

Play in Practice during the Pandemic

Nursery and Foundation Stage

June 2021

Full Report



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast



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Authors

- Dr. Glenda Walsh, Stranmillis University College.
- Tracey Woods, Controlled Schools' Support Council.
- Dr. Cira Palli-Aspero; Alan Herron and Angela Stallard, PlayBoard NI.



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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Background Context	3
Play as Learning	3
Play and the Pandemic.....	4
Play in Practice Post Lockdown	6
Chapter 2: Methodological Approach	8
Chapter 3: Results	10
Section One: Impact of the Pandemic on Practice (Sept-Dec 2020)	13
Measures put in Place to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19.....	13
Impact of Measures on Children's Experiences.....	16
Observable Changes in Children Post the Initial Lockdown	17
Time Available for Play in Practice Post the Initial Lockdown	20
Use of Play Spaces.....	22
Type of Play Activities Available	23
Changes to Play Resources.....	25
Changes to the Play Environment	26
The Quality of Play	27
Children's Responses to Play in Practice Post Lockdown.....	31
Section Two: Potential Impact of the Second Lockdown on Children's Play	36
Additional Concerns Expressed	36
Chapter 4: Overarching Conclusions.....	40
Chapter 5: Key Recommendations	47
Appendix	52
Reference List.....	64

Tables

Table 1. Q5. What measures did your setting implement in terms of managing COVID-19 related restrictions?	13
Table 2. Q14. During the period up to 24th December 2020, what safety precautions, if any, did you introduce to enable children to continue to enjoy play in practice, even in a reduced fashion?	15
Table 3. Q9. If the time available for play decreased, why was this?	21
Table 4. Q12. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you make any changes to the type of play resources you use?	25
Table 5. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you have to makes changes to the play environment to make it more COVID-19 friendly?	26
Table 6. Q15. In your opinion, has COVID-19 affected the overall quality of playful learning experience in your setting and classroom?	27
Table 7. Perceived causes for the increase on children's levels of anxiety	35
Table 8. Q21. Following the introduction of these further restrictions, have you noted any further concerns above and beyond those noted in section 1 of the survey?....	36
Table 9. Further concerns in relation to the impact of COVID-19 restriction measures.	38

Figures

Figure 1. Years of experience as a teacher	10
<i>Figure 2. Institution in which initial teacher education was completed</i>	11
Figure 3. Class where currently teach	12
Figure 4. Impact of COVID-19 related restriction measures on children's experience of being back in school.....	16
Figure 5. Time available for the children to spend playing.....	20
Figure 6. Children being able to use the same play spaces post lockdown.	22
Figure 7. Changes to play activities pre and post COVID-19.....	23
Figure 8. Children's levels of engagement in play pre- and post-pandemic.....	31
Figure 9. Children's levels of social interaction pre- and post-pandemic	32
Figure 10. Changes on children's levels of anxiety.....	33

Chapter 1: Background Context

Play as Learning

The importance of play and its associated benefits for young children's learning and development have long been recognised (Bruner et al 1976; Whitebread et al, 2012; Fisher et al, 2013). Play in its many forms has been linked to positive social, emotional, physical and cognitive outcomes (Whitebread et al, 2012, Fisher et al 2013 and Zosh et al, 2017) allowing children "not only to be happy and healthy in their lives today but also develop the skills to be the creative, engaged, lifelong learners of tomorrow (Zosh et al, 2017:6). Play experiences can also support improvements in children's academic learning across a range of subject areas including literacy, mathematics and science skills, while also enhancing executive functioning, learner engagement, motivation, and work habits (all pre-requisites for later schooling) (Yogman et al, 2018 and Parker and Stjerne-Thomsen, 2019).

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of the importance of play for young children's learning and development, as children make the transition towards the primary classroom, there tends to be a shift in practice. This is particularly the case within Western societies with a shift towards a more formal style, where the educational experience becomes more about academic outcomes and assessment rather than play (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Hyvonen, 2011; Martlew et al 2011; Hunter and Walsh 2014; Nicholson 2018, Walsh, 2019). There is however a growing evidence base highlighting the importance of playful approaches to teaching and learning in the early years of primary schooling and beyond (van Oers, 2015, Walsh, McMillan and McGuinness, 2017, Parker & Stjerne Thomsen 2019). Pedagogical approaches including active learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, problem and inquiry-based learning, as well as project work, have been found to impact positively on children's holistic learning if meaningful, socially interactive, actively engaging,

iterative and joyful (Zosh et al, 2017 and Parker and Stjerne-Thomsen, 2019). Play and playful pedagogies therefore provide a means to enable all children, irrespective of their age, to move beyond the acquisition of mere knowledge and facts to engage in “deep, conceptual understanding that allows them to connect concepts and skills, apply their knowledge to different situations, and spark new ideas.... allowing them to step into this uncertainty, create opportunities for themselves and their communities, and learn throughout life” (Zosh et al, 2017: 5).

Play, moreover, is a fundamental right for all children enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (PlayBoard NI, 2016) further reinforced in UN General Comment 17 (Atkinson et al. 2014). Such a rights-based approach to play is inclusive of the instrumental (viewing play as important for learning and healthy development) and autotelic approaches (viewing play as important for its own sake) by acknowledging that play as both a right in itself as well as an important means of achieving other rights (such as health, development and education) (Davey and Lundy, 2011). Article 31 therefore cannot be read in isolation to the other articles of the UNCRC and so it could be argued that all children have a right to an education which is holistic in nature and playful in perspective.

Play and the Pandemic

Yet, against this backdrop of the importance of play and playful pedagogies for children’s holistic learning and healthy development, is a dismantled picture of schooling, society and life as a whole that no one could have ever predicted, all resulting from a universal crisis, known as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been impacting children in all countries across the globe (United Nations, 2020). Nationwide lockdowns, social distancing and a suite of restrictions, including the closure of schools and early years settings, playgrounds and public parks, as well as reduced

access to extended family and friends have transformed children's lives in a way that no-one could ever have imagined, resulting in an unprecedented change to where, when, how and with whom play occurs in general (Graber et al, 2020).

Drawing on a recent rapid review of research on children's play under restrictive circumstances, it is essential that such changes to children's play are taken seriously (Graber et al, 2020). There is growing evidence of the long-term negative impacts of play deprivation on child development and later social and emotional learning (Brown, 2018), exacerbated during times of increased stress and anxiety (Graber et al, 2020). As a result of COVID-19, almost all children will have spent less time playing with children beyond their own family, i.e. their peer group. In addition, outdoor play opportunities, essential to a child's healthy growth and development, have been reduced due to closures of playgrounds, and public parks. These closures will have been felt more keenly by children living in both urban and/or disadvantaged areas who have may have little access to private gardens or open green spaces in their local community (Bento and Dias, 2017). Recent evidence from PlayBoard Northern Ireland showed that, during lockdown, percentages of school-aged children being active in play dropped from 53.2% to 31.4%, participation in social play decreased dramatically from 58.9% to 5%, while technology-based play increased from 33.9% to 55.7% (PlayBoard NI, 2020).

COVID-19, and the restrictions put in place to eliminate its spread, have necessitated widespread social isolation, impacting on everyone, including children. Meta-analysis of research over the past two decades (Oppenheim and Rehill, 2020) has revealed that young children today are more likely to have older parents and fewer siblings, and as a result of the restrictions put in place to tackle the pandemic, will have had less opportunities for social development in the home than they would have had from interacting with their peers at school. A recent systematic review, conducted by Loades

et al, (2020), indicated that children may experience higher rates of depression and anxiety during and after enforced isolation. In such crisis situations, Graber et al (2020) argue that children need play more than ever as a means of coping with stress, anxiety and trauma and providing a form of enjoyment and stability in their lives when everything else appears to be in disarray.

Play in Practice Post Lockdown

As Northern Ireland schools began to prepare for a return to the classroom or pre-school setting at the end of August/September 2020, having been closed from mid-March, teachers were presented with the unenviable task of managing the risks posed by the global pandemic while still ensuring a high-quality playful learning experience for children in practice. During this time, and more recently, there have been calls from mental health and early years experts for an emphasis to be placed on play and playful pedagogies both indoors and out as children return to the classroom or pre-school setting (see e.g. Walsh and Gillespie, 2020, McMullen and Walsh, 2020, Weale, 2020, Ball, Gill and Yates 2020), based on the premise that young children need to 'emotionally regulate before we educate' (British Psychological Society, 2020). Yet enabling such a playful learning experience whilst also ensuring the safety of children and teaching staff does not come without its challenges

Furthermore, juxtaposed with the need to prioritise play as schools returned, is what McMullen (2021) refers to as a 'fatalistic discourse' of catch up, recovery, redress, summer schools, extended school days and small group tutoring to make up for the loss of learning and lost school time. While research evidence has revealed that the protracted period of school closure has heightened existing disadvantage and vulnerabilities (Walsh, Purdy et al, 2020), Sharp et al (2020) caution against catch-up being envisaged as a 'quick-fix' endeavour. There appears to be a need, more than ever, to call upon the creativity, enthusiasm and expertise of our early years teachers

in enabling a new normal in practice (Walsh and Gillespie, 2020). Even if future lockdowns require schools and early years settings to return to a more blended approach to teaching and learning, experts, such as the Lego Professor of Play at the University of Cambridge, have been advocating the need to maintain active and playful methods, guarding against the intrusion of formal and paper-based approaches (Ferguson, 2020), as well as an over-emphasis on digital learning (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020).

It is within this context that a collaborative project between PlayBoard NI, Stranmillis University College and the Controlled Schools' Support Council was initiated to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of play in our early years classrooms with a particular focus on the contexts of Nursery and Foundation Stage. The overall research objectives were to:

- Review the current state of play in our nursery settings and foundation stage classrooms
- Consider the pressures on children and early years staff,
- Identify the enablers and barriers to implementing high quality play-based learning and teaching in times of crisis, and
- Reflect on lessons learned and project a way forward.

This survey was designed to gain an insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on play in practice in Northern Ireland's early years settings. The survey specifically sought the views of Nursery and Foundation Stage teachers (P1 and P2) in relation to their experience of trying to maintain a high-quality playful pedagogy despite the many restrictions put in place to protect the safety of both children and staff.

Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

Method

For the purposes of garnering a wide range of early years teachers' (Nursery and Foundation Stage) perspectives on play in practice in the current COVID-19 pandemic, an online survey using Survey Monkey was adopted for data collection. The questionnaire focused on the following five key areas namely:

1. the impact on classroom practice as a result of measures put in place to mitigate the risk of COVID-19;
2. the impact on the current state of play in practice in the setting/classroom;
3. the impact on children's overall levels of engagement and social interaction; and emotional well-being;
4. the potential impact of a further protracted period of lockdown and school closure; and
5. any additional guidance and/or support required to enable settings to continue to provide a high-quality playful learning experience in practice.

In addition, the survey was divided into 2 sections:

- Section one focused on the impact of the pandemic on play in practice from the initial return to school in September 2020 to the 24th December when a further lockdown was re-introduced across Northern Ireland.
- Section two focused on the potential impact on play in practice of a second period of home-learning re-introduced as a result of a further lockdown and the subsequent closure of schools and nursery settings.

A variety of response option formats was utilised including checklist responses, scaled responses, and some open-ended responses to allow for respondents to explain their answer in greater depth if they desired. Before distribution, the online survey was piloted with 4 teachers (2 Nursery and 2 Foundation Stage) and their associated responses in relation to the content, layout and wording of the survey were then incorporated into the final version.

The survey collected 499 responses in total, and after filtering for partial responses and for responses outside of the Nursery and Foundation Stage phases, 291 useable responses remained.

Analysis

The quantitative and simple qualitative data were subjected to univariate analysis (descriptive and inferential). The analysis was conducted in two stages. In stage one, an initial analysis of the survey results was conducted using Survey Monkey analytical tools to identify the overarching trends. Stage two, focused on a more in-depth analysis of the open question responses using MS-Excel and MS-Word. These contained more complex qualitative data which allowed for a form of thematic analysis by deductive coding to take place, drawing out common core themes.

Ethics

This study was guided by the ethical principles and protocols of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and ethical approval for the research was granted by the Research and Scholarship Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast (Ref: 01/2021/Walsh).

Chapter 3: Results

Demographics

Respondents were asked about the number of years' experience they had as a teacher and the results are shown in Figure 1. Although the majority of respondents had between 16 and 25 years' experience (40%, n=119), there were 32.9% (n=98) with 6 -15 years' experience, 8.2% (n= 49) with 26-35, 10.1% (n=30) with less than 5 years and two teachers with over 36 years' experience. These results indicate therefore that the respondents who completed this survey are representative of a range of teachers with differing levels of experience.

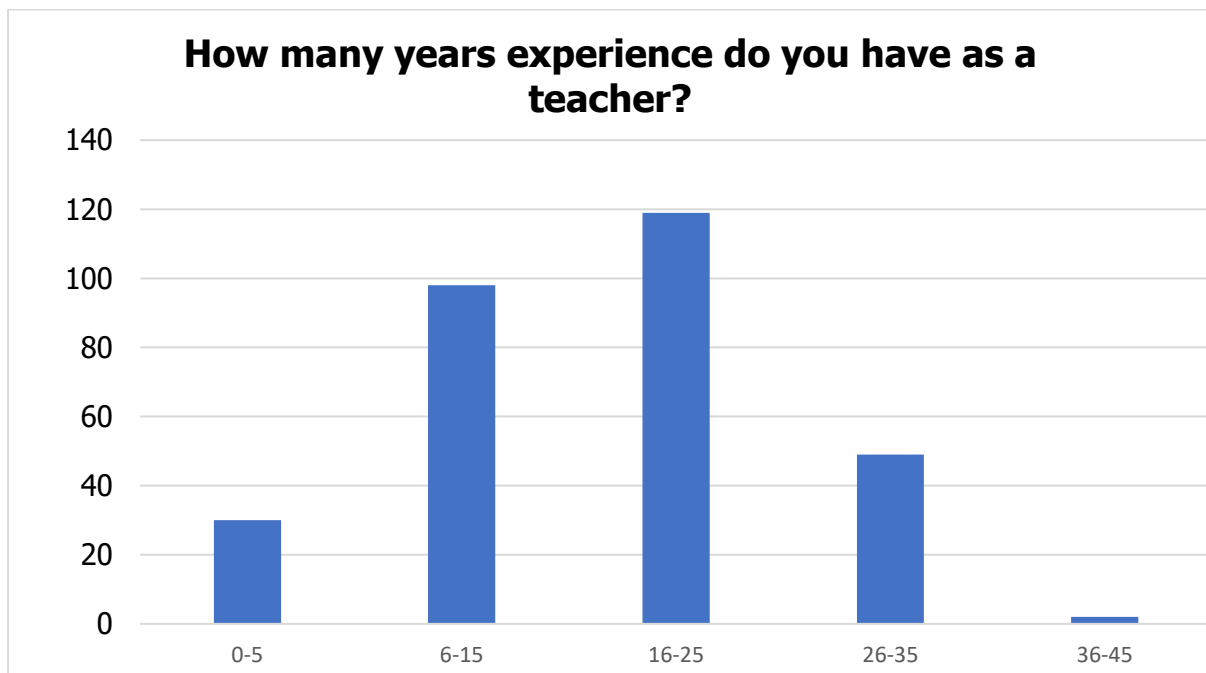


Figure 1. Years of experience as a teacher

Respondents were asked to identify the institution in which they completed their initial teacher education. See Figure 2. Stranmillis University College received the highest percentage of responses (47.2%, n=154) by a clear margin. The results also indicate that 16% (n=52) of respondents completed their training at St Mary's University College, while 11.3% (n=37) of the respondents trained at the University of Ulster.

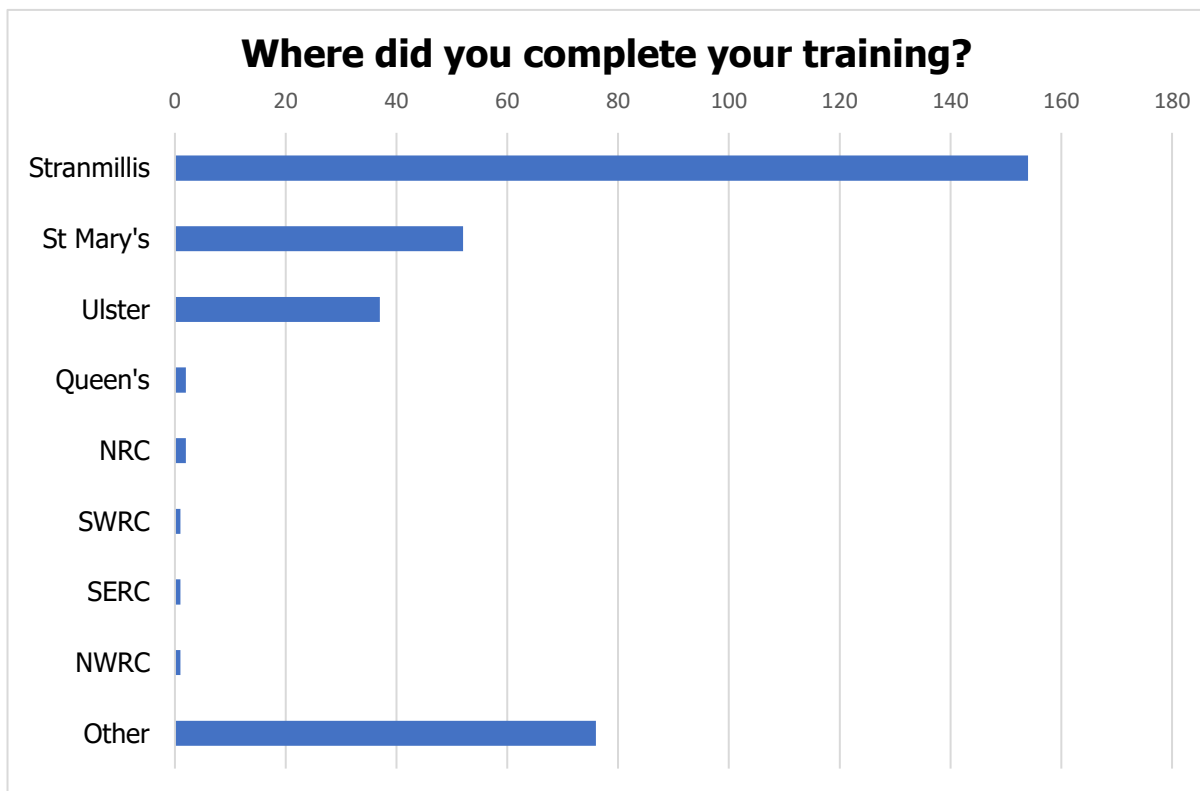


Figure 2. Institution in which initial teacher education was completed

In question 2, respondents were asked about the class in which they currently teach. See Figure 3 for results. The majority of respondents (37.1%, n= 130) are presently teaching in a nursery setting, with 29.4% (n=103) of the respondents teaching in P1 and 21.1%, (n= 74) in P2. The other category comprised those who were presently working in a voluntary or private pre-school setting or a Key Stage 1 classroom.

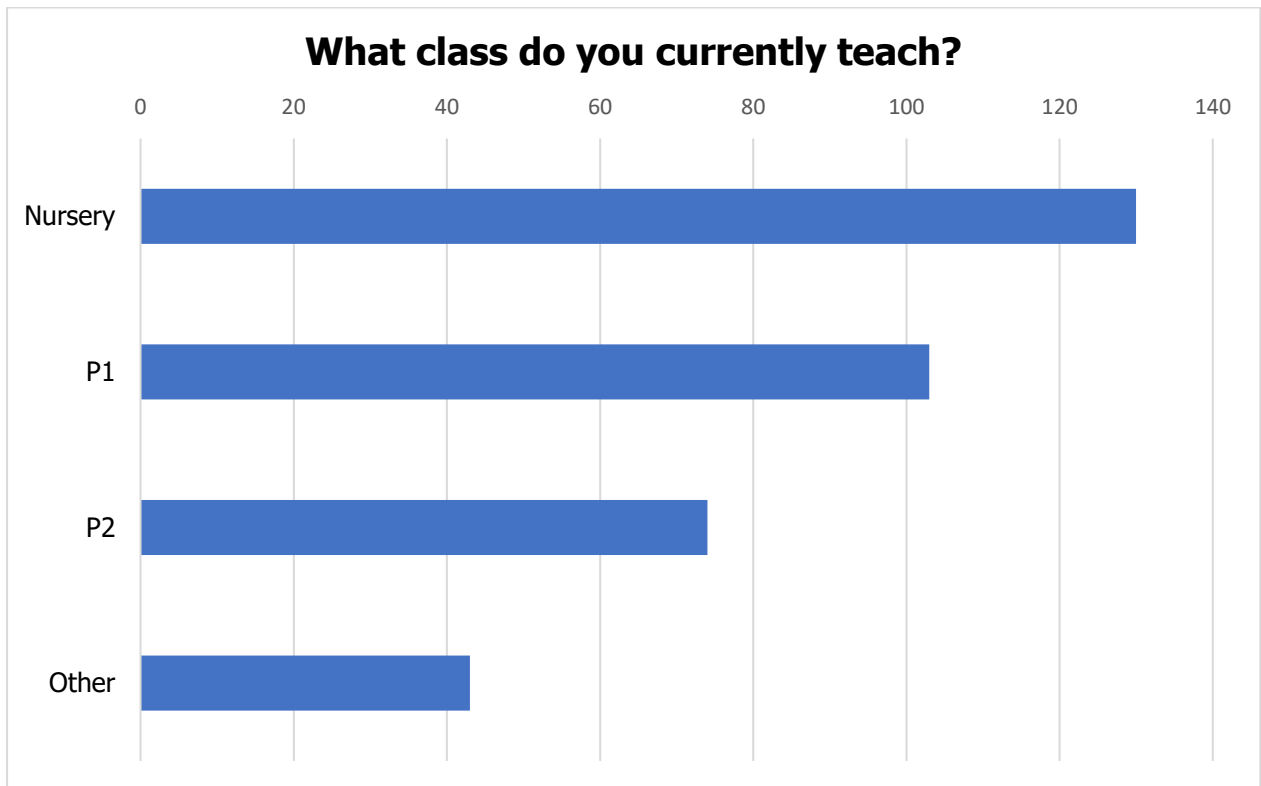


Figure 3. Class where currently teach

Section One: Impact of the Pandemic on Practice (Sept-Dec 2020)

Measures put in Place to Mitigate the Impact of COVID-19

Respondents were asked what restrictions, if any, they had put in place in their classroom/setting to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. (No limit was placed on the number of choices that the respondents could make). From the collected responses, as detailed in Table 1, the most common measures put in place related to hygiene and cleaning protocols.

Answer Choices	Responses
Establishment of pupil 'bubbles' for learning activities	86.6% (n=227)
Establishment of pupil 'bubbles' for non-learning activities	66.4% (n=174)
Use of face coverings in school (for adults)	55.3% (n=145)
Cleaning protocols (hand washing etc.)	98.5% (n=258)
Increased levels of cleaning for frequently touched surfaces etc.	95.8% (n=251)
Social distancing protocols in shared spaces	76.0% (n=199)
Other (please specify)	29.4% (n=77)

Table 1. Q5. *What measures did your setting implement in terms of managing COVID-19 related restrictions?*

Respondents' comments included additional measures as detailed below:

Staggered arrival and pick-up times

"Restricted amount of adults, restricted use of some toys and materials, hand pumps outside, signing into rooms, restricted use of entrances and exits, staggered pick-ups." (Foundation Stage P1/P2 teacher)

Classroom arrangement

"Desks all forward facing rather than in groups. No use of sand for play – including sand house. Individual playdough. Soft furnishings removed and no use of fabric items by children e.g. dressing up clothes, puppets." (Foundation Stages P1 teacher)

"Seating arrangements - rows rather than groups. No sand/water play. All children had a pencil case of their own (that did not leave school) and a tray of their own resources, e.g. whiteboard, marker, scissors, glue etc. so no mixed handling. Reading books that left the school were wiped down by parents and quarantined for 72 hours before being reassigned to another child. Homework became all online via Seesaw - no submission of paper copies from home." (Foundation Stages P2 teacher)

Rotation of resources

"(...) rotation of toys between classes to allow quarantine period".
(Foundation Stage P2 teacher)

"Less opportunities for sand, dough and group messy play. More rotation of toys so item not necessarily available the next day. Time built in for hand washing." (Nursery teacher)

Increased cleaning measures

"Sensory play was no longer shared (all individual trays), limited contact with other staff/bubbles in school and limited contact with parents (no GRTL sessions in school), no home school diaries and discouraged use of school bags amongst pupils where appropriate." (Nursery teacher – SLD in special setting)

Participants were also asked to identify which safety precautions, if any, they had introduced to enable children to enjoy play safely during the period up to 24th December 2020. These responses are detailed in Table 2.

Answer Choices	Responses
Regular cleaning of play spaces	95.14% 235
Regular cleaning of play equipment/materials	93.52% 231
Increased use of disposable play equipment/materials	48.18% 119
Wearing of PPE	42.11% 104
Washing/Sanitizing of hands pre and post play	96.36% 238
Other (please specify)	20.24% 50
Total	247

Table 2. Q14. During the period up to 24th December 2020, what safety precautions, if any, did you introduce to enable children to continue to enjoy play in practice, even in a reduced fashion?

Increased hygiene measures

"Fogging between sessions and at the end of each day. Adults and children's temperatures taken, hand sanitisers at entrance to building and on exit, essential adults only in building, strict protocols for all adults, no backpacks, no home lending libraries." (Nursery teacher)

"Due to two sessions per day a huge effort has been undertaken by nursery staff to designate all play resources to specific groups. Each day all used equipment is sterilized in Milton and hung out to dry in net sacks. A steamer is used to

steam the entire room and a thorough cleaning schedule is maintained to minimise any spread of the virus. A massive undertaking without complaint by any member of staff.”(Nursery teacher)

Some teachers were of the opinion that a degree of normality in the classroom was paramount, irrespective of COVID-19, and imposing such restrictions on young children was impossible in practice as reinforced by the following comment:

“I have tried my best to keep the day as 'normal' as possible. It is impossible to keep socially distanced in P1/2 especially during play.”(P1/P2 teacher)

Impact of Measures on Children’s Experiences

Nursery and Foundation Stage teachers were asked if the restrictions put in place in the classroom/setting to mitigate the spread of the pandemic had interfered in any way with the children’s experience of being back in school. Over half of respondents (58.6%, n=153) considered that they had, whilst a sizeable minority (41.4%, (n=108) were of the opinion that this was not the case. See Figure 4 for these results.

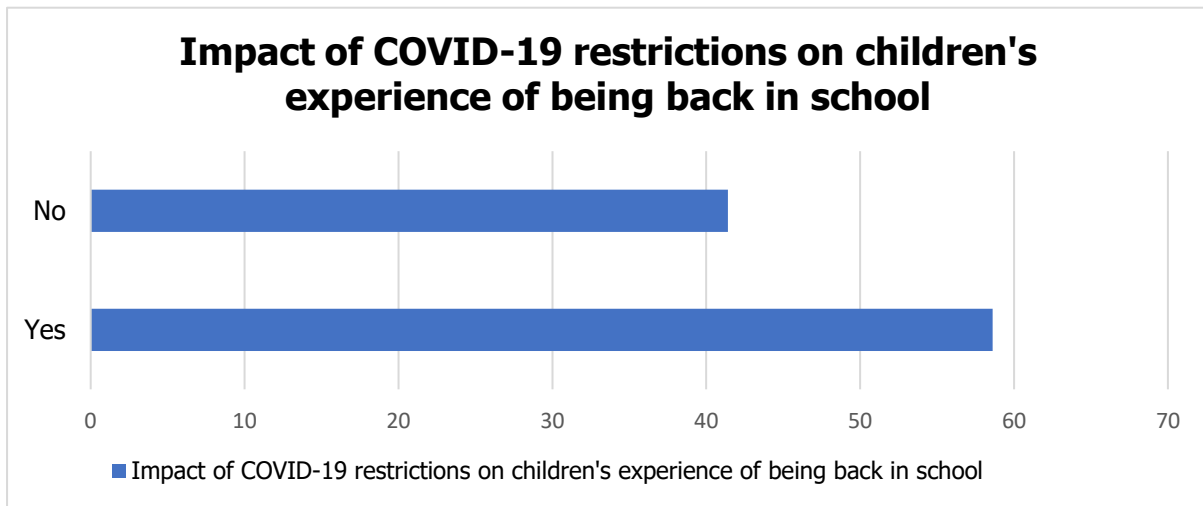


Figure 4. Impact of COVID-19 related restriction measures on children’s experience of being back in school.

Observable Changes in Children Post the Initial Lockdown

When asked if they had observed any changes in the children following the initial lockdown (i.e. in relation to attentiveness, social connectivity, level of engagement with activities, level of withdrawal, self-care skills, independence etc.), 247 respondents provided substantive responses and two schools of thought emerged.

A more positive school of thought

Nursery and Foundation Stage teachers (n=72) reported several positive changes: children were excited about their return to school, appeared more resilient, were coping well with the classroom/setting restrictions, were focused, engaged and eager to learn. Some Nursery teachers (n=6) noted positive changes to children's self-care routines (e.g. hand hygiene, dressing or going to the toilet) and others reported that children appeared to have less separation anxiety and adapted to routines quickly (n=4). In addition, some Nursery teachers (n=6) noted a higher level of independence on the part of some children, explained as a result of the children spending more time with their parents/carers during the period of school closure, ensuring happier, and more relaxed children.

The following qualitative comments support these findings:

"Children were very settled when they came back to school - we did not expect this to be the case. School is quieter - restricted movement of classes/children. The playground is calmer - classes play separately and fewer out at a time. No significant withdrawal/loss of self-care etc....but the 'real' impact is likely to be deeper and sadder and may not be apparent through immediate observations."
(P2 teacher)

"The children settled more easily than any other year & I think it was because both parents and children were ready to be apart after a long time together in Lockdown." (Nursery teacher)

"In fact, the adults struggled more to settle into the new routines. The children just accepted things as they were and settled into the new normal from the start. It was actually amazing how they came into the class without the support of their parents. They were very resilient and enjoyed and chose activities such as role play where they were able to connect with each other physically."
(P1 teacher)

"Children were very glad to have routine of nursery." (Nursery teacher)

"Due to the layout of the classroom no groups, children facing the front in rows of two, I actually noticed an increased level of attentiveness from the class. Children became very familiar with routines and were independent with their trays of materials which they had to sort and organise themselves." (P1 teacher)

[A more negative school of thought](#)

In contrast, the majority of respondents (n=150) reported that children had been negatively impacted by the lockdown experience and the restrictive measures put in place in the classroom/setting. These respondents reported that children appeared more anxious, and less independent. According to these respondents, a lack of routine during lockdown had resulted in some children experiencing difficulty adjusting to the structure of the school day leaving them unsettled, nervous and somewhat restless.

Some of the respondents from both Nursery and Foundation Stage (n=19) noted that children's speech, language, communication, and listening skills had been negatively impacted by the protracted period of time spent out of school. They reported that children's social skills were under-developed and children experienced difficulty in sharing or turn-taking (n=31). Problem solving skills were negatively impacted with adult intervention and guidance for simple tasks required more frequently. It was also noted that levels of anxiety had increased (n=12) with some children appearing less focused and presenting with significantly lower levels of attention (n=27). Some

settings experienced behavioural issues as a result of poor emotional regulation and other respondents observed that some children appeared withdrawn (n=20) and less adventurous in terms of their play. Obsessive behaviours were also observed in some children who had a heightened awareness of the need to keep themselves, others and toys/materials clean. These respondents also noted weaker fine motor skills both in Nursery and Foundation Stage, (n=17), as well as less independence in relation to self-care routines (n=51).

The following qualitative comments add support to this negative picture re. children's attitudes and dispositions towards learning on their return to school post lockdown:

"(...) Their attention and listening skills appear to be poorer than ever and story time had to take place in small groups. The narrative of coronavirus is evident in the children's home talk e.g. they talk about mummy wearing a mask, the bad virus and not seeing grandparents anymore. I have certainly found the behaviour of the children this year to be more exuberant and I have been implementing volume charts and focusing heavily on emotion talk with them."
(Nursery teacher)

"Their independence was certainly less than if other years and the sharing of resources and focused engagement during activities was certainly reduced. (P1 teacher)

"(...) a large number of boys I observed an increase number of behaviour incidents in relation to sharing and finding a place within the class. I also observed a greater number of small dependency groups where children attached to another child and did much of their day with the one other child."
(P2 teacher)

"(...) I noticed a great difference in the children's self-care and independence skills and found that they were much more reliant on adults in the setting."
(Nursery teacher)

Time Available for Play in Practice Post the Initial Lockdown

The majority (53.1%, n=139) of the respondents (both Nursery and Foundation Stage) reported that, on average, the time available for children to play remained the same in practice on returning to school post the initial lockdown. Figure 5 also highlights that just over one fifth of teachers (22.5%, n=59) reported that the time available for children to play had actually increased, while the remaining 24.4% (n=64) noted that play in practice had decreased as a result of the pandemic.



Figure 5. Time available for the children to spend playing.

For those 64 respondents who indicated that the time available for play in practice decreased post lockdown, Table 3 highlights the primary causes.

Answer Choices	Responses
Need to catch up on academics	14.1% (n=9)
Concern at the level of risk	43.8% (n=28)
Inadequate space to allow for social distancing whilst at play	34.4% (n=22)
Insufficient adult support available to facilitate play	12.5% (n=8)
Shorter session time	65.6% (n=42)
Other (please specify)	40.6% (n=26)
Total	64

Table 3. Q9. If the time available for play decreased, why was this?

The qualitative comments below provide further reasons as to why the time available for play in practice was reduced. Reasons included: staggered arrival and pick-up times, more time spent cleaning surfaces and materials, lack of facilities or resources to allow for the same amount of play due to strict adherence to public health rules.

Examples of these comments are detailed below:

"Unable to use main playground in usual way due to more time needed for individual class break times and staggered collection times towards end of day." (P2 teacher)

"Dual day. More time needed for staff to sanitise surfaces and change equipment between sessions." (Nursery teacher)

"The nursery still had the same hours, but play was shortened a little by hand washing on entry, slightly early tidy up for a more structured snack time, handwashing again before snack and after outside, then a slightly earlier home time for most as it was staggered." (Nursery teacher)

Use of Play Spaces

The respondents were then asked whether the children in their class/setting had been able to avail of the same playful spaces, both indoors and out, that they had experienced prior to lockdown. As illustrated in Figure 6, while the majority of teachers (56.3%, n=139) reported that the playful spaces had not changed post lockdown, 43.7% (n=108) of the respondents indicated that changes to play spaces both indoors and out took place.

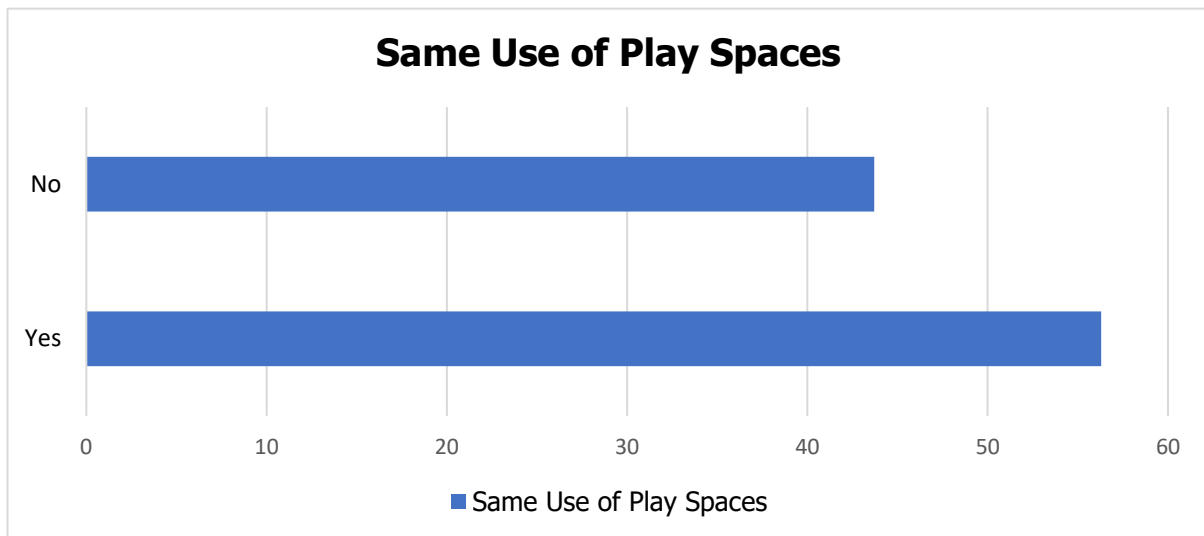


Figure 6. Children being able to use the same play spaces post lockdown.

Type of Play Activities Available

Figure 7 reports on the type of playful activities available to the children in their early years setting pre- and post the initial lockdown. As Figure 7 indicates, there was a significant increase in noisy play (increase of 35.3%), loose parts (increase of 21.4%), and outdoor play (increase of 37%) including outdoor free play (increase of 22.3%). On the contrary, sand play (decrease of 57.7%) and messy play (decrease of 18.4%) were reported to have been more available before the outbreak of COVID-19. Water play seems to have remained approximately the same (increase of a 5.36%).

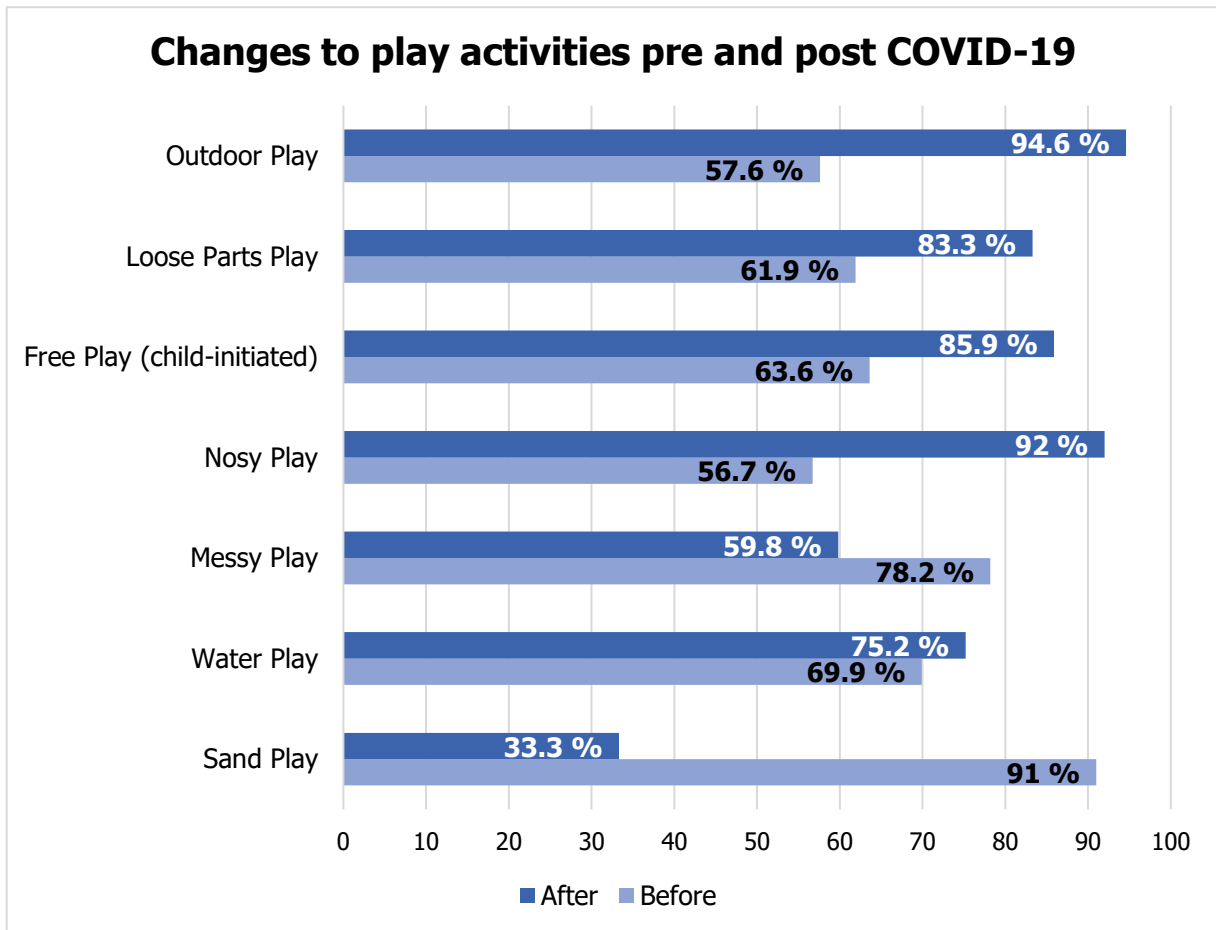


Figure 7. Changes to play activities pre and post COVID-19.

The following comments provide further detail on the availability of playful activities on children's return to their Nursery and Foundation stage classes:

Rearranging classrooms

"We have worked hard and rearranged our rooms/ resources etc. to make sure the children still have all of the experiences that are essential to their development."(P1 teacher)

"Role play area has been dramatically decrease due to time restraints on cleaning."(P1/P2 composite teacher)

"Outdoor space decreased because we had to share with three other bubbles. But we developed an outdoor play area for each bubble. Classroom space was exactly the same."(P1 teacher)

"Dough is available on some days but with fresh dough for each class and only used for a day. Children have to wash their hands before and after using it. Sand is changed between the part time classes - a tray kept for each. It is sprayed daily. We have tried to keep things as normal as possible. There are no soft toys, cushions, or dressing up clothes."(Nursery teacher)

"No adaption to type or resource or access to or of play have been made. Cleaning or replacement of resource or consumable turnover has been increased. I have not limited the children's access rather mitigated the risk appropriately."(Nursery teacher)

Changes to Play Resources

Table 4 focuses on any changes to play resources that were put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in classrooms/settings. Interestingly, the majority of teachers made greater use of disposable and natural resources in practice but several teachers also referred to enhanced use of plastic resources for ease of cleaning.

Answer Choices	Responses
No Changes	15.4% (n=38)
More disposable play materials	51.8% (n=128)
More plastic play materials	48.6% (n=120)
More natural play materials	29.6% (n=73)
Other (please specify)	38.1% (n=94)
Total	247

Table 4. Q12. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you make any changes to the types of play resources you use?

The following qualitative responses add further clarity as to why such changes to the play resources were required:

"More cleaning, sanitising and use of antibacterial spray, essential oils in dough etc. and also resources disposed of and replaced more regularly." (Nursery teacher)

"We used disposable aprons when painting. More plastic toys used as our wooden toys would not withstand being sterilised each day." (P2 teacher)

"We rotated toys on 72-hour cycle." (Nursery teacher)

"We played outside every day regardless of weather." (P1 teacher)

"We operated as a secure bubble so had no restrictions to play other than no sharing of resources with another bubble." (P2 teacher)

Changes to the Play Environment

When respondents were asked to indicate what changes they had implemented in order to make the playful environment more COVID-19 friendly, the following responses, as detailed in table 5, were provided.

Answer Choices	Responses
More outdoor play	65.7% (n=157)
Reduced number of children in play spaces	41.8% (n=100)
Less 'free' play i.e. more adult directed	19.3% (n=46)
Children assigned to a play bubble or pod	36% (n=86)
Other (please specify)	35.6% (n=85)
Total	239

Table 5. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you have to make changes to the play environment to make it more COVID-19 friendly?

The following qualitative comments reinforce this thinking. Some of the most frequent responses focused on the removal of difficult to clean resources, adding substitute materials or toys, rotating toys on a 72-hour cycle, and/or keeping children in their bubbles.

Children grouped in 'bubbles'

"Restricted access to play zone, role play, water play etc to two days a week allowing it to be cleaned between P1 bubbles on a Wednesday so all children had some access." (P1 teacher)

"In class bubbles children were allowed to choose where they wanted to play and with whom." (P2 teacher)

Removing toys and/or play resources

"Restricted toys and materials used. Limited time outdoors due to class bubbles. Still child-initiated play." (P1 teacher)

"In nursery we would usually have sand, playdough and water as play areas. These were all removed due to COVID restrictions which was okay initially as the children were all engaging with the other areas on offer but as time went on, these areas would have been beneficial to progress play and certain skills, particularly fine motor! We have begun to have playdough days, in which we make playdough and the children wash their hands before use. We then throw the playdough out that day. Additionally, all soft surfaces and things that can't be wiped down had to be removed. This meant removing role play costumes, cosy reading corner cushions, mats etc. At this age, a simple role play costume can really progress children's play and imagination so it's unfortunate for them to miss out on this opportunity in their play. We have also had to think about our reading corner to try and make it as inviting as possible without any cosy elements!" (Nursery teacher)

"Removal of all items from the classroom to the assembly hall. Each class can retrieve needed items from there. This gave a lot more space to allow free play - children know only 3 at each station and choose in rotation for fairness. The can move to any free space when they choose - they are well prepared in the routines if sanitizing and tidying." (P2 teacher)

The Quality of Play

In response to whether the restrictions put in place to counteract COVID-19 had affected the overall quality of the playful learning experience in the classroom, the majority of respondents (68.7, n=169) reported that they had, while almost one third of the respondents (31.3%, n=77) stated that this was not the case. (See table 6).

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	68.7% (n=169)
No	31.3% (n=77)
Total	246

Table 6. Q15. In your opinion, has COVID-19 affected the overall quality of playful learning experience in your setting and classroom?

The open-ended responses reinforced the negative impact COVID-19 had on the quality of play in practice in both Nursery and FS classes. For example, respondents stated that there was less opportunity for sharing (both of toys and play areas), less imaginative play, less messy play, reduced or no sensory play – sand, water, playdough, and reduced or no therapeutic play. Additionally, some noted that the reduction of social interactions had a significant impact on the way children relate to one another, and with the adults. It was noted that there was less collaborative play, and a loss of decision-making/problem-solving skills.

In Nursery settings, teachers reported a decrease in free child-led play due to enhanced cleaning routines, and limited access to play areas. This resulted in a significant reduction in opportunities for spontaneous play. The use of outdoor spaces had, for many, been the solution and has allowed settings to provide for more free play and child-led activities, and increased social interactions (bubble mixing).

The qualitative comments below illustrate this more negative stance further:

Reduced resources

"Reduced sharing and planned contact activities. The children have still had quality play but some things are missing". (P2 teacher)

"I think mostly the stress of the threat of COVID has put staff in a state of anxiety which the children must sense in some form. Additionally, we were unable to provide wet sand or dough in the initial period before Christmas which really reduced the opportunity for therapeutic sensory play. So, reduced opportunities for certain play activities have had an impact. In addition, we were told not to use aprons at the water tray, which meant putting much less water than usual into the tray. Therefore, the experience of filling and pouring was reduced in quality. Whilst there has still been a drive for high quality playful learning, I feel that the biggest impact of COVID-19 has been the anxiety of needing to stay safe in an environment where social distancing is not possible. Having said that, I have continued to hug and hold hands with the children

since I feel that they are in particular need of nurture during this time."(Nursery teacher)

Less free play indoors, more adult-led activities

"(...) as some of the areas of play had to be restricted. A reduction in free play and more adult led activities reduced children's freedom to be creative." (P2 teacher)

"The children have less choice where they go each day. Adults have a harder job trying to ensure every child gets at least a turn at each area over the week. Also, children find it difficult to stay at one activity for prolonged length of time. Our play varies from 30mins, 45 mins or 1hr sessions depending on which day. These play sessions now involve a lot more adult direction to keep children at an activity." (Foundation Stages P1/P2 composite teacher)

"(...) less spontaneous play, less resources." (Nursery teacher)

Impact of hygiene measures on the time to play

"Able to do most things in the classroom but need to build in time for hand washing and cleaning equipment." (Nursery teacher)

"With limited staff in school. It is impossible to implement cleaning of play resources to enable play to happen as it should." (Foundation Stage P1/P2 teacher)

Less social interactions

"We assigned the children into play bubbles based on our seating arrangements - this did negatively impact their level of social interaction." (P2 teacher)

Insufficient guidance

"FS staff need to be released from the expectation that they will be able to provide the same quality of learning experience with limited guidance; no additional resources and no regard being given to their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. If play is truly recognised as a priority, then many of

the obstacles can be overcome but teachers have been left to get on with it without any support.” (P1/P2 teacher)

More financial support

“I feel nurseries could really benefit from money to go towards more outdoor play equipment as I feel outdoors is a safer place for our young children to mix and play during a pandemic (...).” (Nursery teacher)

“Financially it’s difficult to provide individual learning through play items for children to use to enhance learning.” (P1/P2 teacher)

“(...) I also think all nurseries should have internet access. I am in a mobile classroom on school grounds and because nurseries were never connected to the c2k network in schools I have to go to the main school to get internet access. In the digital age we live in I think this is totally unacceptable.” (Nursery teacher)

Other teachers, however, saw the changes imposed on play in practice by COVID-19 in a more positive light as reinforced in the following responses:

“I think teachers have reinvented play-based learning in a very short period of time. I have personally seen the benefit to children’s play when it is well planned and the adult steps back to let the children engage free of adult direction or expectation. It has changed my approach to play for the better.” (P2 teacher)

“I noticed a huge change in play behaviour, resulting in quite a lot of COVID related play such as wearing masks, keeping distance, washing hands etc. I thought this was a really interesting development to watch as the children worked out what they were dealing with by playing it out.” (P2 teacher)

“Children’s role play has become more focussed on helping people. Even superhero’s changed from typically fighting the bad guys, to helping to save people from the virus.” (P1/P2 teacher)

“I am surprised to say that this has been a positive. I presumed play would be difficult but the children have shown me that throwing the kitchen sink of selection at them does not make quality. Indeed, lesser materials encourage greater creativity and engagement.” (P2 teacher)

Children's Responses to Play in Practice Post Lockdown

Participants were asked to reflect on how children's levels of engagement in playful learning post lockdown compared with the period prior to the pandemic. In terms of children's engagement levels, the majority of teachers (56.7%, n=138) reported no difference. In sharp contrast, 11.9% (n=29) of teachers reported significantly lower levels of engagement; with 13.9% (n=34) reporting a modest decrease in children's level of engagement. Only 4.5% (n=11) of teachers reported a modest increase in the levels of engagement, but interestingly 7.8% (n=19) of teachers reported a significantly higher level of engagement on the part of children post lockdown.

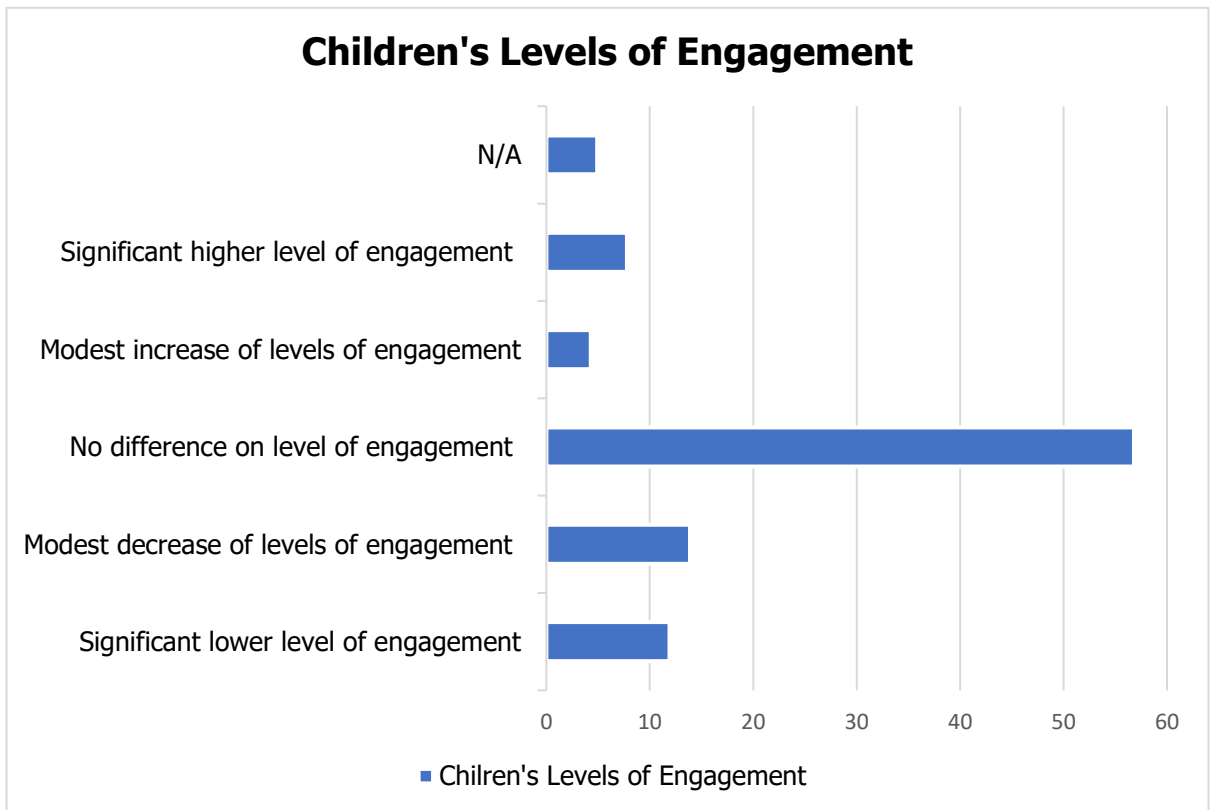


Figure 8. Children's levels of engagement in play pre- and post-pandemic.

Additionally, respondents were asked whether there was any difference in the children's levels of social interaction during play in comparison to pre-COVID times. As represented in figure 9, the majority of teachers (57.4%, n=139) reported no observable differences. A total of 16.1% (n=39) reported significantly reduced levels of social interaction, with 15.7% (n=38) reporting that there was a modest reduction in the children's levels of social interactions. Finally, only 2.9% (n=7) of teachers reported a modest increase, with only 5.8% (n=14) reporting significantly higher levels of social interaction on the part of children post lockdown.

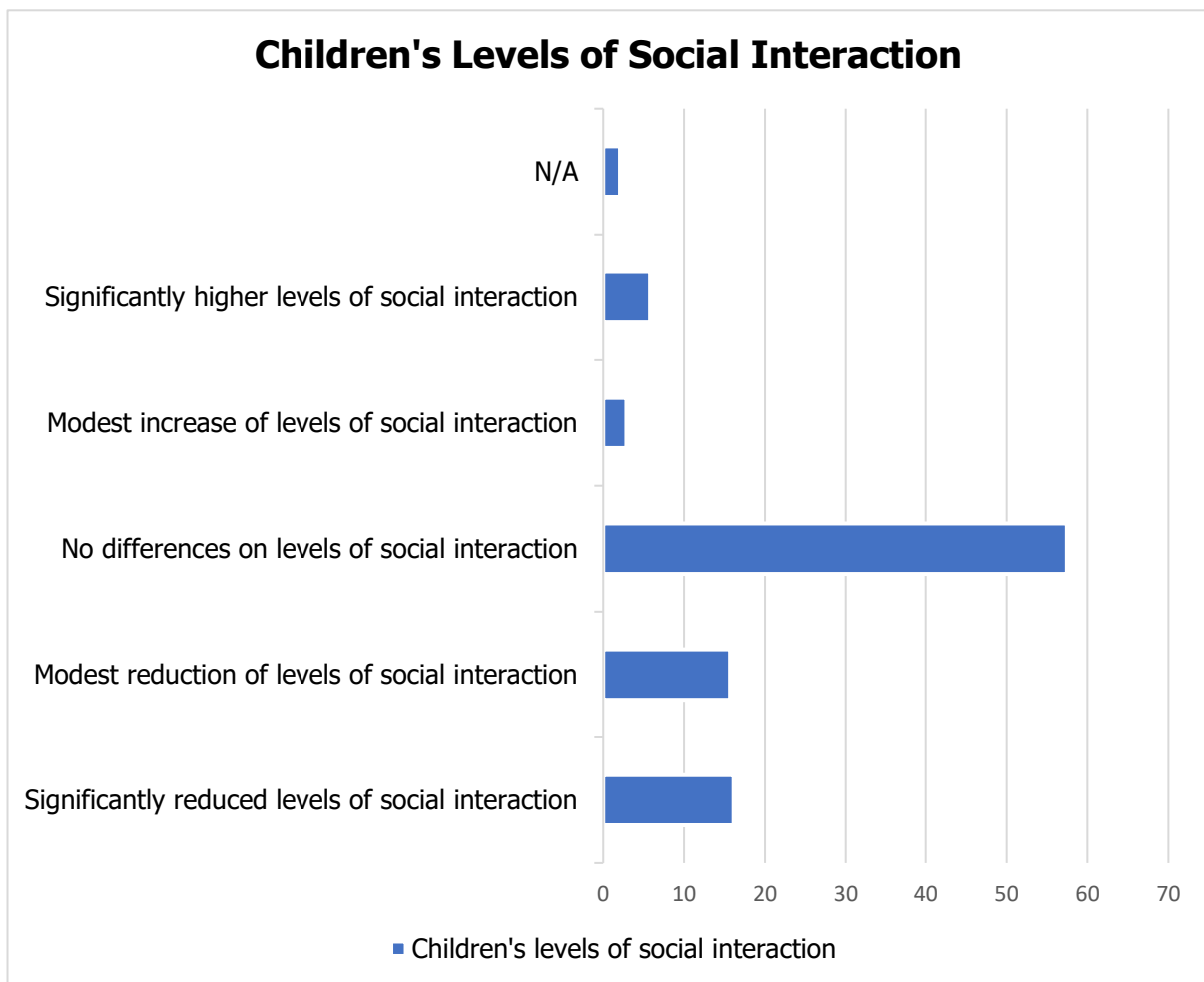


Figure 9. Children's levels of social interaction pre- and post-pandemic

When respondents were asked to comment on whether children were more or less anxious as a result of COVID-19, 34.9% (n=84) reported that the children's levels of anxiety had increased; 2.9% (n=7) stated that they had decreased, while 62.2% (n=150) reported that there was no change. See Figure 10 for these results.

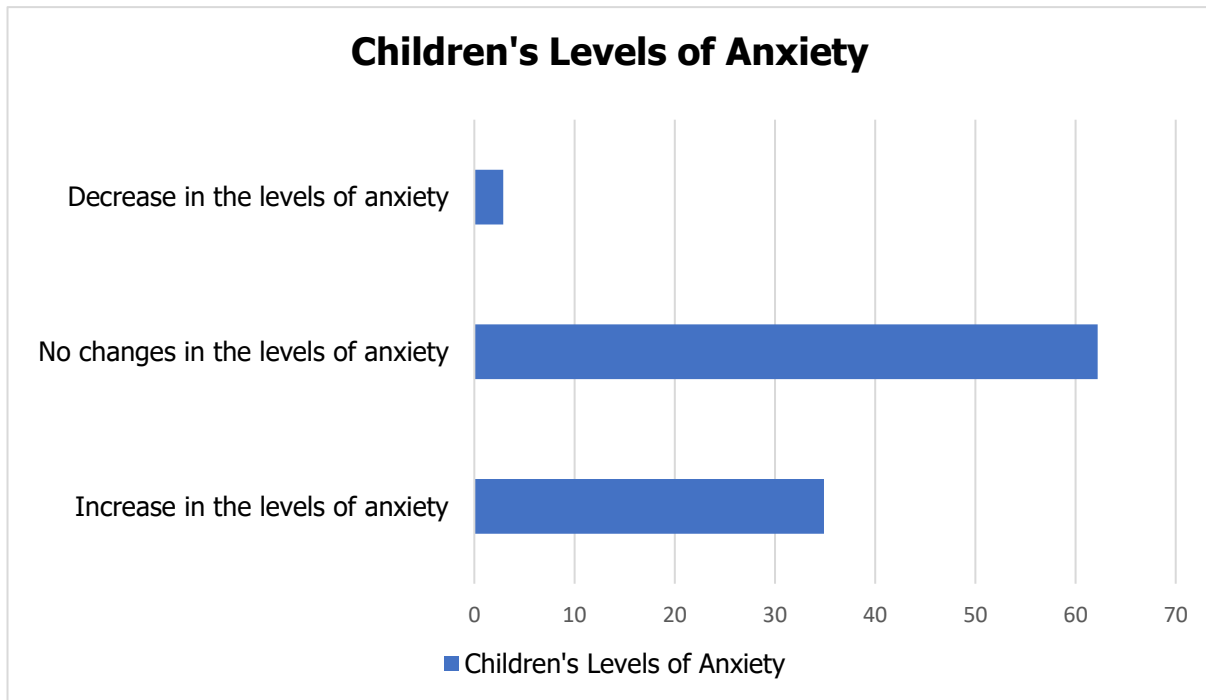


Figure 10. Changes on children's levels of anxiety.

For those teachers who indicated that children were exhibiting increased levels of anxiety, they were asked to specify how such anxiety was presenting in the classroom/setting. Below are some examples of the teachers' responses:

Resilience and emotional regulation

"Requiring constant reassurance. Having emotional meltdowns with no triggers. Attachment and separation issues." (Nursery teacher)

"Struggling to settle, struggling to relate to their peers, challenges in regulating behaviours." (P1/P2 composite teacher)

"(...) Some children have greater difficulties with resolving conflict during play. Boisterous play more common and need to establish boundaries as children have had reduced time at pre-school before entering the nursery environment. Greater time and sensitivity require for some in adjusting to Nursery routines and some children showing regression to toddler type behaviours. (...)."
(Nursery teacher)

Hygiene and self-care

"Distancing themselves, checking if something can be washed as someone sneezed, anxious because they can't see friends in other bubbles." (P2 teacher)

"Worry over handwashing, other people touching things, harder to settle."
(Nursery teacher)

"Worried about other children touching them or sneezing/coughing close by them (this would not have been a common complaint before) wanting to wash hands more frequently and not touching others belongings." (P1 teacher)

Social interactions

"They are less confident playing with others. They are less confident talking about their play or answering questions. They can be reluctant to move from one activity to another." (P1 teacher)

"Not used to being in big groups of children so anxious and rely on adults more." (Nursery teacher)

"Separation anxiety following extended period of lock down and not attending school- impacting relaxed free play and social interaction with peer upon return to school (play skills also impacted by loss of term 3 of their Nursery year and limited group play experiences)." (P1 teacher)

Independence

"Reluctant to try new things or do things for themselves." (Nursery teacher)

"(...) Increased need for reassurance and adult attention." (P2 teacher)

Table 7 details some of the reasons the respondents provided for the increased anxiety observed in some children in the early years classroom/setting.

Themes	Identified Causes
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cold classrooms Lack of freedom of movement Use of PPE Changes in classrooms: layout, resources, activities, routines (e.g. parents drop off at gates)
Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of routines at home Changes in previous routines Hard time adapting to changes Changes without warnings (e.g. sudden school closure)
Social interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced social interactions outside the home Lack of social experiences Lack of interactions with peers Missing family members Need a lot of/rely on adult intervention Separation anxiety Attachment issues with other children Parental attachment issues
Home environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental difficulties: loss of job, mental health, etc. Safeguarding issues Neglect
Adult anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parental anxiety Staff/teachers anxiety Negative media
COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delayed and confused grieving processes Worried about germs Fear of getting sick or making a family member sick Death – fear of losing a family member Lack of understanding of what's happening
Hygiene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cleaning and hygiene measures in general (disruption of routines/activities) Obsessed with hand washing

Table 7. Perceived causes for the increase in children's levels of anxiety

Section Two: Potential Impact of the Second Lockdown on Children's Play

Additional Concerns Expressed

On 24th December 2020, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a further lockdown was introduced by the Northern Ireland Executive which again resulted in the closure of schools, including nursery settings, from January to March/April 2021, with the exception of vulnerable children, the children of key workers and children attending special schools.

Table 8 shows teachers' responses as to whether they had any additional concerns to those expressed in section 1 of this survey about children's play, following the re-introduction of lockdown and the closure of schools and nursery settings to the majority of children. While a narrow majority (53.7%, n=122) reported no further concerns, a sizeable minority (46.4%, n=105) stated that they had additional concerns due to the re-introduction of home-learning.

Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	46.4% (n=105)
No	53.7% (n=122)
Total	227

Table 8. Q21. Following the introduction of these further restrictions, have you noted any further concerns above and beyond those noted in section 1 of the survey?

Of those respondents who expressed additional concerns, an in-depth analysis of their qualitative responses suggested some broad key themes which have been detailed in Table 9. There were several concerns expressed regarding the possibility of delivering play remotely without altering the quality of the experience and some respondents referred to the impact that further reduced social interactions would have on children's

speech, language and communication skills, cooperative play and problem-solving opportunities.

Themes	Identified concerns
<p>The Importance of Play</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerns about parental engagement with play activities (focus on basic literacy instead). - Don't want to over-burden parents. - Unable to monitor the quality of playful activities or the engagement with play activities. - Challenging to replicate the playful learning provision through online/home learning while parents balance challenges at home. - Play-based curriculum cannot be facilitated remotely - Play based online activities are dependent on what is at home and parental time <p>Increased inequalities – not everyone has access to the same playful resources</p>
<p>Restrictions on Play</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited play resources, limited play time/space - Negative impact on development - Negative impact on learning - Missing out on necessary social interactions - Missing out on experiences (sensory, messy, social play) – impact on crucial skills. Social play – crucial for mental wellbeing and development of social skills - Support and ideas in the planning for indoor play - Lack of availability of outdoor spaces in some homes
<p>Children's Wellbeing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Missing out on physical activity. - Lack of social interaction, especially impacting those children with delayed emotional and social development. - Concerns about emotional well-being. - Negative impact of the lack of social interactions with peers and others.
<p>Remote learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home learning difficult to monitor. - Various levels of engagement (vulnerable children less engaged).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficult to adapt pre-school curriculum to remote learning. - Missing out on learning opportunities. - Reduced contact between teachers and children. - Difficult to build relationships with children remotely. - Difficult for children to maintain concentration. - Struggling to reach some children.
Parental support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor parental engagement in remote learning (children need parents to login and support with the activities). - Parents cannot assume the role of teachers. - Safeguarding issues. - Challenging home environment (stress, lack of resources, etc.).

Table 9. Further concerns in relation to the impact of COVID-19 restriction measures.

Below are some examples of teachers' concerns about the provision of play in the home environment:

Concerns about parents' ability to understand the importance of play

"As a FS teacher, I am aware of the importance of play-based learning as part of the school day and I do endeavour to steer parents towards useful activities and experiences that they can share with their child. I am also aware that many parents have to be selective when deciding which activities they will engage with and with their own worries and time restrictions, will generally opt for the 'proper' school work."(P1/P2 teacher)

"I am a great believer in the importance of play, this is hard to instil in parents at home who only want to do the 'important' parts of home learning. They are not understanding that play is how we all learn! This information needs to come from a higher authority than the teacher."(P1/P2 teacher)

"I am concerned as I know we provide resources for academic work and parents are happy to do this. Parents don't engage with playful ideas as much."(P1 teacher)

"It is very hard to get parents on board with valuing play as part of the home learning school day. It is largely ignored and only paper-based work is completed."(P1 teacher)

Challenges of remote learning

"Young children are reliant on parents or older siblings to help them with remote learning activities. Parents may be working or working from home, concentrate on completing older children's work first. Limited time to engage their child in play. In nursery, we have had to reduce the amount of resources freely available as we wash everything daily. Had to reduce time in nursery by half an hour to allow for cleaning and set up. Had to stop parents daily stay and play sessions with parents." (Nursery teacher)

"Internet access for some people is a problem, resources are a problem for some, some people really don't see the importance of doing activities with their Nursery children because their focus is on older children, like the last lockdown some start really well but after a few weeks there is a drop off..." (Nursery teacher)

"The restrictions have decreased our effectiveness in connecting with some families who are less engaged to begin with, these children are suffering and will be very unprepared for primary 1. they are not getting the opportunity to build strong foundation skills for learning. these families do not engage in home learning, no matter how hard you try." (Nursery teacher)

Value placed on play and early years in general

"Play does not seem to be prioritised at any level and sadly Early Years provision has not been valued (evident in our late closure and falling under the childcare sector) children need access to uninterrupted free play, this can't be planned via an app activity. We can share ideas and suggested of playful learning but it is often an approach. Sharing ideas with parents at this difficult time, for some can be another activity that is added to their to do list and this may take away from the playful approach required." (Nursery teacher)

"Play has again been pushed to the background after us having fought so long and hard to get its value appreciated." (P1 teacher)

Opportunity to educate parents

"There has actually been an opportunity to inform parents better about the learning occurring in playful activities and to support them in seeing beyond a screen in no-cost daily activities." (Nursery teacher)

Chapter 4: Overarching Conclusions

The findings emerging from this study, as detailed in Chapter 3, present an interesting insight into the views of Northern Ireland's Nursery and Foundation Stage teachers as to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on practice in early years classrooms with a particular focus on play both indoors and out. The online survey sought to explore the type of restrictions put in place to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in early years classrooms, their associated impact on play in terms of time spent on playful activities, the availability of play areas and play resources as well as the overall quality of play. Children's responses to play following the initial period of lockdown were also considered as was the introduction of a further lockdown on 24th December 2020, the closure of schools for the majority of young learners and the associated impact on children's play. The wealth of responses, enriched by the in-depth open-ended responses from the Nursery and FS teachers highlight four main areas for discussion.

First, both Nursery and FS teachers implemented a variety of procedures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the early years classroom/setting. These included staggered arrival and pick up times, rearranging the classroom layout, the creation of class bubbles, the use of PPE and enhanced hygiene and cleaning protocols. Not only were children required to wash and sanitise their hands at regular intervals throughout the school day, all resources and equipment had to be sterilised after the children returned home. This was particularly evident in dual day settings whereby double the cleaning was required.

Two schools of thought emerged as to the impact of these measures on children's experience of being back in school. The majority of respondents (58.6%, n=153) were of the opinion that such measures impacted negatively on children in terms of their social skills, their levels of independence, their ability to stay on task and overall anxiety levels and in some cases obsessive behaviours were observed. A sizable minority (41.4%, n=108) adopted a more positive stance, indicating that children were more independent in terms of self-care routines, more settled in class, happier and more relaxed, and displayed increased levels of resilience and coping skills to manage the new world which they now inhabit.

Second, the findings from this study suggested that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state of play in practice was not as negative as perhaps anticipated due to the initiative shown by early years staff. The majority (53.1%, n=139) of the respondents (both Nursery and FS) reported that, on average, the time available for children to play remained the same in practice post lockdown, with over one fifth of teachers (22.5%, n=59) reporting that the time available for play had actually increased. Due to the restrictions in place, the availability of some play areas and activities (e.g. role play) had to be reduced whilst changes to some play resources (sensory play materials such as sand) were also necessitated. Despite restrictions, the majority of early years teachers appeared to improvise making greater use of the outdoors (65.7%, n=157) for playful learning opportunities, as well as using disposable (51.8%, n= 128) and natural materials (29.6%, n= 73), alongside plastic resources (48.6%, n=120) for ease of cleaning.

Nevertheless, the majority of teachers (68.7%, n=169) were of the opinion that the restrictions put in place to guarantee children a safe space to play, alongside intense cleaning regimes, had impacted negatively on the quality of play in practice, resulting in a more sterile playful learning space. The need for additional financial support and

guidance were deemed to be key requirements to enabling staff to continue to provide high quality playful learning experiences, while also ensuring the safety of children and staff from COVID-19. Many early years teachers felt that such support had not been adequate or forthcoming and that they had been left to their own devices to actualise this new normal in practice, as summed up in the words of one nursery teacher: "*teachers have been left to get on with it without any support and guidance*", resulting in increased pressure on their part.

On the other hand, approximately one third of respondents (n=72) assumed a more positive stance. They emphasised how 'less' in terms of the play environment was actually 'more' with regard to the quality of the learning experience, encouraging enhanced creativity and engagement on the part of the children. In addition, greater use of the outdoors was perceived to have afforded more child-led opportunities for play, guaranteeing increased levels of interest and engagement in turn. As one FS teacher stated: "*It (COVID) has changed my approach to play for the better*" (P2 teacher)

Third, at first glance the pandemic did not appear to impact significantly on children's engagement, social interaction and emotional well-being during their playful learning experiences post lockdown. The majority of teachers reported that there had been little change in children's level of engagement (56.7%, n=138), in children's level of social interaction (57.4%, n=139) or children's level of anxiety (62.2%, n=150) during play post lockdown, principally as result of their efforts. Yet on closer analysis, there was a sizeable minority of teachers who expressed a degree of concern regarding children's responses to play on their return to the classroom/nursery setting after a protracted period of home learning. Over a quarter of teachers were of the opinion that children's engagement in playful learning activities had decreased, 11.9% (n=29) believed that they had significantly decreased. Furthermore, almost one third of

teachers were concerned about children's social interaction in their play, 16.1% (n=39) considering levels of social interaction to have significantly decreased on the children's return to school. In addition, over one third of teachers (34.9%, n=84) believed that children's levels of anxiety had increased within their play, with constant reassurance required on the part of staff to encourage some children to try out new things and to engage in play of a less boisterous nature. The reason for such change in child behaviours during play stemmed principally, according to the teachers, from the changes to the play environment and from the long period of time spent at home where important classroom routines had been forgotten and required re-establishing.

Fourth, the re-introduction of lockdown on 24th December 2020, and in turn the re-establishment of an extensive period of home-learning, heightened teachers concern about the lost opportunities for young learners to engage in purposeful play in practice. Several of the teachers felt that purposeful play may be less accessible in the home due to the absence of peers with whom to play and the reduced range of play resources available. Further concerns were raised regarding how equitable the home play experience was during lockdown. Concerns included children from less advantaged backgrounds not having the same opportunities to avail of outdoor play due to the lack of usable garden space and children from disadvantaged areas not having access to the appropriate technology to enable regular contact between the children and their teacher. In addition to this, several parents, according to both Nursery and FS respondents, failed to value play as a learning medium, and as a result, more formal aspects of learning in the form of paper-based Literacy and Numeracy tasks were likely to be assigned greater emphasis in the home-learning experience.

While understanding how important their role was to encourage more playful learning activities in the home throughout this period, some teachers lacked a degree of confidence in how this might be mastered in practice through the online platform and called for more support and guidance in this field. Other teachers raised the issue of parental engagement and its importance in terms of translating the playful learning tasks which had been planned and uploaded onto an online platform by the class teachers, into practice in the home environment. Teachers were aware that in the early years, irrespective of the amount of time invested on their part, they were totally reliant on the parents to actualise such tasks into practice as children were, in the main, too young to do so independently. In this way, educating all parents on the value of play for children's learning assumed heightened significance, and for some, COVID-19 provided that opportunity for them to do so. Yet, others appeared less optimistic as evidenced in the following comment: "*Play has again been pushed to the background after us having fought so long and hard to get its value appreciated.*" (P1 teacher)

This lack of opportunity for play experiences for both learning and leisure reasons was also raised by some teachers as an area of concern. Enforced isolation and reduced opportunities to relax and play with peers in the local play park could be one of the reasons for the significant impact on children's overall levels of socialisation and their physical and emotional skills likewise. Such outcomes were potentially exacerbated for those children who were exposed to adverse experiences in the home during the lockdown periods, and some of the teachers in this study appeared conscious of the renewed challenges a further period of lockdown would bring to some families more than others, contributing to a degradation in children's mental health and wellbeing.

Limitations of the Study

There are two important limitations of the current study which must be acknowledged. First, the study drew only on one data collection method i.e. an online survey and sought the opinions of early years teachers (Nursery and Foundation Stage solely), and not the opinions of parents nor perhaps more significantly the children themselves. In this way, it could be argued that the findings from the study present a relatively limited perspective on the topic, albeit an informed perspective.

Second, the survey was sent out at an extremely busy time for practising early years teachers i.e. during a further period of lockdown and the re-commencement of home-learning. Had the survey been sent out at a less pressured time for teachers, we may have had a level of responses. Furthermore, although we received 499 responses, unfortunately a substantive number of these responses (n=49) were from practitioners/teachers who did not teach in either Nursery or FS classrooms, and therefore their responses could not be included in the final dataset. Partial responses were also removed which reduced the overall dataset to 291 responses. As a result, the depth of the analysis may not have been as rigorous as it could have been if a larger dataset had been drawn upon.

Overall Conclusions

The impact of COVID-19 on early years education, schooling and children's play have been significant. As this study has indicated, the global pandemic has not only impacted on the classroom/nursery environment but more importantly on the playful experience through which young children learn best. However, the findings suggest that the impact of the pandemic on play has not been completely negative. This has been in large part due to the creativity, dedication and initiative shown by Nursery and Foundation Stage staff, who have ensured that young learners have continued to enjoy a stimulating, playful and nurturing learning experience in as safe an

environment as possible during this time of crisis. The time is ripe therefore for both policy and practice to embrace these lessons learned as we move beyond the pandemic to ensure that play is prioritised at all levels whether it be in the classroom, at home and in the wider community.

Chapter 5: Key Recommendations

The final aspect of the survey asked the respondents to identify any additional support or guidance they deemed necessary to enable them to continue to deliver high quality playful learning experiences for their children whether it be in school or at home during and beyond periods of lockdown. These responses were collated and informed the following four key recommendations to be taken forward from this report.

Action 1: Need for Greater Value to be Assigned to Play in the Home

There was a general consensus amongst respondents that there is a growing need to enhance parental understanding of the importance of play as a means of supporting learning, building resilience, improving health and wellbeing and contributing to the enjoyment of childhood. A key part of this will be supporting parents to develop and support play within the home environment. Teachers from both Nursery and FS classes stressed the need to provide a bank of playful ideas that parents can reproduce in the home, that enable meaningful play and ideas to encourage child-led play activities at home with the use of minimal resources to avoid adding extra financial pressure to parents and carers.

Within the current COVID-19 climate, some Nursery teachers also pointed out the need to provide clear guidance to parents about the current regulations and emerging scientific evidence on play activities to counteract their fears about the use of certain play types e.g. sensory, messy and outdoor play etc.

Below are some examples of teachers' comments reflecting the need to promote the value of play:

"There needs to be an advertising campaign aimed at parents to emphasise the value of play especially during this lockdown. Parents do not want to play with their children, instead they want us to forward worksheets like the primary schools are doing." (Nursery teacher)

"Would love collaborative approach from education and health to outline how important play is also acknowledgement of play at an executive level." (Nursery teacher)

"Ideas & information for parents on the benefits of engaging in playful activities - as many parents do not value play and are requesting formal learning materials for 3-4 year olds!" (Nursery teacher)

Action 2: Need for Further Guidance on Managing Play during the Pandemic

The most recurrent comments from FS teachers were on the need for clear guidance on school's reopening, on safe practices, grants, and further safety measures (i.e. cleaning procedures, resources and equipment and hygienic measures). There were demands for advice on the continuation of bubbles/pods to provide safe play spaces in which children can interact.

Many expressed the need to obtain specific guidance on the implementation of a play-based curriculum online for future home-learning experiences, as well as further guidance on remote learning resources and remote learning platforms. This was a particular concern for Nursery teachers who expressed the need for playful ideas and resources which could be applied through remote learning to nursery aged children. Another concern for many FS teachers was the difficulty of monitoring learning during lockdown and the need for further support and guidance as to how this might be managed in practice. The following comment reinforces the dilemma which many nursery teachers are experiencing:

"It is very difficult to post up a lot of what you do in Nursery because quality Nursery education revolves around quality language interactions between the children and the adults - it's all about the experience the child has at Nursery- no amount of online activities will ever replicate that. What do you suggest that Nursery teachers should be doing - maybe a discussion should be held?" (Nursery teacher)

"More funding for Home Learning resources please! Getting Ready to Learn has been fantastic however, other initiatives set up to avail of small amounts of funding to supply education resources to parents would be most beneficial."
(P1/P2 teacher)

Action 3: Need to Prioritise Outdoor Play and Outdoor Learning in the School Environment Post Pandemic

In light of schools re-opening, many responses referred to the need for the enhanced focus on outdoor play and outdoor learning to be maintained in schools post lockdown and the need for policymakers to support such an initiative in practice by providing appropriate guidance and funding.

"I feel nurseries could really benefit from money to go towards more outdoor play equipment as I feel outdoors is a safer place for our young children to mix and play during a pandemic (...)." (Nursery teacher)

"(...) the children have been spending the majority of time outdoors - this of course provides an excellent range of holistic benefits to the children." (Nursery teacher)

"We have embraced the use of outdoors and spend about 80-90% outside daily. Kids better engaged and love it?" (P1/P2 teacher)

"Better quality play as we are mainly outside- more space to move and be creative." (P1/P2 teacher)

"We were outside most of the time anyway. We just sent home rain clothes for parents to dress them for arriving in the morning. We also made a seating area outside so they could listen to stories." (Nursery teacher)

Action 4: Need for Professional Development in the Early Years

A demand for further training opportunities was also identified as a requisite by both nursery and FS teachers. They identified the following areas as of greatest need:

- Training on children's mental health and wellbeing and mechanisms to help improve it or maintain it within the school context.
- Training on outdoor learning, its conceptual underpinnings as well as methods and techniques for best practice.
- Training on therapeutic play, its conceptual underpinnings as well as methods and techniques for best practice.

Additionally, there was a demand from some nursery teachers to organise a shared event to exchange ideas and activities that have been sent to parents during the months of lockdown.

Action 5: Need for Further Research into the Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Children's Holistic Learning and Development

Although this research has gone some way to shed light on play in Nursery and Foundation Stage classrooms/settings during the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of teachers, a much more in-depth study of a longitudinal nature is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of COVID-19 on children's holistic learning and development.

Action 6: Need to Prioritise Play more fully across NI Schools and Early Years Settings Post Pandemic

Thanks to the extensive roll-out of the vaccine programme, restrictions are presently being slowly lifted and a degree of normality is returning to our schools and early years settings. The time is therefore ripe to ensure that we embrace the lessons learned from this small-scale study and indeed the COVID-19 crisis more generally in

terms of the significance of play for young children's learning and development and invest in appropriate support to guarantee high quality play in practice across all Northern Ireland early years classrooms/settings and indeed homes beyond the pandemic.

"I think teachers have reinvented play-based learning in a very short period of time. I have personally seen the benefit to children's play when it is well planned and the adult steps back to let the children engage free of adult direction or expectation. It has changed my approach to play for the better."
(P2 teacher)

Appendix

Introduction

We are a research team from Playboard NI, the Controlled Schools' Support Council and Stranmillis University College, Belfast and we are keen to gain an insight into early years teachers' views on the impact of the pandemic on play in practice.

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information about your experiences of working to meet the needs of your pupils during the pandemic, the challenges experienced, your pupils' responses and any support you have received/would like to receive as you continue to provide a high quality play-based experience. All Nursery and Foundation Stage (Year 1 and Year 2 teachers) are eligible to complete this survey.

In recognition of the additional Covid-19 restrictions introduced on 26th December 2020 the survey has been split into 2 sections:

- *For Section 1 we would ask that you focus on the period up to 24th December 2020*
- *For Section 2 we would ask that you focus on the period from 26th December 2020 to present*

We estimate that the survey will take around 10-15 minutes to complete. All data will be anonymised and will remain confidential to this project. No children, teachers, principals, or schools will be named in the final report or any other subsequent publications.

Due to Half-Term Holidays the survey closing date has been extended until 12 noon on Friday 26th February 2021.

Please note that all data will be held securely on a password protected network, accessible only to the research team. Full ethical approval has been granted by the Research and Scholarship Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast. Your answers will provide important insights into play in practice in the pandemic.

1. I understand the information provided above, and give my consent for my responses to be used as part of the research study.

- Yes
- No

Background Information

2. Background Information

How many years experience do you have as a teacher?

Where did you complete your training?

What class do you currently teach?

How many years have you been teaching in your current setting?

What is the postcode of your school/nursery?

3. How many children are currently in your class?

4. What is the class split in terms of boys and girls?

Boys

Girls

Section 1: Impact of Covid-19 on Practice (Period up to 24th December 2020)

5. What measures did your setting implement in terms of managing Covid related restrictions? Select all that apply.

- Establishment of pupil 'bubbles' for learning activities
- Establishment of pupil 'bubbles' for non-learning activities
- Use of face coverings in school (for adults)
- Cleansing protocols (hand washing etc.)
- Increased levels of cleaning for frequently touched surfaces etc.
- Social distancing protocols in shared spaces
- Other (please specify)

6. In your opinion, did the implementation of such measures impact on the children's experience of being back in school?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes, what do you feel the main impacts have been?

7. During the period did you observe any changes in the children as a result of going through lockdown? This could be in relation to attentiveness, social connectivity, level of engagement with activities, level of withdrawal, self-care skills, independence etc.

8. When children returned to school following the initial lockdown, did the amount of time available for the children to spend playing increase, decrease or stay the same?

Increased

Stayed the Same

Decreased

9. If the time available for play decreased, why was this?

- Need to catch up on academics
- Concern at the level of risk
- Inadequate space to allow for social distancing whilst at play
- Insufficient adult support available to facilitate play
- Shorter session time
- Other (please specify)

10. During the period up to 24th December 2020, were the children able to play in the same spaces (indoor or outdoor) they had played in prior to lock-down?

- Yes
 No

If changes were made or restrictions introduced, please provide further details below.

11. In terms of the types of play activities available, please indicate below if there have been any changes pre and post Covid.

	Available Pre-Covid	Currently Available
Sand play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Water play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Messy play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Noisy play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Free play (child driven)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loose parts play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Outdoor play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

12. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you make any changes to the types of play resources you use?

- No Changes
 More disposable play materials
 More plastic play materials
 More natural play materials
 Other (please specify)

13. During the period up to 24th December 2020, did you have to make changes to the play environment to make it more Covid friendly?

- More outdoor play
- Reduced number of children in play spaces
- Less 'free' play i.e. more adult directed
- Children assigned to a play bubble or pod
- Other (please specify)

14. During the period up to 24th December 2020, what safety precautions, if any did you introduce to enable children to continue to enjoy play in practice, even in a reduced fashion?

- Regular cleansing of play spaces
- Regular cleansing of play equipment/materials
- Increased use of disposable play equipment/materials
- Wearing of PPE
- Washing/Sanitizing of hands pre and post play
- Other (please specify)

15. In your opinion, has Covid-19 affected the overall quality of playful learning experience in your setting and classroom?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please provide further details below.

Impact of Covid 19

16. Thinking about engagement in playful learning experiences up to 24th December 2020, did you notice any difference in children's levels of engagement pre-Covid and during Covid?

Significantly lower level of engagement		No Difference		Significantly higher level of engagement	N/A
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. Thinking about social interaction during playful learning experiences, have you noticed any difference in children's levels of social interaction pre-Covid and during Covid?

Significantly reduced level of Social Interaction		No Difference		Significantly higher level of Social Interaction	N/A
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. In your opinion were the children more or less anxious as a result of Covid-19?

- More anxious
- Less anxious
- No change

19. In what ways have you identified the children exhibiting increased levels of anxiety?

20. Based on your interactions with the children, what would you say are the primary causes of increased levels of anxiety?

Section 2: Impacts of Further Covid-19 restrictions introduced on 26th December 2020

21. On 26th December 2020 a further period of restrictions was introduced by the Executive to run initially up to 6th February 2021.

Under the restrictions nurseries were initially to remain open, however this changed following further DE intervention on 5th January. At this point remote learning was introduced for the majority of pupils, however face-to-face provision was to remain for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

Following the introduction of these further restrictions, have you noted any further concerns above and beyond those noted in section 1 of the survey?

- Yes
 No

If Yes, please provide further detail in the box below.

22. With the introduction of the most recent round of restrictions, have you identified any areas relating to play and playful learning that you would like further support or guidance on?

23. Is there anything else you would like to add about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on play during the pandemic?

Further Support Needs

24. If you would be interested in participating in further research on the topic of play in practice during the pandemic please provide your contact details below.

Name

Contact Email Address

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Contacts



Stranmillis University College
Stranmillis Road
Belfast, BT9 5DY
Telephone: 028 9038 1271
Email: research@stran.ac.uk



PlayBoard NI
7 Crescent Gardens
Belfast, BT7 1NS
Tel: 028 9080 3380
Email: info@playboard.org



Controlled Schools' Support Council
Second Floor, Main Building
Stranmillis University College
Stranmillis Road
Belfast, BT9 5DY
Telephone: 028 9531 3030
Email: info@csscni.org.uk