

## **Well-being Playworkers in Primary Schools – A Headteacher’s Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

In Torfaen, situated in the South-East of Wales during the first lockdown there were seven ‘hubs’ supported by the Play Service Well-being Playworkers. The Well-being Playworkers have continued to support schools post-lockdown. Interviews were undertaken with nine headteachers from all seven of the ‘hubs’. Thematic analysis of the data identified three themes: Strong Relationships with children and the school, becoming part of the School Team, and the Well-being Playworkers offering a Quality Service. The support the Well-being Playworkers have provided to both the children and the school has contributed to the Welsh Government’s drive for a ‘Whole School Approach’ to support children’s well-being, as well as implementing the themes within the ‘Play Policy Implementation Plan’ and tackling child poverty. The presence of playworkers, or well-being playworkers in all aspects of a school, both within and outside of the school curriculum is a service other schools across the UK should consider when supporting children’s well-being.

**Key Words:** Well-being Playworkers; Primary School, Covid-19, Lockdown, Well-being, Children

## **Introduction**

When the United Kingdom (UK) went into lockdown on the 23rd of March 2020 (POLITICO 2020), the impact on reduced movement and services included the closure of all schools from face to face teaching to online 'home schooling' (Williams et. al. 2020), that also occurred for school children around the world, for example, Germany (Letzel et. al. 2020) and Norway (Bubb and Jones 2020). The move to online homeschooling resulted in children not interacting face to face with either their teachers or their peers unless their parents were considered to be key workers or vulnerable children (gov.uk 2020a). For most children, the Covid-19 pandemic during lockdown resulted in reduced movement and direct social contact with peers where "International research evidence indicates that pandemics have an extremely negative impact on mental health, with children and young people being especially at risk" (Cowie and Myers 2020, 63). Also, critical and key working children "also had to cope with alternative childcare settings or arrangements" (Buheji et al. 2020).

For schools in the UK with children aged 4-11 years, or primary aged children, some schools remained open and became a 'hub' (gov.uk 2020b) to provide education for children of key workers, for example, 'blue light' key workers such as the police, fire brigade, and ambulance, as well as other key working staff including those who work in the National Health Service (NHS), and for vulnerable children. The 'hubs' that were formed in the first lockdown in the UK in March 2020 comprised a 'cluster of schools'. In one local authority area in Wales, Torfaen Borough Council, seven school 'hubs' were created staffed by both teachers from the 'cluster of schools, and playworkers from the Borough's playwork team (King 2021).

Playwork in the UK has been defined as:

A highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes (SkillsActive 2010, 3).

Playwork focuses on the process of play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005) rather than using play as an outcome where playworkers work in a diverse range of settings including adventure playgrounds (Chilton 2018) and after school clubs (King 2019). In the last 30 years across the UK, the need for more childcare provision to support adults working or training saw a rise of after-school provision, many based in primary schools, where playworkers provided play and care for children before their parents or carers collected them. Torfaen Borough Council have had a Play Service since 2004 and pre-covid provided community play provision that included holiday playschemes, family and play engagement sessions, fathers and children sessions, play and respite sessions and a play lending library service. For schools, the Play Service offer a Play on the Playground Project, Breakfast and Early Bird Sessions and Play in The School Project for children on a modified time-table that includes both one-to-one and group work play sessions for children during the school day. The one-to-one work includes using Lego® in the 'Build to Express' programme (Lego Education, 2021).

With the first UK lockdown finishing in July, and primary schools forming 'bubbles' of children, the local authority playworkers continued to support the schools by running play sessions between children attending their classes in 'bubbles'. However, this return of the children to their schools and in 'bubbles', many of the cluster of schools involved in the

'hubs' maintained the services of the playworkers as it was recognized by the schools that for some children there was a need for them to be able to 'play' rather than focus entirely on their educational needs. The playworkers who worked during the school 'hubs' returned to work in eight schools to support children's well-being. The focus on well-being resulted in a change in job title to become 'Well-being Playworkers', however, the focus on supporting children's play remained unchanged. When the third lockdown in January 2021 was introduced, many of the schools in the original cluster had their own 'hubs' which they co-ran with the Play Service again.

The worry of children not attending school during the lockdown, and for some not being able to go out, play, socialize or have any space to themselves has led to a growing concern not only about the loss of education (McGuinness 2021) but also the loss to have space and time to play with their peers may have an impact on their well-being (Cowie and Myers 2020; Tonkin and Whitaker 2021). The impact of the first and second lockdown has resulted in "Children and young people's behavioural, emotional, and restless/attentional difficulties have increased again from January to February 2021" (Shun et. al. 2021, 6), and these concerns have also been expressed by children and young people themselves about experiencing increased stress, loneliness, and worry (Barnados, 2021), only to be compounded with the third lockdown in March 2021. Continual lockdown measures on reducing movement, direct contact with peers, and being able to play appears to be having a continual negative effect on children's well-being "with particular effect on the most deprived families and their children" (Cowie and Myers 2020, 64).

Tonkin and Whitaker (2021) discuss the 'Five Ways to Well-being' (New Economics Foundation (NEF) 2011) of Connect, Be active, Take notice. Keep learning and Give which

contribute to positive well-being. Buheji et. al. (2020, 12) review of the international well-being literature on the effects of Covid-19 and lockdown on children and young people have proposed a framework based on four variables of “physical activity, the psychological status, the nutrition status, and then the recovery practices”. These ‘Five Ways to Well-being’ and ‘Well-being Framework’ reflect the growing concern in the UK for children’s well-being as during the two major lockdowns and a call in the UK for a ‘summer of play’ in July and August when the primary schools in the UK close for 6 weeks (Dodd 2021), rather than reduce the summer holidays to play ‘catch up’ to lost learning in the classroom (McGuinness, 2021). The impact of Covid-19 and lockdown on children is most prevalent as:

“Children are one of the most vulnerable groups to the indirect risks of the COVID-19 epidemic. They may experience fears, uncertainties, and physical and social isolation and may miss school for a prolonged period. (Beheji et. al. 2020, 9).

These concerns on children’s well-being have been supported with both qualitative and quantitative studies undertaken around the world including Bangladesh (Yeasmin et. al., 2020), Hong Kong (Tso et. al. 2020), Germany (Ravens-Sieberer et. al. 2021), and Ireland (O’Sullivan et. al. (2021). The well-being of pupils is an important aspect for schools in Wales about meeting the seven goals within the ‘Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) (Welsh Government (WG) 2015), in particular, the goals of ‘A More Equal Wales’ and ‘A Wales of Cohesive Communities’. All schools have a role to play concerning developing a ‘Whole School Approach’ to children’s well-being (WG 2021).

This current study is unique in that although the use of playworkers in schools is not new particularly in school lunchtimes (Follett 2017), the use of playworkers throughout the school

day is not as common. Within the playwork profession, the focus of the process of play to support children's health and well-being is reflected in the eight Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005), put forward by Sturrock and Else (1998) that the playground (play space) is the natural healing space for children. This playwork approach has also been used where children have experienced adversity, for example, the Tsunami in Japan (Kinoshita and Woolley 2014). This study aimed to consider the role and contribution of the Well-being Playworker from the school perspective on how a playwork approach is supporting children both during the first and second lockdowns and their return to school.

## **Method**

The research design used semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as this enables the use of an interview guide (Bernard 2013, 182) where a "written list of questions and topics are covered in a particular order" as in structured interviews but allows "the freewheeling quality of unstructured interviews".

All interviews were undertaken between March and April 2021 remotely using the Teams® platform and were granted ethical approval from the College of Human and Health Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University. This enabled a face-to-face interview to be undertaken and the ability to record for transcription and analysis without having to be in the same room so abiding by the Government lockdown restrictions. Before any interview beginning, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, informed consent, and the right to withdraw at any time. The interview questions asked to each participant were:

- Briefly describe how the school ran during the first lockdown in March 2020 and since September 2020 after the first lockdown

- Explain why you first used the Well-being Playworkers?
- What do the Well-being Playworkers do in your school?
- What contribution to your school have the Well-being Playworkers had?
- What do you think are the children's views of having Well-being Playworkers?
- When we get to the stage of getting back to how things were before the Covid-19 outbreak, would you continue to have the Well-being Playworkers? (if yes or no, then follow up question of can you explain your answer)
- Is there anything you would like to add or say?

All interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word® document and then uploaded into the Nvivo 12® software for analysis. All the transcriptions were undertaken by listening back to each interview to ensure what each participant had said was recorded accurately. Transcription packages were avoided as it was important in qualitative research to 'immerse' yourself into the data (Green et. al. 2007) and listening back and re-winding sections to ensure accuracy also enables the listening and re-listening to the comments.

### **Area of Study**

The study was undertaken in a Local Authority Borough of Torfaen, situated in the South-East of Wales. The borough has a size of 126 Km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 91,800, for which 12,050 are aged between 0 and 10 years of age (Torfaen Public Services Board (PSB) 2017). The interviews with headteachers represented seven different schools, however with the formation of 'hubs' during the first pandemic in March 2020, the work of the Well-being Playworkers involved other schools that formed a 'cluster of schools' for each hub.

### **Participants**

Participants were invited to take part in the study through email invitation as Well-being Playworkers are currently working in the schools. 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 nine, representing all seven 'hubs'.

### **Analysis**

The data were analysed 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 the interview to further immerse into the data (Green et. al. 2007) to identify initial codes which then are grouped into themes, a process in qualitative research called collapsing the data (Elliot 2018). The analysis started after interview 4, and by interview 6 no new themes or sub-themes had emerged suggesting the data had reached saturation point (Fusch and Ness 2015). The themes and sub-themes from the data were sent to all the participants of the study for comments on the credibility (Shenton 2004) of the results on being an authentic and accurate account, and this was confirmed.

### **Results**

During the data analysis, the three main themes emerged consistently between all seven interviewees. They all spoke highly of the professionalism and enthusiasm of both the individual Well-being Playworkers and the Play Service which is reflected in the comment below:

“They became the real bedrock on how that provision ran, because why we provided leadership every day from different schools, provided teachers and people in there, the real constant was the playworkers and the play service in what they provided in terms of the range of activities, in terms of personnel, in terms of the enthusiasm and carrying it through to keep things moving during those trickier times that went on”

(Interviewee 4)

The three themes of Relationships, Part of the School Team and Quality are shown in Table 1 and are discussed in more detail below.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<b>Main Factors</b>
<b>Strong Relationships</b>	With the Children	Meeting Children's Needs Informal Approach Rapport with Children
	With the Staff and School	Changed Perception of Play Team Symbiotic Support Cluster of Schools
	With the Wider Community	Knowledge of Families Contact with Families Supporting Families
<b>Part of the School Team</b>	Ran the Lockdown 'Hubs'	Provided Continuity Provided Structure Key working and Vulnerable Children
	Bespoke Provision	Group Work One to One Work Therapeutic Work
	Academic Support	TA Roles in Classes Foundation Phase Children Key Stage 2 Children
<b>Quality Service</b>	Adaptable Play Practice	Lunchtime Sessions Support in Lessons Running Playschemes Play and Wellbeing Camps Breakfast Club
	Trained Staff	Paid-Staff Volunteers
	Resources Provided	Physical Play Group Play Creative Play Outdoor Play

### **Theme One: Strong Relationships**

The theme of Strong Relationships was consistently mentioned by all seven interviewees throughout each interview. Three sub-themes within the themes of Relationships were formed: Children; Staff and School and the Community.

The diversity of the children and their needs who attended the hubs during the lockdowns or when the school re-opened were discussed. Within the lockdown hubs, both key working children and those who were identified as vulnerable attended, however for many of the children the hubs were not in their schools as each hub would involve a cluster of primary schools:

“We invited people who were eligible as key workers to come in and that is when the hub was established. We had a small number of our pupils as we had a small number who fit into the critical worker groups or anything. We had children from the other primary schools coming here as well” (Interviewee 6)

For the Well-being playworkers, the group of children who attended the hub would be mixed concerning their rationale of the primary school from where they had come and whether they were identified as a key worker family or vulnerable family. The Play Service has organised play schemes during school holidays for over 25 years that had children from different schools attending, therefore the principle of the ‘hub’ was very similar to the playschemes that have been organised and run in the past.

In addition to the hub, children identified as vulnerable were had been supported by the Well-being Playworkers both pre-lockdown in March 2020 with some of the schools during the school day, and by all the school’s post-lockdown. The vulnerable children varied about

challenging behaviour, lack of confidence, identified disability, learning support need, anxiety, low self-esteem, or concerns on their well-being. Whatever the reason or rationale the Well-being Playworkers were used to interact with the children, they were able to meet individual children's needs, through their more 'informal' approach and developed a strong rapport with the children:

“They can see if they get irritated in class and then they will take them out and do a bit of a sporting activity and then bring them back” (Interviewee 3)

“The playworkers are not seen as the more formal, because of the uniform and the children associate them with play, happiness and fun” (Interviewee 1)

“The energy they had, they were absolutely amazing, I can't fault them. The relationship they had with the children, they would have their lunch with them, they would play games with them, and watching the way they dealt with the children, when they were upset, when they were emotional, the time, the patience the strategies they used” (Interviewee 5)

The children, whether in the hub, in the schoolyard at breaktimes, or within the classroom who were in contact with the Well-being Playworkers enjoyed being with them. When asked what do the children think of the Well-being Playworkers, the response from the interviewees was “fun” where children could not wait to play with them.

The relationship between the individual Well-being Playworkers and the Play Service with the school and staff strengthen in schools who had been using the serviced pre-lockdown in

March 2020 and developed very quickly with the schools who experienced the play team for the first time within the hubs:

“That first lockdown, we had a good relationship with the Play Team, but I think you will find before that most people saw them as ‘play’, but after that, bluntly they took them seriously and saw them as a valuable resource for all these children in the schools” (Interviewee 1)

“Staff got a much better understanding of what the capabilities and the skills and the experience of the playworkers was, or is and a much greater respect I think as a result of that” (Interviewee 6)

During the first lockdown in March 2020, the cluster of schools that used a hub had staff from each school attend on a rota basis to ensure there was some form of blended learning. The presence of the Well-being Playworkers and the school staff enabled a positive symbiotic relationship where each brought in their skillset, and having a positive ‘knock-on effect’ within the classroom:

“The playworkers we’ve got are adding to our team, we can offer to them our skills, our well-being skills” (Interviewee 3)

“We get the play provision in breakfast club and suddenly we don’t have those incidents or triggers. The children are into class, they are focused in their class” (Interviewee 7)

The third aspect of the theme Strong Relationship is with the wider community. Schools have always been considered as a central aspect of a community and with the Play Service having organised and delivered playschemes and respite services in the past, many of the families whose children utilised the hub, the Well-being Playworkers had knowledge and contact with the parents and carers:

“They have that different relationship with parents, the difference is the non-threatening, as a teacher ‘whoa’ but as a playworker, as a parent I can associate with that” (Interviewee 2)

The Well-being Playworkers have thought the current Covid-19 pandemic and the development of the first lockdown hubs, and subsequent hubs developed on existing relationships with children, the school and school staff, and the community, as well as forming new relationships with these three groups. How these relationships have developed and strengthened link with the further two themes of Part of the School Team and Quality Service.

### **Theme Two: Part of the School Team**

The services of the Playwork Team before lockdown have been used by some of the schools to support children in their lunchtime, where teachers are not undertaking any formal academic teaching. For example, working with individual children or organising group games for targeted vulnerable children which may take place whilst other children are in their classes:

“It’s impossible and very hard for the children to open up. So, in comes Lego® therapy, it is the playworkers who come in and work with children through Lego®. It’s such a valuable service, it’s absolutely fantastic.” (Interviewee 5)

Often, working with individual children or groups, whether during the lunchtime break or the academic part of the day, teachers did not see how the Well-being Playworkers worked with the children. When the lockdown in March 2020 closed the schools and hubs were formed with a cluster of schools, initially, the Well-being Playworkers were brought in to support the school staff. During the first lockdown, it became apparent that the hubs were being organised by the Playwork Team supported by the teachers:

“It was very much the case, it did not take very long, school staff were coming in supporting play staff, rather than we’re teachers and your coming in. It turned on its head a little bit” (Interviewee 6)

All seven interviewees referred to the importance of the same Well-being Playworkers attending the ‘hubs’ all day and every day, supported by the rotation of school staff from the cluster schools where as well as providing continuity of Well-being Playworkers, they also provided a structure for the hub:

“We (the schools) were asked to help staff them, but the running of the hubs and the actual groupings of the children were done by the Play Team, so they would do all the activities” (Interviewee 1)

When the UK went into a second lockdown in October 2020, and the third lockdown in January 2021, schools ran their own ‘hubs’ rather than having a cluster. This enabled more children, particularly vulnerable children to attend. Again, the Well-being Playworkers was brought in to run the hubs, the teachers focusing on blended learning, and the Well-being Playworkers on the organisation of the hub. Between March 2020 finishing in July 2020 and the start of the third lockdown in January 2021, the Well-being Playworkers still had a presence in many of the schools. This enabled continual continuity of the Well-being Playworkers working with the key working and vulnerable children who were attending school ‘hubs’.

The Play Team has been providing a bespoke service to support individual children and groups of children that has a therapeutic benefit. The Lego® Therapy and organisation of group game continued and developed as staff saw a change in many of the children when they returned to school in September:

“our older Key Stage 2 children, who really struggled to co-operate, play with each other after being off and not having to be in big groups. Boundaries a lot of time had been removed at home, so they were struggling” (Interviewee 1)

However, in addition to the bespoke provision of one-to-one and group work, the Well-being Playworkers were also working and taking on a Teaching Assistant (TA) role working with both the Foundation Phase (0-7-year-old children) and Key Stage 2 (8-11-year-old children) within the school classes, but still focusing on the ‘play’ element of their work.

This provided academic support for the teachers, for example helping with the baseline assessment within the Foundation Phase and help to settle the Key Stage 2 children when they returned to school:

“The other playworker could see what I was doing with the baseline and asking questions. The other playworker was then counting in the play, which is what we want, sound recognition where the learning through play, they clicked into it really quickly in that role, they were excellent” (Interviewee 5)

“They needed something different, they needed the play. Especially the KS2 children because the curriculum is tight and lots of pressures outside” (Interviewee 1).

The Well-being Playworkers have established themselves as an integral part of the school team, supporting children in different contexts, and supporting staff in both the formal and informal aspects of the school day. The adaptability and versatility of the Well-being Playworkers are discussed concerning Theme Three, Quality Service.

### **Theme Three: Quality Service**

The quality of the both the individual Well-being Playworkers and the Play Service was constantly referred to during the seven interviews:

“Top to bottom, the quality of leadership, quality of recruitment and quality of training in what all of those playworkers have whether they are full time, paid or voluntary, that quality is there. They are able to match the right workers to the children and right schools” (Interviewee 4).

The Play Service is now over 25 years old and has had to adapt to the changing political and financial climate that is commonplace within Local Government. In addition to running the 'hubs', bespoke service, and playschemes in the school holidays, the Well-being Playworkers are now running and supporting the schools that run the Play and Well-being Camps. The Play and Well-being Camps are for the vulnerable children who can attend to support their well-being about activities and being fed. The Well-being Playworkers are now running these Play and Well-being Camps:

“In the well-being camps they do focus on the active thing, the healthy eating. They focus on well-being mental health type of things and do a range of activities around”

(Interviewee 1)

The quality of the varied and versatile service provided by the Well-being Playworkers is reflected in the quality training provided by the Play Service, irrespective of a paid member of staff or one of the many volunteers recruited each year and the quality of the resources provided that enables children to engage in different types of play:

“All the workers are fully trained, even the volunteers, and they have been doing the training online if they had not been able to get back to the centres. That has been, well I mean invaluable ... all the skills have been planned by the playworkers”

(Interviewee 2)

“We started quite loosely, and all quite play-based, different things for different ages, they brought in craft equipment, art equipment, there was also gaming consoles and

things for some of the older pupils. There was a big emphasis on being outdoors being the safest place. Play equipment out on the playground” (Interviewee 6)

It is clear the three themes of Strong Relationships, Part of the School Team and Quality Service are strongly linked together.

## **Discussion**

For all schools in Wales, the Welsh Government has provided guidance on how well-being is a whole school approach using a framework based on “the core values of belonging, efficacy and having your voice heard” (WG 2021, 6). With the impact on children’s well-being from the Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns since March 2020 not going to be fully assessed for probably many years, the short-term implications have already been recognised by headteachers in this study reflecting the systematic review undertaken by Beheji et. al. (2020). Letzel et. al. (2020) study of home schooling in Germany found students to have an increase during a lockdown of being “listless, bored, and more worried” (p. 162). This whole school approach includes “other professionals working with the school” and “with the wider community that surrounds the school” (WG 2021, 5). Other professions and the wider community of the school would include the Play Service and this study indicates the positive contribution the Well-being Playworkers have had not only for the children but also for both the school and teaching staff and the community. Three key themes were identified: Strong Relationships; Part of the School and Quality Service.

Supporting well-being requires a therapeutic approach for which playwork has considered being an important aspect of the professional practice (Sturrock and Else 1998).

This entails forming positive relationships with the children, as well as the children's families (King, 2021). A therapeutic approach in playwork also requires a non-directive approach where the playworker, here the Well-being Playworker supports the play process (King and Temple 2018; PPSG 2005). The third aspect of playwork practice that has been identified is how adaptable and versatile it has had to be (King 2021). It is clear from the Headteachers perspective within this study how adaptable and versatile the Well-being Playworkers are concerning running the hubs, running bespoke sessions on a one-to-one or group basis, and supporting both Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2 children within their academic classroom. This has enabled a change in perspective on what playwork is, and what the Well-being Playworker through play supports children's well-being.

Buheji et. al. (2020) well-being framework based on the four variables of "physical activity, the psychological status, the nutrition status, and then the recovery practices" (p. 12) focused on supporting parents during and post-lockdown. However, the four variables can be seen to be relevant for the Play and Well-being Camps which many of the schools in this study run. The Play and Well-being Camps provide meals (nutrition) as well as the Well-being Playworkers organising physical play (physical activity) and creative play activities to support children's emotional and well-being health through playing, talking, and listening to the children (psychological status). This in turn will support the 'recovery process' as indicated in this comment from children who upon returning to school in September 2020 had attended the Play and Well-being Camps in the summer:

"What we did find was when we did come back in September, those children who had the 5 weeks were far more chilled whatever their ages. Some were 4 years old right

up to year 11 years old, they showed far more resilience and were less emotional than their peers were” (Interviewee 2)

Although there has been no ‘measure’ on children’s well-being, it is evident from both this comment and that of the other interviewees how the Well-being Playworkers have contributed to children’s well-being through the pandemic, where through play children have been supported in the ‘hubs’, in the school playground and their lessons.

Wales was the first country in the world to have a national play policy (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2002), a national play policy implementation plan or strategy (WAG, 2006), and introduce statutory legislation for play within the Children and Families Measures (Wales) Act 2010 (WG, 2010) (Legislation.gov.uk, 2021) which aims in reducing child poverty. This statutory duty involves all the 22 Local Authorities in Wales to undertake a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years (WG, 2014). The use of the Well-being Playworkers within schools in Torfaen is implementing the Themes of ‘Encouraging More Play Provision’, ‘The Role of Schools’, ‘Play in the Community’ and ‘A Playwork Profession’ (WAG, 2006) and contributing to reducing poverty with vulnerable children attending the Play and Well-being Camps which provides food, physical activity and supports children’s play, factors that are integral to children’s well-being (Buheji et. al. (2020,)), using a ‘Whole School Approach’ (WG, 2021).

The current climate about children returning to school in the UK media is around having a ‘Summer of Play’ (Dodd 2021) and the need for play at school rather than ‘schoolification’ (Weale 2021). What the schools, and more specifically in this study the headteachers are a

recognition that immediately post-lockdown there was a need for a focus on play, and at sometimes at the expense of the curriculum, as summed up by this comment:

“I think if you gone back a couple of years, or back before Covid and somebody said, “I want to take eight of your children out to play dodgeball”, our year 6 teacher would have said “no you’re not, I’m doing maths”. It is that mindset change that of “do you know that is what they need for their well-being, we can do maths later with them for those children, that’s fine”. Because they are not emotionally regulated to learn at that minute, they need something else, or that pick me up or well-being boost”

(Interviewee 1)

The use of playworkers, or in this case Well-being Playworkers is not new where examples of playworkers supporting children’s play during lunchtimes can be found, for example with the Outside Play and Learning (OPAL) organisation (Fossett 2008). However, this study has shown how not only is it during children’s lunchtime, when teachers are not teaching, playworkers can have a role in supporting the academic side of school life by offering bespoke sessions on a one-to-one or group basis for children to be in a calmer mindset to engage in their lessons. This has only been possible with the foresight and funding made available to train and develop a professional play service to support the WG Well-being Framework (WG 2021) that schools in Wales must adopt. The model outlined in this study, and the value headteachers have placed on the use of playworkers in schools can easily be copied and adopted by other Local Authorities to support children’s well-being in school, not just in Wales but across the United Kingdom.

There are limitations to the study. The number of schools within the cluster that used the Well-being Playworkers was small, however, the total number of nine interviews does provide a true representative of the headteachers who were involved in the seven 'hubs'. From the perspective of the headteachers, there was no doubt the Well-being Playworkers have and are making a difference to children's well-being. However, without any quantitative measure, this will remain as a perception. There is a scope to set up a counter-balance pre-and post-test intervention using the Play and Well-being Camps using a standardised measure on well-being to see record any potential benefit. This would be a useful follow-up study. One interviewee stated that upon the return of the students after the first lockdown, at times learning had to take a backseat to play as children could not concentrate if being distracted by potential anxiety or concern. By providing children with space during the more formal curriculum time, even for 20 minutes, enabled children to return to the class in a less anxious state. The impact of the well-being playworker intervention may support educational attainment by supporting children's health and well-being through play.

## **Conclusion**

The current Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent three lockdowns in the United Kingdom have put pressure on children, young people, and school staff. For children and young people, the lockdown has resulted in less contact with peers and an increase in concerns around their well-being. Schools already must consider a 'Whole School Approach' to children's well-being, and when pupils returned from the first lockdown, a more play-focused experience was adopted in this cluster of schools within Torfaen.

This was supported by the Well-being Playworkers who ran the initial 'hubs' in March 2020 during the first lockdown, and subsequent 'hubs' during the second lockdown in January

2021. Also, the Well-being Playworkers continued to support schools supporting children's play during lunchtimes, providing bespoke play on both a one-to-one and group basis and supporting teaches in both the Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2 of the curriculum. From a headteacher's perspective, their support pre-lockdown, during the lockdown, and post-lockdown has been invaluable. This perception was based on the Well-being Playworkers forming Strong Relationships, being part of the School Team, and providing a Quality Service. This was all summed up by one comment:

“They are value for money, I would pay more” (Interviewee 7)

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