

Section 1- 1774 words

Play-based learning is a central focus in early childhood education, widely recognised for its role in fostering children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012). It refers to a pedagogical approach in which children engage in self-initiated or guided activities that encourage exploration, imagination, and meaning-making, supporting learning through active engagement rather than passive instruction (Wahyuni *et al.*, 2024). Despite a shared emphasis on the importance of play, educational frameworks differ in how they interpret and apply this concept in practice. Two influential models, Waldorf Education and the United Kingdom's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), both place play at the heart of their pedagogy, yet they diverge significantly in their underlying philosophies, curricular design, and the role of the educator. This assignment will explore and compare the Waldorf and EYFS approaches to play-based learning, examining how their distinct interpretations impact early years practice and critically analysing the curricular guidance each provides, and assessing their strengths, limitations, and broader implications for early childhood education.

In Waldorf Education, play is viewed as a vital, natural activity through which young children express themselves, develop creativity, and make sense of the world. Rooted in the developmental theories of Rudolf Steiner, this approach emphasises unstructured, imaginative, child-initiated play in a homelike environment filled with natural materials (Nicol & Taplin, 2012; Taplin, 2024). Formal academics are intentionally delayed until around age seven, based on the belief that young children learn best through imitation, sensory experience, and rhythmic daily routines (Edwards, 2002; Aljabreen 2020). In contrast, the EYFS framework, established as the statutory curriculum for early years in England that presents play as a key medium for delivering learning across seven areas of development, combining both child-led and adult-guided activities (Department for Education, 2024). EYFS practitioners are expected to observe children at play, assess their development, and scaffold learning in ways that respond to individual needs and interests. The framework reflects contemporary theories such as Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, recognising that adult interaction within play can significantly enhance learning (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). While both models uphold the value of play, Waldorf prioritises intrinsic developmental readiness and imaginative exploration, whereas EYFS adopts a more structured, outcomes-based strategy that integrates educational goals into playful experiences.

Despite their differing philosophical foundations, both Waldorf Education and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) share important similarities in their commitment to play as a central mode of learning in early childhood. Both frameworks recognise that play supports holistic development, including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, and prioritise safe environments, engaging, and nurturing (DfE, 2024; Nicol & Taplin, 2016). They also emphasise the importance of respecting the child's developmental stage, allowing learning to unfold naturally through active exploration and meaningful interaction with peers and adults. In both approaches, educators are expected to create environments that foster curiosity and provide consistent routines, enabling

children to develop independence and confidence. Furthermore, both the Waldorf and EYFS models promote the role of observation in assessing children's learning needs. Though implemented differently, each relies on the practitioner's attentiveness to support child development effectively (Bruce, 2021). In both approaches, careful observation enables educators to understand individual interests, developmental progress, and emotional well-being, forming the basis for responsive and meaningful learning experiences. These shared principles reflect a broader understanding within early childhood education that learning is most effective when it is embedded in play and responsive to the individual child.

The Waldorf and EYFS approaches to early childhood education are shaped by distinct philosophical, cultural, and educational drivers. The primary driver behind Waldorf Education is the anthroposophical philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, which views child development as a spiritual and developmental process unfolding in distinct stages (Nicol & Taplin, 2016; Wien, 2001). This belief shapes the Waldorf emphasis on creativity, imagination, and delayed formal instruction, aiming to nurture the "head, heart, and hands" in a balanced way (Edwards, 2002; Jaffke, 2017). In contrast, the EYFS is driven by educational policy and evidence-based research, focusing on school readiness, inclusion, and measurable outcomes to ensure every child meets developmental milestones (DfE, 2024; Nutbrown, 2018). The EYFS is shaped by the socio-cultural theories of learning, particularly the work of Vygotsky, and aims to reduce inequalities by ensuring consistent standards across early years settings (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). Additionally, government accountability and the need to prepare children for the national curriculum influence the EYFS framework's structure and assessment focus. In summary, Waldorf is guided by a holistic, developmental philosophy, while EYFS is driven by national policy, research, and social equity considerations.

In practice, both Waldorf Education and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) implement play-based learning environments, but their delivery methods differ significantly. In Waldorf settings, daily routines are intentionally rhythmic and predictable, creating a sense of security and continuity for the child. Children engage in long periods of unstructured, imaginative play using natural, open-ended materials such as wooden toys, wool, and silks to stimulate creativity and imitation (Nicol & Taplin, 2016; Jaffke, 2017). Practitioners act as role models rather than direct instructors, performing real-life tasks like cooking or gardening, which children are encouraged to imitate. Digital technology is largely absent, and academic instruction is deferred to focus on social, emotional, and physical development through storytelling, nature walks, and artistic expression (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2018). By contrast, EYFS settings operate within a structured curriculum that blends child-initiated exploration with adult-guided learning, using observation and planning cycles such as the "observe, assess, plan" model (DfE, 2024). Activities are designed to meet specific developmental milestones across seven areas of learning, including literacy and numeracy, even in early years. EYFS practitioners often use continuous provision, carefully arranged environments inviting children to engage with resources independently while leading focused learning sessions. Practitioners document children's progress using assessment tools like the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) or Tapestry, often supported by digital technologies. Though their methods differ, both models rely on responsive and intentional practice, with educators closely observing children's interests and behaviours to shape learning experiences accordingly.

Implementing Waldorf and EYFS approaches in practice brings distinct challenges for educators, families, and multi-agency professionals. In Waldorf settings, practitioners face the ongoing challenge of staying true to the philosophical underpinnings of Steiner's educational approach while navigating the demands of contemporary society. A central tension arises around the delayed introduction of formal academics and the avoidance of digital technologies, which can conflict with parental expectations in a highly school-ready, technology-driven culture (Nicol & Taplin, 2016). For instance, in a case study by Rawson (2018), Waldorf teachers expressed concern that pressure from families, who compare Waldorf outcomes with mainstream education, can erode confidence in the method. Parents unfamiliar with Waldorf pedagogy may worry when their children are not being taught reading or using tablets in early years, potentially leading to withdrawal from the setting or strained home-school relationships. Additionally, Waldorf practitioners often operate in philosophical isolation, making multi-agency collaboration difficult. Professionals such as speech therapists, educational psychologists, or health visitors may struggle to integrate their assessments with the Waldorf model, which typically avoids standardised testing. This disconnection can result in under-diagnosis or late intervention for children with additional needs, as observed in Rawson's (2018) review of cross-sector dialogue.

Conversely, EYFS practitioners are often challenged by policy pressures, data-driven accountability, and target-led outcomes, which can compromise the quality of relational pedagogy. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017) found that early years educators in England were increasingly concerned about the impact of assessment frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), noting that they spent disproportionate amounts of time collecting data and documenting progress rather than engaging in meaningful play and learning experiences with children. This pressure can result in surface-level learning, where activities are planned more for evidencing outcomes than for nurturing curiosity. Moreover, a "schoolification" of early years has been widely criticised for creating environments where structured adult-led tasks take precedence over child-initiated play, especially in preparation for formal schooling (Nutbrown, 2018). This can have negative consequences for children's creativity and emotional well-being, particularly for those who learn in non-linear or culturally diverse ways.

From a family and interagency perspective, the EYFS framework is generally more aligned with multi-agency working due to its integration into national education and health policy. For example, tools like the Early Help Assessment and SEND Code of Practice are compatible with EYFS documentation, which allows more seamless referrals and collaboration between educators, health professionals, and social services. However, this system can also feel bureaucratic and overwhelming for families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with limited literacy. Families may feel pressure to engage in specific home-learning practices to meet developmental goals, which may not reflect their values or circumstances (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). In contrast, while the Waldorf model fosters strong relational bonds and parent involvement through festivals, storytelling, and artistic activities, its lack of standardisation and formal reporting can limit transparency for external agencies and potentially hinder early identification of developmental concerns (Jaffke, 2017).

In both approaches, there is a shared reliance on practitioner observation and professional judgement, but the expectations and applications of these observations differ greatly. EYFS practitioners use

structured observation tools to track progression through defined stages, which can offer clarity but also reduce flexibility. Waldorf educators, however, prioritise intuitive, long-term observation, often resisting developmental checklists, which encourage deep understanding of the child but may lack accountability in diverse or state-funded settings.

While both the Waldorf and EYFS approaches offer valuable contributions to early childhood education, the EYFS framework is generally more effective in practice, particularly in diverse, inclusive, and policy-driven contexts. One of the key strengths of EYFS lies in its flexibility and responsiveness to the varied needs of children and families, offering a balanced combination of child-initiated play and adult-guided learning within a structured curriculum (DfE, 2024; Whitebread & Bingham, 2021). Unlike the Waldorf model, which may struggle to accommodate children with additional needs due to its avoidance of standardised assessments (Rawson, 2018; Noddings, 2018), the EYFS promotes early identification and targeted support, making it more compatible with health and social care services (Tickell, 2017). Its emphasis on progress tracking, inclusive practice, and multi-agency collaboration ensures that no child is left behind, especially important in multicultural and socio-economically diverse communities (Roberts-Holmes, 2019; Cameron & Moss, 2020). Additionally, EYFS frameworks are rooted in contemporary research, drawing on socio-cultural theories such as Vygotsky's to promote language development, social interaction, and active learning (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). While Waldorf education nurtures creativity and imagination, its rigid adherence to Steiner's developmental stages and resistance to digital tools or early academics can limit children's preparedness for transition into mainstream schooling (Edwards, 2002; Nicol & Taplin, 2016). Therefore, in terms of accessibility, inclusivity, and adaptability to modern educational demands, the EYFS presents a more effective and equitable model for early years education.

Section 2 - 1464 words

Assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is guided by a deep respect for the concept of the "unique child", acknowledging that each child develops at their own pace and in their own way. This principle is integral to play-based curricula, where assessment should be flexible, formative, and responsive to children's interests and individual trajectories (Department for Education, 2024). Two core assessment methods used within the EYFS, observational assessment and the Learning Journey, offer distinct yet complementary approaches for understanding and supporting each child's development in context.

Observational Assessment: Observational assessment is perhaps the most fundamental and widely used method within EYFS settings. Practitioners observe children during everyday play and routines, using these insights to assess development across the seven areas of learning and development. This approach aligns strongly with the EYFS principle of the unique child, as it captures spontaneous learning in real-life contexts, rather than relying on standardised tests. Observations are often made through brief notes, photos, or videos and can be either planned (focused on a specific developmental area) or incidental (child-initiated moments of learning).

What makes observational assessment so effective is its ability to honour children's voices and interests, particularly in play-based environments where children reveal their thinking through exploration, imagination, and interaction (Whitebread & Bingham, 2021). For example, in my setting a practitioner may observe a child repeatedly building and knocking down a tower, which can be used to assess spatial reasoning, perseverance, and problem-solving. This kind of assessment is rich in context and meaning, offering a holistic view of the child's learning, including emotional and social development (Formosinho & Peeters, 2019). However, this method requires a well-trained eye. In our team, we dedicate time each week to reflect on our observations to ensure accuracy and reduce bias. The main challenge, as highlighted by Formosinho & Peeters (2019), is that observational assessment demands significant practitioner expertise and attention to context. In settings like mine, where staffing ratios can be tight, it's important to plan time for focused observation and ensure every child receives equitable attention. Without this, observations risk being rushed or superficial.

Learning Journey Assessment: The Learning Journey, sometimes called a developmental portfolio, is a curated collection of a child's learning over time, typically including photographs, practitioner notes, children's artwork, and sometimes parent contributions. This method is not just a record of progress; it's a narrative of the child's unique experiences, co-constructed by educators, the child, and their family. Portfolios make visible the child's development and voice, supporting the concept of the unique child by showing how learning is personal, diverse, and embedded in play.

One of the key strengths of this method is that it fosters partnerships with families, offering a shared understanding of a child's learning journey. When families contribute home observations or stories, they enrich the narrative, validating the child's cultural background and identity (Goodall, 2017). The process also encourages reflective practice among educators, who must think critically about what each piece of evidence reveals about the child's progress, interests, and needs. Yet, as with observational assessment, portfolios demand significant time and organisation. If used mechanically to

meet external expectations, they risk becoming compliance tools rather than meaningful assessments (Roberts-Holmes, 2019).

In effective EYFS settings, observational assessment and learning journeys are integrated seamlessly into daily routines to provide a holistic picture of each child's learning and development. Practitioners use observations not as isolated events but as ongoing, purposeful activities that inform immediate and long-term planning. For instance, during free play, a practitioner might notice a child struggling to share toys and record this behaviour alongside their social interactions, which then guides targeted support to develop social skills through small group activities (Blandon, 2021). This ongoing observation ensures that learning is child-led and responsive, respecting each child's unique pace and interests.

Simultaneously, learning journeys compile these observations, samples of children's work, photographs, and input from families to create a comprehensive narrative of development over time. For example, my settings use digital platforms such as Tapestry, which allow practitioners to upload observations and multimedia evidence promptly, share these with parents, and invite family contributions. This practice fosters a partnership approach, ensuring continuity between home and school, and recognising the child's cultural background and home experiences (Goodall, 2017).

The effectiveness of these methods relies heavily on practitioner expertise and reflective practice. Skilled educators regularly review observations and portfolio entries to identify emerging patterns, strengths, and areas for support. This reflective cycle supports differentiated planning, ensuring learning activities are tailored to meet diverse needs, including those of children with SEND or EAL (Whitebread & Bingham, 2021). Furthermore, collaborative team meetings often use evidence from observations and learning journeys to discuss progress and plan interventions, involving multi-agency professionals when appropriate.

However, for these assessment methods to be truly effective, sufficient time and training must be allocated. Settings that invest in ongoing professional development find that practitioners are better equipped to interpret observations meaningfully and engage families in the learning journey. Conversely, rushed or purely compliance-driven use of these tools can reduce their impact, making assessments feel mechanical rather than supportive (Roberts-Holmes, 2019).

Combining observational assessment and learning journeys offers a comprehensive approach that is especially beneficial in inclusive early years settings catering to children with EAL and SEND. Observational assessment enables practitioners to notice subtle cues in children's play and communication that might otherwise be overlooked, such as non-verbal expressions or culturally specific play patterns, which are critical for understanding the developmental progress of children who face language or learning barriers (Whitebread & Bingham, 2021). For example, an EAL child might demonstrate understanding of social rules through play before expressing themselves verbally, and sensitive observation can guide tailored support strategies. Meanwhile, learning journeys serve as an ongoing record where families and multi-agency professionals can contribute insights, ensuring that the child's home language and specific needs are recognised and respected (Goodall, 2017). This collaboration fosters consistency between home and setting and helps in creating individualised learning plans that accommodate diverse learning styles. Digital portfolio tools have further facilitated

this partnership, allowing multilingual parents to share observations via video or audio, thus enriching the learning narrative (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). Despite challenges such as time constraints and the need for skilled practitioners to interpret and integrate diverse data sources, the combined use of these assessment methods ensures that children with SEND and EAL are assessed holistically and inclusively, promoting equitable access to quality early education.

In my setting, observational assessment and Learning Journeys are seamlessly integrated into daily routines. Practitioners use real-time observations to inform both immediate responses and future planning. For example, during free play, I noticed a child having difficulty negotiating turn-taking in the role-play corner. I recorded this moment, discussed it with colleagues during our weekly planning session, and we designed small group activities to support social development and language use. These observations are not isolated; they feed directly into the child's Learning Journey, contributing to a fuller picture of their developmental path. We use this data to identify patterns, such as persistent interests, repeated behaviours, or emerging skills and adapt our environment or adult interactions accordingly. Digital platforms like Tapestry help streamline this process, allowing us to upload observations quickly and share them with families, fostering transparency and engagement.

Despite their value, both observational assessment and learning journeys present notable challenges that can hinder their effectiveness if not addressed thoughtfully. One of the main limitations of observational assessment is its reliance on practitioner judgment, which can lead to inconsistent or biased interpretations of children's behaviours, especially if the observer lacks experience or cultural awareness (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). Additionally, high workloads and staffing shortages may result in rushed or superficial observations, making it difficult to capture the complexity of children's learning within play (Tickell, 2017). Similarly, learning journeys, while intended as a holistic record, can be reduced to a box-ticking exercise under pressure from accountability measures, leading to over-documentation of minor achievements while neglecting deeper reflections on children's developmental needs (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018). This can shift the focus away from interaction and toward compliance, limiting practitioners' capacity to be fully present with children during learning experiences. To support children's development despite these issues, EYFS settings can implement several strategies. Firstly, ongoing training and moderation should be provided to develop practitioners' observational skills, ensuring they are confident in identifying meaningful moments of learning and using them to inform planning (Whitebread & Bingham, 2021). Secondly, using shared digital platforms like Tapestry or Evidence Me can streamline documentation, freeing up time for direct engagement and improving communication with families. Finally, developing a whole-team reflective approach, where observations are discussed collaboratively, helps ensure a balanced view of each child's progress and encourages inclusive, culturally responsive assessment practices. By addressing these limitations with professional reflection, collaboration, and better resourcing, assessment tools can remain meaningful and truly support every child's unique learning journey.

Reimagining the Curriculum: Considerations for Implementing a Play-Based Approach

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Early childhood education is evolving rapidly. With constant shifts in curriculum frameworks, heightened focus on school readiness, and pressures surrounding assessment, early years professionals are navigating a complex landscape. The role of an educator is no longer solely about nurturing children—it involves working within a dynamic system of pedagogical expectations, policy shifts, and practical constraints.

Amid these changes, one approach has remained consistently relevant: play-based learning. Extensive research confirms that play is not just a leisure activity, it is a critical mechanism through which children learn, explore, and understand the world (Whitebread et al., 2012; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). When implemented effectively, a play-based approach can support holistic development while meeting curriculum demands.

This article explores the key considerations for implementing or revitalising a play-based curriculum. Drawing on research, national guidance, and real-world practice, we'll examine how to anchor curriculum reform in what matters most: children's learning and development.

Why Play Matters More Than Ever

Play in the early years is not trivial, it is central to how children develop cognitively, socially, physically, and emotionally. Educational theorist Tina Bruce (2021) emphasises that play nurtures the whole child, integrating communication, thinking, and physical coordination with emotional regulation and creativity. It connects all areas of learning in a natural and engaging way.

The revised *Development Matters* (Department for Education, 2024) echoes this sentiment:

“Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems.”

Despite this endorsement, the reality in many settings is that play time is under threat. The growing emphasis on Early Learning Goals (ELGs) and measurable outcomes can drive a shift toward adult-led activities, leaving less room for exploratory, child-initiated learning. This risks diluting the transformative power of play.

To initiate lasting change, educators must first reassert the *why*. Reaffirming the research and principles behind play is essential for aligning your team, leadership, and families. Play isn't a break from learning, it *is* learning. Without this shared understanding, any curriculum shift may falter.

Begin with the Child: Not the Checklist

Effective curriculum change starts not with documents, but with children. A successful play-based approach is rooted in the lives, interests, and identities of the learners in your care. Rather than imposing rigid structures, educators should observe what children are drawn to, how they play, and what they need to grow.

As the EYFS (DfE, 2024) outlines, each child is a “Unique Child.” This means tuning into individual developmental pathways, cultural backgrounds, and communication styles. Observation is a powerful tool in identifying learning through play, not just what children are doing, but how and why they are doing it.

Children's engagement with play also varies widely:

- Children with SEND may thrive in sensory-rich, well-structured environments (Casey, 2010).
- EAL learners may rely on gesture, role-play, or mimicry as a non-verbal bridge into social interaction (Drury, 2013).
- Some children may need gentle scaffolding or modelling to build confidence in imaginative or cooperative play (Pyle et al., 2023).

Thus, your curriculum must remain flexible. Uniform approaches often fail to meet the real, varied needs of children. Curriculum should grow from the children present, not an abstract notion of an “average learner.”

Balancing Adult-Led and Child-Initiated Learning

One of the most challenging elements of a play-based curriculum is striking the right balance between adult-led instruction and child-initiated exploration. While the EYFS encourages a mixture of both (DfE, 2024), in practice, this requires nuanced decision-making.

The influential EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004) found that the most effective settings did not rely solely on free play or direct instruction. Instead, they fostered sustained shared thinking, where adults engaged in children’s play to support and extend ideas.

Achieving this balance requires sensitive, skilled practitioners who know when to intervene and when to observe. It’s not about stepping back entirely or taking control but finding a rhythm that supports learning. This is why professional development is key. Shifting practice involves not just changing resources, but building confidence and skill in reflective, responsive teaching.

The Environment as the Third Teacher

In a play-based setting, the environment is more than a backdrop, it actively shapes learning. A well-designed space supports autonomy, exploration, and creativity. Poorly thought-out environments, in contrast, can stifle curiosity and limit choice.

Ask yourself:

- Are there cosy corners for reflection and rest?
- Is there a rich mix of open-ended, sensory, and real-world materials?
- Do the resources reflect the cultures, languages, and identities of your children?
- Is outdoor space used as an extension of the learning environment?

As Clark (2006) highlights, children who are involved in shaping their environments, such as setting up role-play areas or suggesting new outdoor challenges, develop a stronger sense of agency. Environments should encourage children to lead, experiment, and return to ideas over time.

Bridging the Home–School Divide

Many parents, especially those unfamiliar with play-based education, may question its value. Comments like “But they’re just playing” are common. To build trust and understanding, practitioners need to make learning through play visible and relatable.

This can involve:

- Hosting parent workshops or informal Q&As.
- Sharing photo journals or “day in the life” examples showing play linked to literacy, numeracy, or social-emotional skills.
- Using platforms like Tapestry to communicate progress and invite parental input.
- Encouraging parents to contribute ideas or materials that reflect home cultures and experiences.

Strong home–school relationships not only validate the learning taking place but also extend it into the home (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004).

Meaningful Assessment That Respects Play

Assessment in play-based learning must be careful not to interrupt the learning it seeks to observe. Overly rigid checklists or evidence gathering can strip play of its spontaneity and child-led nature.

Fortunately, the *Development Matters* (DfE, 2023) revision advocates for a “lighter touch,” encouraging practitioners to focus on formative, in-the-moment assessments rather than data collection for its own sake.

Alternative tools include:

- **Learning stories** capturing children’s development over time.
- **Floor books** documenting group projects and investigations.
- **Photo journals** combined with reflections and links to learning goals.

Assessment should be integrated, reflective, and rooted in children's experiences, not separate from or imposed onto them.

Sustaining Change Through Reflective Practice

Curriculum change should not be a one-off project. Children change, and so must our approaches. Sustainable transformation is rooted in reflective practice, ongoing inquiry, and team collaboration.

Simple frameworks like action research cycles: *plan, do, review* (Elliott, 1991) empower teams to adapt in response to what they see and hear. Encouraging professional conversations around questions like “Is this working?” or “How can we improve?” keeps the curriculum alive.

A culture of trust and inquiry enables staff to share, question, and innovate. This, in turn, leads to stronger, more responsive practice that adapts with the needs of your children.

Final Thoughts: Reclaiming Play with Purpose

Reimagining the curriculum through a play-based lens is a courageous and purposeful act. It requires more than new plans, it asks for a shared belief in child-centred practice, ongoing development, and a willingness to listen and adapt.

In a system driven by results, choosing play may seem radical. But it's essential. Because play isn't a detour from learning. It is the road itself.

Let's protect it. Let's honour it. Let's make it central to how we teach, plan, and grow.

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