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# Play in the time of pandemic: children's agency and lost learning

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## ABSTRACT

Children, their families and teachers are working and playing in the context of ongoing challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. During successive lockdowns, restrictions on domestic spaces to play, social distancing and homeschooling have impacted in diverse ways on children's access to play. Additionally, the ways in which the pandemic has both exacerbated and uncovered inequality has led to the concept of 'lost learning'. While it is important to understand how children have been affected by school and closures, little attention has been paid by policymakers to children's lost opportunities for play. The article reviews the literature to date. It argues for a renewed appreciation of the importance of children's agency and play, which it is argued could also play a significant positive role in our journey back from the effects of the pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

Play; early years; pedagogy; agency

## Introduction and background

All the research indicates that children's emotional health is suffering in the lockdown, and it seems likely that this suffering will, in many cases, continue into the long term. We are urging ministers and policymakers to ensure that children are afforded substantial, and if possible enhanced, access to high-quality play opportunities as soon as possible. (Weale 2020)

The rapid spread of COVID-19 across the globe from early in 2020 has brought about unprecedented changes in every aspect of how we live and interact with one another. The impact on children's education across the globe has been particularly challenging and the outcomes are highly variable according to geographical location and economic and demographic factors. In the UK, the government required schools and early years settings to close at short notice in March 2020, and as a result, the social connections forged by children in their pre-lockdown lives were very suddenly curtailed and reduced to interactions through screens, at least for those fortunate enough to be well-connected digitally. From the beginning of the pandemic, children were thought to be less at risk from the virus medically, than older age groups in the population. Nevertheless, many other risks might affect children, depending on their home circumstances and individual experience of the pandemic. In some aspects, it might be argued that children were the most vulnerable population group, dependent on the care of adults, with less agency to contribute to decision-making, and through lack of access to space, particularly in disadvantaged urban environments (Kyriazis et al. 2020). The quote above is from medical experts, who as early in the COVID-19 pandemic as May 2020, indicated that from the outset, concerns over children's lack of access to play during lockdowns was a serious cause for concern, linking play explicitly with children's mental health and

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well-being. Despite such concerns, relatively little attention has been given to the importance of play in children's lives from policymakers and the government over the ensuing months.

At the time of writing, it would be easy to assume from a casual walk around the neighbourhood that the COVID-19 pandemic is now past, and that life has for the most part returned to normal. Children have returned fully to schools and early years settings and the ongoing political position in England and Wales is that lockdowns and school closures will be avoided. Even as we are told by politicians that we must learn to 'live with the virus' in the UK, children, their families and teachers continue to face daily challenges in managing infection outbreaks in schools, and ongoing anxiety associated with the possibility of serious illness. As policymakers across the globe calculate the economic cost of the pandemic, the focus in education policy is firmly upon the learning lost during successive periods of lockdown, and the ways in which the most disadvantaged children might 'catch up' during repeated absences from school (Harmey and Moss 2021).

In a powerful account of the immediate days after a lockdown in the UK, Lovatt (2021, 2) writes:

Paper rainbows began to appear in windows, painted as a token of hope by children kept indoors; but of children themselves there was no sign.

Children were no longer visible on the streets or in playgrounds, but more than that, in the early part of the pandemic, they were for the most part invisible in the government narrative on COVID-19 (Russell and Stenning 2020). Understandably, the attention centred upon the rising infection rates in the medically vulnerable population, and the increasing pressures this brought upon the health and social care sector. As lockdown continued, perhaps for longer than at first imagined, the attention of policymakers has moved to children's extended absence from school. The quality and quantity of remote teaching provided by schools at short notice varied enormously, and made more challenging for many by the lack of time available to parents to deliver and monitor homeschooling, due to pressures stemming from their own work. Research studies internationally have highlighted the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic both surfaced and exacerbated disadvantage across communities, for education, health and socio-economic outcomes (see, for example, Anders et al. 2021). Therefore, the policy focus has been firmly on ways to 'recover' learning 'lost' and the provision of 'catch up' tuition.

In early years settings, curricular and pedagogical approaches are largely play-based. But the types of play appropriate to young children and typically found in early years settings did not translate easily into online, remote learning. Nor was it possible to replicate the types of spontaneous play which takes place between children in break times and outside of school. Closure of playgrounds in the first lockdown in the UK also meant that children had little contact with other children beyond siblings via screens and social media platforms. Little attention was given in the government's narrative to the ways in which the social, physical and emotional needs of children are distinctly different to adults, evident in children's play and day-to-day playful interactions. Consider, for example, a four-year-old as she walks from home to school with her mother. She may run ahead of her parent or carer, skip, hang off the bars of the barrier outside the school, sing and shout. She may call her friends along the street. These ordinary, taken-for-granted interactions with people and places illustrate some of the simple but important ways in which children experience the world around them.

Once in school, some children may struggle to make sense of the rules, regulations and teaching styles. The following example, from an ethnography of children's play (Rogers, Waite, and Evans 2017), illustrates how different children, in this case in Year 1, make different sense of the same learning situation:

The task of the teacher or educator to meet the needs of a wide range of children is a highly complex one. Thus, we can see how this complexity is significantly increased by the raft of changes to home and school life, brought about by COVID-19 (i.e. social distancing, mask-wearing, 'bubbles').

Alongside policy and research attention on what has been lost during successive lockdowns, we might also want to give some consideration to what might have been gained and what lessons can be learned. Those fortunate enough to have decent housing, a secure income, access to outdoor spaces and strong familial relationships during the first lockdown may have benefitted from an unexpected period away from daily commutes, hectic family routines and stressful office environments. Enforced confinement in the first lockdown led to a noticeable outpouring on global social media of playful and creative endeavours, singing from the balconies of apartment blocks, humorous accounts of life under lockdown, driven in no small part by the sheer novelty of the situation and a growing sense of community spirit. Heljakka (2021) writes of the ‘teddy bear’ challenge in Finland, where toys were left in windows as a way for children to connect to the outside world. Heljakka interprets this as a response to ‘the possible harmful effects of social distancing and self-isolation through communal play for the sake of the common good’ (2021, 20). It is well documented that the silence that fell on many parts of the world in the initial period of lockdown led to a resurgence of interest in the natural world, the possibility of streets without traffic, significant reductions in air pollution due to significant reductions in traffic and global travel (Environmental Technology 2020 in Russell and Stenning 2020), and clear skies without the contrails of planes, bringing together the effects of the pandemic with new insight into the possibilities for addressing the climate emergency. There are many written accounts, for example, of the sudden vibrancy of bird-song in urban environments (see, for example, Lovatt 2021).

However, reconnection with nature and our creative selves, positive though that clearly was for many, was held in sharp contrast to rapidly rising death rates, the unyielding pressure on essential workers and worsening conditions for those already living in poverty with few if any support networks. We see also a widening gap between those with an increased sense of agency due to their personal circumstances, and the decreasing agency brought about by greater economic uncertainty, pressure on housing, lack of connectivity and access to digital devices for homeschooling (Harney and Moss 2021).

To date, relatively little has been written about the effects of ‘lockdown’ on children’s opportunities for play both in early years settings and in the home. As I will argue here, play and the agency it affords children and young people will be even more important as we face greater uncertainty, but also the potential to do things differently in future. The creative thinking, flexibility and adaptability afforded by play may offer one way to cope with the changing world. This article will, then, consider three main questions: Why is play important and particularly in a time of crisis? How and in what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted children’s play? What can be learned from research so far to inform planning for future crises and possible restrictions on movement?

## Revisiting the importance of play and agency

Why is play important and why might it be particularly important in a time of crisis. Play, by its very nature, is notoriously difficult either to define or reduce to measurable outcomes and benefits (Rogers 2015); however, a commonly accepted definition of play is that it is voluntary, intrinsically motivated and allows a high degree of autonomy to the player. I have already noted that play and agency are related. The starting point in this paper is that children are competent social actors who can and do exercise agency in the classroom and society more widely. Agency or the child’s ability to act or make choices will inevitably be constrained by the structures that comprise social life (Archer 2003; Sorbring and Kuczynski 2018; Sirkko et al. 2019). Hence, an enabling pedagogy (Rogers 2013) will be committed to understanding the child’s motivations and co-construct learning outcomes, particularly in play. In this way, the concept of agency is always relative, negotiated by social actors in a given context and mediated by societal norms, social relationships, materials and interactions. We see this daily in children’s play as they negotiate themes, friendships and resources. Play, therefore, is never completely free and choice is always mediated. We can also observe relative agency in children’s resistance to adult-imposed rules (see, for example, Rogers and

Evans 2008). Additionally, through the agentic nature of play and the possibility of greater autonomy, it allows for social connections to be made, for rules to be created and tested and for behaviour to be modified. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Ryan and Deci (2006) suggest that play promotes well-being since it enables the three basic human psychological needs to be met: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2006). Play, by definition, is self-chosen and self-directed (promoting autonomy); play is often challenging and skill-building (promoting competence); and social play is a principal means by which children connect with others (relatedness).

Of particular significance in human play is the remarkable parallel development of imagination and social skills in the first five years, which provide the foundations of creative practice, problem-solving and relationships with others in later life. One of the most influential accounts of the value of play for young children is that given by Vygotsky (1978). He proposes that through adhering to the rules of playful activity established by peers in play, children learn to self-regulate their behaviour and demonstrate knowledge in the roles they adopt and behaviours they enact in their make-believe play.

Perhaps most profound is the human ability to *intentionally* 'step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life' (Henricks 2006, 1), thus revealing a complex range of cognitive and social processes. In the play, children draw on and transform the full range of learned subject knowledge such as mathematics, science, history and so on. So, we might think of 'play' as a key signifier in the convergence between a range of different and highly distinctive fields (Rogers and Lapping 2012) and as the context in which to draw on children's existing knowledge and experience. Skilled educators can build on this, weaving in elements of subject knowledge deemed desirable by society at appropriate moments (van Oers and Duijkers 2013), without disrupting the play to such an extent that it loses its playful qualities.

We may observe children imitating adult behaviours or experiences in their play but our interpretations of this need to be mindful too of the child's perspective. In times of crisis or disaster such as has been experienced by many children across the globe during the pandemic, it is all too easy to forget the 'otherness' of children (Jones and Welch 2018). By this, I mean those aspects of their world are simply inaccessible to adults and may not be easily captured in our accounts of their experience. Through showing children that we are interested in their play, it may be possible to gain insight into how they have made sense of extreme events such as the pandemic particularly as there is no mention in curricular documents or guidelines for the pedagogy of sex, death and violence that is prevalent in young children's 'play' (Rogers and Lapping 2012). All this lies outside of the regulatory framework, perhaps giving a sanitised view of the play that may not fully reflect the reality of play in a time of crisis. This point is aptly illustrated in a study of children's perspectives on returning to nursery after periods of lockdown. Pascal and Bertram (2021) report that children's play was more intense and extended. Play themes reflected the children's experience of COVID-19 such as mask-wearing and not touching. In one example, children explore bereavement in their play:

Group story: The death game

A small group of children in one nursery are repeatedly playing what they call the 'death game'. One child role plays the mum who coughs, and then falls down. The other children then carry out various rituals e.g. bringing blankets, pillows, drinks and then, after some time, the 'mum' dies.

Excerpt From: Pascal and Bertram (2021).

In relation to social isolation brought about by successive lockdowns, it is important to include the perspectives of children on their experiences. Children undoubtedly enjoy the company of adults in their play and respond well to pedagogies that are co-constructed and which value their ideas and contributions. But equally, studies show that from the perspective of children, play is viewed as a child-led, peer group activity, distinctive and separate from schoolwork and often enacted beyond the gaze of adults. Studies report that pretending and being with friends are the aspects that children like most in play. This is particularly the case around the time that many children enter primary school classrooms at ages 4 and 5 in England (Rogers and Evans 2008).

In early years education, play is now well-established in curriculum texts in many parts of the world and educators' pedagogical practices. In England, for example, there is a requirement in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2021) to provide an *enabling environment* that supports children's play, both indoors and outdoors. Rogers et al. (2017) goes further to suggest that an *enabling pedagogy* is required to ensure that children can exercise choice, agency and control over learning without unnecessary interruptions to complete adult-led tasks which may not be related to learning outcomes, or which may, in fact, disrupt the flow of play in which children are deeply engaged. Similarly, the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department for Education Skills and Employment 2021) states play-based learning provides 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations'. Unique to curricular frameworks in early childhood is the explicit bringing together of learning and development: As part of the maturational process, children develop the capacity to learn specific concepts from key areas of knowledge, and play is a leading way in which they achieve this (Rogers 2015).

### **Play in primary and middle childhood**

Opportunities for children to play diminish significantly as they move from early childhood settings to primary or elementary school. This severing of play from childhood happens abruptly in some cases, perhaps across the summer vacation as children leave the play-based environment of the pre-school to enter the very different space of the primary school classroom. One primary headteacher, recognising the difficulties associated with this transition from a playful to a 'playless' classroom (Bibby 2011) described this in relation to outdoor play as 'between a meadow and a rockface' (Rogers, Waite, and Evans 2017). The metaphors suggest a notion of play in the early years as a place of pleasure, evoking sunshine, warmth and naturalness. By contrast, the rock face is challenging, hard, possibly frightening and austere even when scaling its heights may ultimately be rewarding. The changes in pedagogy between the early years and primary schools noted by research studies of transition (Rogers, Waite, and Evans 2017) highlight the way in which play is widely regarded as an activity of early childhood, the principal way in which young children learn, grow and develop and that play ceases to be of value as a mode of learning once children enter primary education. However, play continues to be an important mode of experience and resource for learning in its broadest sense, though it is often contained within more formal arenas such as organised games, sports, drama and the virtual worlds of media and digital technologies. The statutory school starting age of 5 (though in practice it is 4 in England) is particularly early when compared with other European countries. Thus play-based approaches to learning are a relatively short-lived part of children's education, displaced by an increasing emphasis on subject-orientated activities and potentially lesser active forms of learning. This is reflected in the physical layout of classrooms, changes in the types of resources available, the absence of outdoor play areas and a changing relationship with the other children and the teacher all of which signal a different way of working and being in the classroom. However, does that mean that play does not have a place in the primary classroom? Is play dependent upon resources and spaces specifically designed for that purpose?

Opportunities for play in the classroom may diminish as children move to primary school and later secondary school, but as many readers will have observed and as research demonstrates, children still find ways to play in less visible and less structured ways – to be playful – through illicit interactions with peers (Rogers and Evans 2008), in 'the toilets, corridors, under the desks, at the back of the classroom, putting rubbish in the bin – all provide opportunities for the children to side-step teacher demands for compliance and learning' (Devine 2003, 35). In other words, play goes underground. Some key questions arise from such observations: what is the justification for fracturing play-based learning opportunities as children transition to primary school? What does that mean for children's learning in the early years as they progress to primary school, particularly following

periods of absence from settings during the pandemic? Similarly, what does it mean for children as they are in primary school, particularly when they may have missed out on vital opportunities for play with peers during the closure of schools, clubs and outdoor play spaces? Transitions are never straightforward, whether from nursery to school or from primary to secondary school. But transitions have been severely disrupted during the pandemic. Of particular interest in this article is the possibility that play can in some way help to smooth the transitions that take place as children enter and leave primary school (see for example Waite, Rogers, and Evans 2013). A review of the literature on play in primary schools undertaken by Rogers et al. suggests that the most under-researched age group is middle childhood which equates to Key Stage 2 (age 7–11) and the first two years of secondary education in England and Wales (age 12–14). The review notes that the 8–13 age-group children are subject to several important transitions: educational (changing schools), social (becoming independent) and biological (pre-pubescent). Children move from a position where family relationships are central to one where peers and peer group culture take on greater significance and where children seek greater autonomy and independence. This combination of factors is likely to also engender changes in personal identity, and body and self-image, all of which are central to the ways in which we experience and are shaped by play. It is also a time when children are increasingly excluded from public spaces (see, for example, Waite, Rogers, and Evans 2013) and most susceptible to the ‘no ball games’ culture that is often seen in public parks and playgrounds. Young people, particularly adolescents, are seemingly invisible from public spaces, provided with token spaces, often inappropriate to their needs and purposes. One of the key messages emanating from studies of this age group such as that by Travlou et al. is that it is vital to elicit the views of the young people themselves if we are to plan, design and create usable places that might benefit individuals and communities. In the development of play spaces, then, young people’s involvement at all stages appears to be important. But perhaps more than this, research is also needed that genuinely attempts to understand ‘the multifarious ways that young people perceive and experience their local environment and, how, through this experience, they construct their identities’. As children progress through primary and into secondary school, play becomes more organised into games, clubs and structured team games. However, participation in organised activities may be dependent on selection based on the ability, and availability of finance. The impact of the pandemic on access and increasing economic hardship may exclude children from such opportunities.

Beyond organised sports and games, play continues in older children through their social interactions and relationship building, through humour, language and activities such as construction kits that also have a fantasy element, den building and play fighting with peers and siblings. Through such activities, a wide range of skills and dispositions can be observed including increased social competence and the development of empathy, self-esteem and linguistic capabilities. Outdoor play in primary school may also provide opportunities for the resolution of conflict (both social and cognitive) in authentic and safe contexts (Sutton Smith 1997). Outdoor play has the potential to be highly physical, enabling children to exercise both their muscles and minds within the safety of the play ‘frame’ or game.

During the pandemic and successive periods of confinement to homes, access to the outdoors gains even greater significance for children of all ages. The focus on learning loss may mean that out-of-school activity and playful approaches to learning become even more marginalised. Yet play in this age group may offer children with opportunity and space to resolve inner conflict and prepare for potentially stressful events as they become increasingly independent of familiar adults such as their parents and teachers and ‘gravitate towards their peer group.’ Understanding that children’s play needs to change as they get older, and that play takes on different modes of engagement and action as children progress through primary school is important. Furthermore, the inherent life-enhancing benefits attributed to play *per se* apply to older children and adults as much as they do to the youngest children.

## What do we know so far about the impact of COVID-19 on the play?

Throughout the pandemic, the focus of attention from researchers has been on the negative consequences of children's absence from school and the impact of lockdown on mental health and well-being. A few studies have also considered a fuller picture of how the first period of lockdown, impacted children and families. Importantly, these studies sought the perspectives of children themselves. A survey undertaken by Gray (2021), for example, found that during the first lockdown, a time when restrictions to day-to-day life were at their most severe, children 'suddenly went from a condition of little autonomy, because their time was filled with school and other adult-directed activities, to a condition of lots of free time' (48) The children surveyed reported that they enjoyed the opportunity for more time to play in the home with family members or through video games and social media with distant friends. For some children, the increased autonomy to play motivated by periods of unmanaged time in the home and possible boredom provided opportunities for creative, child-led activity. Reductions in the daily stresses of the family brought about by travel to work and school, and the complex arrangements of work patterns, child-care arrangements and, arguably, increased pressure of high stakes schooling, may have initially at least improved well-being (Bruining et al. 2020).

A survey of 3443 parents with children from ages 1–5 years was conducted by Mantovani et al. (2021) in the Lombardy region of Northern Italy during the lockdown. The Lombardy region was the first and most severely affected area in Europe in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reports that alongside the many difficulties encountered during this time, parents also reported having observed some unexpected and positive outcomes. In particular 'parent/child and sibling relationships, adaptiveness and autonomy on the part of children' (2021, 35). The perspectives offered in the studies by Gray (2021), Bruining et al. (2020) and Mantovani et al. (2021) counterbalance the view that all valuable learning was lost due to absence from school, during this period. Little attention has been paid by policymakers to potential learning opportunities and potential gains during this time and what can be learned from it. Clearly, this is one of the very few studies conducted so far and does not reflect the full range of children's experiences during the first lockdown. However, it does illustrate the value children place upon self-chosen, playful and creative activity and the contribution this can make to mental health and well-being. Also, of interest in this study is the finding that while most children surveyed did not miss school lessons, they did miss being with friends, also noted by Pascal and Bertram (2021). Friendship is highly significant to children from the earliest days in preschool and nurseries. Isolation from friends is perhaps the greatest loss experienced by children in periods of absence from school.

An interim report conducted by Bowyer-Crane et al. (2021) summarises the findings from two studies by the Play Safety Forum (2021), and interim results from Oxford University and Oxford Brookes Universities, UK (2020):

- During the pandemic, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds reported spending less time on activities with their babies and toddlers, compared with parents from more advantaged backgrounds.
- During the lockdown, children from disadvantaged backgrounds spent less time on play or activities requiring outdoor space, or access to books.
- Young children, in general, experienced an increase in TV and touchscreen use for babies and toddlers. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly likely to have high daily screen use.
- Babies and toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds have been missing out on activities to support their development, compared to children of highly-educated, well-paid parents.

In part, these findings confirm that families with poor housing and inadequate space, poorly paid employment, juggling more than one job alongside child-care are likely to be time-poor and space-



poor. They are also likely to have less easy access to a garden or natural outdoor spaces. Harmey and Moss (2021) set out to identify how primary schools had been dealing with the impacts of COVID and consequently how recovery funds might be best spent on return to schools. Interviews with school staff and parents highlighted the variation in impact on schools and families. Families already living in poverty were most adversely affected and found themselves facing unplanned for financial distress due to loss of employment. Schools for these families, in particular, provided important support throughout the worst of the pandemic and school closures, providing in some cases food and clothing and supporting families living in inadequate space, limited access to digital connectivity and those experiences domestic violence and mental health issues. The research by Harmey and Moss (2021) argues that schools vary in the type of recovery plan and funding required and, moreover, that other welfare services require additional funding to reduce the pressure on schools.

Concerns were expressed by headteachers about children in the early years and resocialisation into whole-class activities and about how to manage social distancing in play-based learning (Harmey and Moss 2021). While primary age children may have missed out on informal play opportunities in playtimes during periods of lockdown and absence from school, children in the early years were also missing out on crucial learning experiences offered by the play-based learning approaches which lie at the core of early development. Additionally, key person relationships between very young children and early years educators providing the one-to-one interactions are the characteristic of early years settings, particularly for those under-3 years age and vital to early language development were also severely disrupted. The types of play experienced by the youngest children are difficult if not possible to replicate in most homes where spaces and resources are limited. Older children were likely to be able to utilise remote ways of connecting socially more effectively than very young children, through social media platforms and video games. Alongside school recovery plans that address learning loss, health and welfare, there has been a lack of emphasis on how best it is to support early years educators and teachers to manage to play under social distancing restrictions or indeed lack of access to outdoor play or play in the natural world. While this is unlikely to be seen as a priority with limited funds available, there is evidence to support the benefits of play and particularly outdoor play to mental health and well-being (Garden and Downes 2021). These points are illustrated further in studies of children's views during the lockdown. For example, Pascal and Bertram (2021) undertook a transnational qualitative study of children's perspectives in England, Scotland and New Zealand. Children in the study expressed a desire to regain their daily life and routine, be with friends, have extended time to play, be outdoors and have authentic information. They recommend that practitioners and policymakers listen to and consider the needs of children in planning mitigations for the future.

Playwork is rarely included in discussions about play in education and yet, playworkers provide a vital and complementary service to early years settings and schools through Forest School initiatives, after school clubs and activities for children at risk of disadvantage. King (2021) identifies three main purposes of playwork from his study of the experiences of 22 playworkers during the pandemic: Upholding the right to play and promote play; Therapeutic and Developmental (social); Providing play opportunities and space for play to be child-led. Playwork was not considered to be a key working role during the pandemic and under restrictions; play work was stopped in parks and adventure playgrounds impacting on those children whose only access to the outdoors was through play schemes. In light of these lost opportunities for play during periods of lockdown and government restrictions on movement, an integrated approach that draws on the expertise and skills of trained Forest School and Playworkers has the potential to reap significant benefits to children, their teachers and their families.

### **A child-centred approach to future planning**

The view that planning for future pandemics or situations where the movement of populations are restricted should be child-centred in gaining widespread support from a range of constituencies

(see, for example, Pierre 2021 from the perspective of multi-agency working in social care and Kyriazis et al. 2020 from the perspective of urban planning).

Promoting a child-led design approach in planning the environment and giving voice to children's concerns over restrictions on play and their specific needs is one way to support children's agency. We might also apply this approach to the current anxiety around the climate emergency, which will affect the young disproportionately and yet they have the least agency to make the changes required to ensure a safe and sustainable future.

Child-centred education has often been rejected by critics in education because of its perceived associations with a 'laissez faire' approach to teaching subject knowledge. But while the concept of child-centredness has been erased out of the educational political discourse, it has been taken up overtly in several policy documents surrounding work with children globally. Take, for example, the following extract from UNICEF:

Child-centred approaches to development present an opportunity to tackle the seemingly intractable problems of poverty. Children are the starting points for breaking the intergenerational cycles of denial and patterns of discrimination. Promoting development that is guided by the best interests of the child and oriented towards the rights of children ensures sustainable human development. The well-being of children translates into the well-being of a nation. It is the key yardstick for measuring national developments. (UNICEF 2017)

Here we see that children hold the key to more democratic, socially-just societies, where 'the best interests of the child' are paramount. Such sentiments are echoed across public policy documents including child protection. The Munro Report (2012), for example, made its first recommendation to the government as:

The system should be child-centred: everyone involved in child protection should pursue child-centred working and recognise children and young people as individuals with rights, including their right to participation in decisions about them in line with their age and maturity. (2012, 23)

Adopting a child-centred approach to managing future crises might yield a more integrated and interdisciplinary endeavour that aims to locate education firmly within the complex networks of children's diverse lives. A child-centred approach in education is only realisable in the interactions between adults and children which help to promote children's thinking, agency and independence, and which are predicated on genuine engagement with children's ideas *in relation to* subject knowledge. Kress notes the shift in recent decades 'from the power/authority of the author (and the institution) to the power/agency and interest of the reader, as of the child/student' (Kress 2006, 167) suggesting that the gap has widened as a society and the relationship of children to adults and developments in culture and technology have diversified. Thus, tension is created between the power of the institutional authority and the interests and experiences of learners outside school. This disjuncture, between children's lives today and a curriculum that has changed very little in over a century presents a significant challenge. Whilst it is possible to argue that there has always been a gap between the everyday lives of children and that which they experience in institutions such as schools, Kress is suggesting something more fundamental has changed in the ways in which adults and children relate to one another leading him to conclude that in the wider world, 'ideologically at least, the directionality of power, authority and knowledge to learner and life-world has been inverted' (2006, 167). With this in mind, Kress provides a persuasive case for 'placing the learner and the learner's transforming agency at the centre of institutionalised education'.

A theme running through studies of the impact of the pandemic so far is the need to take children's perspectives, needs and ideas much more fully into account whether this is in relation to activities at school or urban planning for access to outdoor spaces. A further point that I want to emphasise here relates to the profession of playwork. Playworkers offer specialist knowledge and skills that are complementary to play in early years setting, particularly play in outdoor environments. Far greater use might be made of this group to support future lockdowns or social distancing measures to ensure that children can continue to play, exercise and socialise in times of emergency.

Re-engagement with and appreciation of the natural world, particularly at a time of climate emergency, is vital to the future of children today. Play and exploration is one way to achieve this throughout the early years and primary school.

### **A pedagogy of play in the time of pandemic: concluding thoughts**

Play in a time of pandemic has been experienced unequally by children dependent on their life circumstances. And yet, we have seen that play has also provided a valuable vehicle for children to make sense of their experiences of COVID-19. With a future that is uncertain, whether in terms of pandemics or the climate emergency, we will need to ensure that children have opportunities to exercise agency and work together towards creative solutions to problems. Supporting increases in anxiety and mental health issues in the young will require that governments make significant investments to support children to both recover from the effects of the pandemic and preparedness for the future. Alongside recovery plans that address learning loss, health and welfare, there is little in the way of suggestions of how to support play either inside the classroom or in the playground that might help support early years educators and teachers to manage play under social distancing restrictions or indeed lack of access to outdoor play or play in the natural world. While this is unlikely to be seen as a priority with limited funds available, there is evidence to support the benefits of play and particularly outdoor play to mental health and well-being (Garden and Downes 2021). Multi-agency ways of working that bring together professionals from education, play and youth work, architects, forest workers, and climate specialists among others, is perhaps the best way to ensure that we are ready for the challenges that undoubtedly lie ahead. Early years settings and schools already play a significant role in supporting children's healthy development and well-being, but they cannot be held solely responsible for recovering what is lost during times of crisis. At the time of writing studies of the range of possible outcomes for children since March 2020 when most countries went into some form of lockdown or restrictions in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 are relatively few. As we find our way through the ongoing and shifting challenges brought about by the pandemic, it is hoped that new studies will help us to understand more fully, how and in what ways play might contribute to children's well-being and agency. Children today are growing up in an ongoing pandemic, alongside a climate crisis. The clear message from the studies consulted here underscore significant concerns over the child and adolescent mental health. To conclude, greater attention should be paid to the value of play experiences and to how these are offered in early years settings and through primary school. The following questions may help to frame future discussions on how best to provide an enabling pedagogy of play.

- In educational settings, to support the development of agency, can we give children greater choice about where, with whom, what and how they play?
- Can we provide physical spaces (indoors and outdoors) for uninterrupted time to play, to reconnect with each other, revisit, rebuild and recreate ideas with adults and children?
- Can we show children we are interested in their play through co-construction, consultation and negotiation, observation and feedback? This is especially important in times of crisis to support mental health and well-being.
- Can we 'Plan for possibilities' for the exploration of materials, resources, making learning playful, encouraging imagination, creativity and problem-solving to help build valuable skills necessary for tackling future challenges.

The greatest challenge for educators will be to justify play for children, particularly in Primary schools, when the policy focus is on 'lost learning'. This will only be possible with evidence, knowledge and understanding of how play contributes to early learning, development, health and well-being. Moreover, understanding how play changes as children get older and progress in the complexity of play is crucial to support children's increasing capacity to imagine, to represent and to

cooperate in their play. Finally, but most importantly, as educators, we must act as knowledgeable others and advocates for children in their play.

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