



**E Y R**

EARLY YEARS REVIEWS



# **PLAY, POLICY AND POWER**

## **A REPORT REVIEWING LITERATURE: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ENGLAND**

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## **Abstract**

This literature report critically explores the evolving role of play within early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy and practice in England from 2010 to 2025. Drawing upon a broad evidence base including empirical research, policy documents, and theoretical contributions, the review highlights how successive revisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and national directives such as Bold Beginnings (Ofsted, 2017) have contributed to the narrowing of curriculum and the datafication of early learning. The analysis reveals how play, once central to early years pedagogy, has been increasingly subordinated to school readiness agendas, performative accountability measures, and standardised teaching frameworks. This shift has ethical, pedagogical, and professional implications, including the erosion of practitioner agency, the rise of curriculum control, and the marginalisation of child-led learning. Drawing on critiques of neoliberal governance, the review argues for a reassertion of play as a fundamental right and pedagogical principle. It concludes that reclaiming play within early years education is vital to fostering relational, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate practice in increasingly technocratic policy environments.

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## ***Background to the report***

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England has long been shaped by the interplay of political priorities, social expectations, and educational research. Since the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008, the sector has undergone repeated reforms, each reflecting wider governmental agendas around school readiness, social mobility, and accountability. These reforms, while intended to raise standards and reduce inequalities, have significantly influenced how play is conceptualised and enacted in early years pedagogy.

Historically, play has been recognised as a cornerstone of early learning, valued for its role in promoting creativity, autonomy, and holistic development. Influences from Froebelian, Montessori, and sociocultural traditions positioned play not merely as recreation but as an essential medium through which children explore, connect, and construct meaning.

However, in the context of England's highly centralised education system, the role of play has been progressively reframed. Policy documents such as Ofsted's *Bold Beginnings* (2017) and successive EYFS revisions have increasingly emphasised measurable outcomes, phonics, and numeracy, often positioning play as supplementary or secondary.

This policy trajectory reflects broader neoliberal trends within education, where accountability, performance measurement, and datafication dominate discourse. The introduction of initiatives such as the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and the Good Level of Development (GLD) exemplify how early childhood has become subject to formalised assessment regimes from the earliest stages of education. These developments have raised critical questions about professional autonomy, the purpose of early education, and the risk of "schoolification" in the early years.

At the same time, resistance has emerged from within the profession. Practitioner-led movements such as *Birth to Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021) and sector-driven declarations like *Play Matters* (Bradbury et al, 2025) highlight collective efforts to reclaim play as central to pedagogy and children's rights. These counter-narratives demonstrate that while policy framing often narrows the scope for play, practitioners continue to advocate for its role in fostering relational, democratic, and inclusive learning environments.

This report is situated within these ongoing tensions. By systematically reviewing the literature between 2010 and 2025, it aims to illuminate how play has been framed, valued, and enacted in England's early years landscape, and to consider the implications for pedagogy, policy, and professional identity.

## ***Rationale for the report***

The rationale for undertaking this systematic literature review lies in the increasing tensions within England's early childhood education system regarding the role of play. Over the last fifteen years, successive reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and high-profile policy documents such as *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017) have shifted pedagogical priorities toward measurable outcomes, early literacy, and numeracy. While these reforms were framed as raising standards and improving school readiness, critics argue they have narrowed curricula, constrained practitioner agency, and marginalised play as a developmental right and pedagogical principle.

Despite a strong body of international and theoretical evidence affirming the centrality of play for holistic development (Bruce, 2012; Wood, 2019; OECD, 2021), the English policy discourse often treats play instrumentally, as a tool for achieving externally defined goals. This has created a significant gap between research-informed understandings of play and the ways in which it is framed and enacted within national policy and inspection frameworks.

Furthermore, the intensification of accountability and datafication (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016) raises urgent questions about professional identity, practitioner autonomy, and children's lived experiences of early education. While sector-led initiatives such as *Birth to Five Matters* (2021) and *Play Matters* (2025) offer counter-narratives, there has been no comprehensive synthesis of how play has been conceptualised, valued, and enacted within this shifting policy landscape.

This research therefore addresses a critical need to:

1. Map and synthesise evidence on how play has been positioned in English early years policy and practice between 2010 and 2025.
2. Analyse the tensions between school readiness agendas, accountability frameworks, and child-centred pedagogies.
3. Illuminate the implications for professional practice, practitioner agency, and children's rights.
4. Contribute to future dialogue by providing a critical evidence base that can inform policymakers, researchers, and practitioners about the consequences of diminishing play in early years education.

In doing so, the review not only responds to pressing national debates about the purpose of early childhood education, but also positions play as both a pedagogical and political issue, central to children's wellbeing, learning, and democratic participation.

## ***Executive Summary***

This report presents a systematic literature review examining how play has been conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood education and care (ECEC) in England between 2010 and 2025. Against a backdrop of significant policy reform, the review explores how political discourse, accountability frameworks, and curriculum control have reshaped the role of play in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and wider practice.

### ***Purpose***

The review was undertaken in response to growing concerns that play, historically central to early years pedagogy, has been marginalised by school readiness agendas and the increasing datafication of early education. It seeks to map how play is framed in policy, interrogate tensions between research and practice, and consider the implications for practitioners, professional identity, and children's rights.

### ***Methodology***

A systematic literature review approach was employed, drawing on peer-reviewed research, government and inspection reports, and sector-led publications. Literature published between 2008 and 2025 was included, with sources screened and thematically analysed across four domains:

1. Political discourse and policy framing
2. Curriculum control and standardisation
3. Practitioner agency and professional identity
4. Conceptualisation and positioning of play

### ***Key Findings***

- **Policy Framing:** National policy documents, most notably *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017) and successive EYFS revisions, prioritise direct teaching, phonics, and numeracy, framing play as supplementary rather than central.
- **Curriculum Narrowing:** Increased accountability and assessment measures such as the Good Level of Development (GLD) and Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) have reinforced schoolification, leading to reduced opportunities for open-ended, child-led play.
- **Professional Autonomy:** Practitioners report constrained agency, with play often legitimised only when linked to measurable outcomes. Yet resistance persists, with educators finding creative ways to sustain play-rich pedagogy.
- **Counter-Narratives:** Practitioner- and sector-led responses, including *Birth to Five Matters* (2021) and *Play Matters* (2025), exemplify collective advocacy to reclaim play as a developmental right, a pedagogical priority, and a cornerstone of democratic early years education.

## ***Implications***

The findings suggest that England's early years policy landscape is increasingly shaped by neoliberal imperatives of accountability and standardisation, often at the expense of play. This shift risks narrowing children's experiences, undermining practitioner professionalism, and eroding the relational, creative, and democratic dimensions of early education.

## ***Conclusion***

Reclaiming play as central to early years pedagogy is both an ethical and political imperative. Policy must move beyond narrow conceptions of school readiness to recognise play as fundamental to children's learning, wellbeing, and rights. Strengthening practitioner autonomy, embedding relational pedagogies, and resisting the instrumentalisation of play are critical to ensuring early childhood education in England remains developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and future-focused.

## ***Overarching Research Questions***

*How has play been conceptualised, valued, and positioned within early years policy and practice in England between 2010 and 2025?*

*What are the implications of these policy and practice shifts for pedagogy, practitioner identity, and children's rights in early childhood education?*

### *Sub questions*

- 1. In what ways have successive revisions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) reframed the purpose and value of play?*
- 2. How have accountability mechanisms such as the Good Level of Development (GLD) and Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) influenced the enactment of play in early years settings?*
- 3. What tensions exist between school readiness agendas and child-centred, play-based pedagogies?*
- 4. How have practitioners experienced and responded to policy pressures, and what strategies of resistance or adaptation have emerged?*
- 5. What role have sector-led initiatives (e.g. Birth to Five Matters, Play Matters) played in reclaiming play as a pedagogical and rights-based priority?*

This review was conducted using the principles to ensure methodological rigour while providing a timely and policy-relevant synthesis of the literature.

The systematic literature review process guided the review in the following ways:

- **Transparent and systematic search:** Multiple academic, policy, and sector-specific databases were searched using predefined terms (e.g. play, pedagogy, EYFS, school readiness, accountability, professional identity) to capture the breadth of literature from 2008–2025.
- **Screening and selection:** Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently to ensure relevance to the English early years context, focusing on literature that explicitly engaged with play, pedagogy, and policy.
- **Quality appraisal:** Studies were assessed for methodological transparency, conceptual clarity, and contribution to debates on early years pedagogy, drawing on adapted EPPI-Centre appraisal criteria.
- **Thematic synthesis:** Evidence was analysed across four domains, political discourse and policy framing, curriculum control and standardisation, practitioner agency and professional identity, and conceptualisation and positioning of play, enabling both critical depth and cross-cutting insight.
- **Balance of breadth and depth:** While not exhaustive in the same way as a full systematic review, the approach ensured a broad evidence base was assessed within a transparent and structured process, producing findings that are both credible and accessible for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

By adopting this approach, the review provides a robust yet timely evidence base that balances critical analysis with practical relevance. This approach ensures that the findings contribute meaningfully to current debates on the place of play in early years education in England, while maintaining transparency and rigour in the synthesis process.

## ***Headline Findings***

The research reviewed for this paper, and presented under the five sub-questions, shows that there is recent and relevant evidence to inform each of these areas, but its strength and quality varies. Some sub-questions are supported by a strong body of critical scholarship, while for others the evidence is emerging, uneven, or harder to locate.

### **1. Revisions to the EYFS and the Value of Play**

There is strong and consistent evidence that successive iterations of the EYFS, particularly in 2012, 2017 and 2021, have reframed play as supplementary to structured learning. Research here is robust and offers a clear account of curriculum narrowing and shifting pedagogical priorities.

## 2. Accountability and Assessment Mechanisms

A substantial body of research highlights how GLD and RBA have entrenched a data-driven culture in early years education, incentivising adult-led instruction. Evidence is strong on the systemic effects, though less work has been done on long-term outcomes for children.

## 3. Tensions Between School Readiness and Play-Based Pedagogy

Evidence confirms persistent tensions between child-centred approaches and outcomes-driven agendas. This area is well-theorised, but empirical evidence on how practitioners navigate and resolve these tensions in daily practice is more fragmented.

## 4. Practitioner Agency and Professional Identity

Research indicates that practitioner autonomy is increasingly constrained by compliance and performativity. Qualitative studies provide rich insight into professional dilemmas and strategies of adaptation, but large-scale and comparative evidence remains limited.

## 5. Counter-Narratives and Sector-Led Advocacy

Evidence from initiatives such as *Birth to Five Matters* (2021) and *Play Matters* (2025) demonstrates growing professional resistance and collective advocacy to reclaim play. However, this is a newer and less established evidence base, with limited data on longer-term impact.

Overall, the review demonstrates a strong critical literature exposing the marginalisation of play in English early years education, alongside emerging practitioner-led efforts to defend it. However, there remain notable gaps in evidence, particularly around children's lived experiences, practitioner strategies of resistance, and the sustained impact of sector-led advocacy.

The key messages from the review and suggested modifications to the currency of the importance of play in England.

### ***Key Messages from the Review***

- Play has been progressively marginalised in England's early years policy and practice, reframed as secondary to direct teaching.
- Accountability measures such as GLD and RBA have entrenched datafication, narrowing pedagogy and shaping practice.
- School readiness agendas often conflict with child-centred, play-based approaches, creating tensions in daily pedagogy.
- Early years professionals face a loss of autonomy and identity, increasingly positioned as deliverers of outcomes rather than reflective pedagogues.
- Counter-narratives (e.g. *Birth to Five Matters*, *Play Matters*) demonstrate strong professional advocacy to reclaim play, but evidence of their long-term impact is still limited.
- The rights and agency of children are at risk of being eroded by schoolification and technocratic accountability frameworks.

- There is a gap between research evidence affirming the developmental value of play and the policy discourse that instrumentalises it.
- Practitioner strategies of resistance exist but are fragmented and highly dependent on institutional support and confidence.
- Sector-led initiatives show that collective action can reassert the role of play as a non-negotiable pedagogical principle.
- Further research and dialogue are needed to ensure play remains central to democratic, relational, and inclusive early years education.

### **Action Points**

- Reassert play in policy frameworks. Ensure future EYFS revisions embed play as a central pedagogical principle, not just a vehicle for outcomes. (Links to Sub-question 1: EYFS and play's value)
- Rebalance accountability measures
- Review GLD and RBA to reduce pressure for performativity and create space for child-led learning. (Sub-question 2: Accountability and assessment)
- Promote balanced pedagogy, Develop guidance that explicitly supports integration of play-based and structured approaches without privileging one over the other. (Sub-question 3: School readiness vs play)
- Strengthen practitioner autonomy. Empower educators through professional standards that value reflective judgement and relational pedagogy over compliance. (Sub-question 4: Practitioner agency)
- Embed children's rights in practice. Recognise play as a developmental right in statutory frameworks, aligning with UNCRC principles. (Sub-question 5: Counter-narratives/children's agency)
- Support sector-led advocacy. Provide funding and platforms for initiatives like Play Matters and Birth to Five Matters to scale and sustain their impact. (Sub-question 5: Counter-narratives)
- Bridge research and policy. Establish mechanisms to ensure research evidence on play informs policymaking, inspection frameworks, and curriculum design. (Cross-cutting: Evidence vs policy gap)
- Invest in professional development. Offer CPD that equips practitioners to defend and enact play-based pedagogy within accountability-driven environments. (Sub-question 4: Professional identity)
- Amplify practitioner and child voices. Involve educators, families, and children in policy consultations to ensure play is valued as lived experience, not only as rhetoric. (Cross-cutting: Agency and participation)

- Commission further research. Prioritise studies on children’s lived experiences of play, practitioner resistance strategies, and the long-term effects of advocacy movements. (Evidence gaps highlighted across all sub-questions)

### ***Recommendations from the Authors***

Drawing on the findings of this review, we recommend the following actions for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and sector leaders:

- Re-centre play in national frameworks

Future iterations of the EYFS should explicitly position play as a developmental right and pedagogical foundation, not simply as a vehicle for school readiness targets.

- Reform accountability and assessment systems

Mechanisms such as the GLD and Reception Baseline Assessment should be critically reviewed to ensure they do not drive curriculum narrowing, but instead support rich, play-based experiences that reflect children’s holistic development.

- Promote a balanced vision of pedagogy

Policy and practice guidance should support educators to integrate child-led play with purposeful adult interactions, avoiding binary framings that pit play against teaching.

- Safeguard practitioner autonomy and professional identity

Workforce policy should value reflective, relational pedagogy and reduce performative pressures that constrain educators’ capacity to enact play-based approaches.

- Embed children’s rights and agency

Statutory documents and inspection frameworks should align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), recognising play as a non-negotiable right and ensuring children’s voices are included in curriculum and policy design.

- Strengthen and sustain sector-led advocacy

Practitioner- and coalition-driven initiatives such as Birth to Five Matters and Play Matters should be supported through recognition, funding, and integration into national debate to amplify their influence on practice and policy.

- Close the gap between research and policy

Stronger mechanisms are needed to ensure that robust evidence on the benefits of play informs national strategies, curriculum design, and inspection criteria.

- Invest in ongoing professional development

Continuous professional learning opportunities should be prioritised to equip practitioners with the confidence and tools to defend, articulate, and implement play-based pedagogy within accountability-driven contexts.

- Amplify diverse voices

Policymakers and researchers must create structured opportunities for practitioners, families, and children to co-construct policy and curriculum, ensuring lived experiences of play shape decision-making.

- Commission further research

More empirical studies are needed into children’s lived experiences of play, practitioner strategies of resistance, and the long-term impacts of sector-led advocacy. Longitudinal evidence would strengthen the case for reasserting play in early childhood education.

# Introduction

In England, early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been increasingly shaped by political discourse, regulatory reform, and heightened accountability frameworks. Since 2008, the early years sector has witnessed a progressive narrowing of pedagogical priorities, as successive policy iterations have sought to align early learning with broader national agendas around school readiness, social mobility, and economic productivity. These shifts have not only reframed the purpose of early education but have also led to a devaluation of play-based learning, despite longstanding recognition of play as central to young children's holistic development and wellbeing.

This review investigates how policy documents and political movements have increasingly positioned play as supplementary, framed as a vehicle for achieving specific educational learning outcomes rather than as a fundamental right or mode of learning. The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2024) and accompanying materials such as Development Matters (DfE, 2021) and the Bold Beginnings report (Ofsted, 2017), exemplify this shift, privileging direct instruction, measurable outcomes, and school-aligned learning trajectories. In response, a growing body of critical research has emerged, highlighting the tensions between outcomes driven approaches and the child-centred ethos traditionally embedded in early years pedagogy.

This literature review draws on a wide body of literature to explore how these policy developments have redefined the value of play in early education in England. The review critically examines the interplay between policy and practice, focusing on how political ideologies shape the construction of play, pedagogy, and professional identity. In doing so, it responds to three core aims: to provoke insight into the significance of play within early childhood in England; to analyse how play is presented in policy and quality documents; and to consider the lived implications for early years practice and pedagogy in an increasingly regulated educational landscape.

## Literature review

### ***Political discourse and policy framing***

One of the most influential and contentious policy documents in recent early years dialogue is that of Ofsted's Bold Beginnings report (2017), which reviewed pedagogy in the reception year. The report criticised practitioners for a lack of formal teaching and advocated for "short, sharp sessions with specific goals," especially in phonics and numeracy. The document makes over three hundred references to "teaching," whereas "play" is positioned peripherally as supplementary or recreational. This rhetorical positioning triggered widespread concern. Williams (2018) argues that Bold Beginnings (Ofsted, 2017) advanced a significantly narrowed and developmentally inappropriate curriculum, with the potential to compromise children's holistic development. Building on this critique, Kay (2021), through critical discourse analysis, highlights how the report's reliance on a "what works" narrative promotes a prescriptive and singular model of reception pedagogy. This approach not only reinforces the dominant school readiness agenda but also marginalises play-based learning, undermining the pedagogical diversity necessary for meeting young children's varied developmental needs.

Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020) describe Bold Beginnings as a potential threat to children's emotional and creative development, raising concerns about the report's implications for holistic early years practice. Complementing this critique many researchers highlight how the report contributes to the erosion of Froebelian and sociocultural pedagogies, privileging performative, adult-led approaches over child-centred, relational learning. Collectively, these critiques point to the report as emblematic of a broader neoliberal discourse in early childhood education, one that emphasises measurable, goal-oriented instruction and accountability, often at the expense of experiential, play-based learning and professional autonomy (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Moss, 2013).

These critiques have highlighted the lasting influence of Bold Beginnings (2017) on subsequent EYFS revisions (2017, 2021) and on the development of Development Matters (DfE, 2021). Although these reforms were positioned as efforts to reduce practitioner workload, they continued to centre structured learning targets, thereby further marginalising play. Nicholson (2018) describes a persistent "tug of war" between maintaining play-based pedagogical values and responding to increasing accountability demands, highlighting a growing discontinuity between the EYFS and Year 1. Building on this, Bradbury (2020) introduces the concept of "datafication" to illustrate how play is increasingly legitimised only when it produces measurable outcomes. This shift compels practitioners to prioritise rapid, goal-oriented activities over more open-ended, child-led experiences, thereby further marginalising the role of play in early years settings.

The cumulative effects of these developments is a shift from a child-centred to a compliance-driven early years pedagogy. Play, once recognised as a cornerstone of development, risks being reduced to a vehicle for academic readiness (Wood, 2019). Wood critiques the narrowing of early years curricula in England and argues that play is increasingly instrumentalised to serve measurable outcomes. She suggests that play is no longer viewed as a developmental right but as a means to achieve school readiness benchmarks. This trend contradicts longstanding research affirming the importance of play for creativity, autonomy, and emotional resilience (Bruce, 2012; Goswami, 2015; Payler et al., 2017). Bradbury (2024) positions this shift as a matter of democratic concern, contending that play must be defended not only as an effective pedagogical approach but also as a fundamental right of the child and a cornerstone of democratic learning environments. In the context of an increasingly technocratic and standardised early years landscape, such calls to reclaim play expose the deep-seated ideological tensions that continue to shape early childhood education policy and practice in England.

A growing body of critique highlights how recent reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) may undermine the developmental breadth of early childhood education and contribute to widening attainment gaps (Pascal, Bertram & Rouse, 2019; Early Years Alliance, 2020). These changes have been described as "limited and limiting" due to their overemphasis on literacy and numeracy at the expense of holistic growth (Pascal, Bertram & Rouse, 2019; Early Years Alliance, 2020). Empirical research supports these concerns. Roberts-Holmes (2015) highlights the "datafication" of pedagogy, which fosters a culture focused on quantifiable outcomes and leads practitioners to align their practices with performance metrics. The House of Commons Education Committee (2016) similarly cautions that performance-oriented reforms may compromise high-quality, play-based interactions.

McCabe and Farrell (2021) argue that the EYFS's shift from developmental and sociocultural foundations toward narrowly defined learning outcomes strips pedagogy of its richness, fragmenting knowledge into compartmentalised units and marginalising the integrative role of play. While significant criticism has been directed at these reforms, some perspectives defend them as necessary and potentially beneficial, particularly for children at risk of falling behind. Proponents contend that the 2021 EYFS revisions and the updated Development Matters (DfE, 2021) guidance offers greater clarity, alignment with Key Stage 1 expectations, and support for smoother transitions (DfE, 2021). An independent evaluation by the DfE (2023) found that many early years professionals welcomed the revised learning goals, especially in literacy and mathematics, citing increased confidence in their ability to support children toward expected outcomes. Additionally, the removal of burdensome assessment requirements has, according to some practitioners, enabled a renewed focus on observation, interaction, and pedagogy rather than administrative data collection.

From this view, play and direct teaching are not mutually exclusive but potentially complementary. Research suggests that structured, purposeful adult interactions within play-rich environments can support cognitive and social-emotional development (Zosh et al., 2018; Weisberg et al., 2016). Supporters of the EYFS reforms argue that gains in literacy and numeracy, especially for disadvantaged children, need not come at the cost of play, provided that practitioners are equipped with the time, training, and professional autonomy to blend pedagogical approaches effectively.

This need for balance is echoed in the government's Best Start in Life policy vision (HM Government, 2024), which maintains that play remains essential but must be integrated intentionally with efforts to close the development gap. These contrasting views illustrate the complexity of the EYFS reform impact. Where some practitioners report a narrowing of play-based pedagogy and increasing performativity, others welcome clearer expectations and a focus on essential skills. Thus, the debate may be reframed not as a binary opposition between play and teaching, but as a question of the conditions under which relational, rigorous, and playful pedagogies can coexist within a high-accountability policy environment.

The increasing 'schoolification' of early childhood education, marked by formal instruction, standardised assessments, and a focus on academic readiness, raises urgent ethical and equity concerns. At the heart of this shift lies a fundamental question: are children being recognised as active agents in their own learning, or reduced to data points within accountability frameworks? Emerging research on children's agentic capacity reveals how policy narratives rooted in risk aversion and control constrain autonomy and silence children's voices as meaning makers (Feeney & Freeman, 2016) Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes (2017) argue that Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) functions as an ethically problematic form of data extraction' transforming children into data and embedding performative logic from the outset of formal education, an approach further critiqued by Pierlejewski et al. (2025) as a "shameful data extraction process".

From a professional and ethical standpoint, early childhood educators face dilemmas when compliance with policy contradicts their ethical responsibility to foster children's holistic growth (Feeney & Freeman, 2016) The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct emphasises respect for each child's dignity, autonomy, and agency, standards that are challenged by schoolification practices focused on standardised teaching and narrow outcome goals (NAEYC, 2011).

Consequently, these ethical tensions highlight a fundamental clash between relational, child-centred practice and the instrumental, accountability-driven imperatives embedded within neoliberal education policy. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016) also warn of a disciplinary triage effect, where resources are disproportionately directed to those near target thresholds, reinforcing rather than disrupting early inequality. Roberts-Holmes (2015) further show that baseline assessment systems can pathologize individual children or settings, reinforcing negative self-concepts and deficit labelling.

Echoing these concerns, Moss (2017) argues that such data-driven structures reposition children and teachers as subjects of managerial oversight rather than active participants in learning. Kay et al. (2021), in their rhetorical analysis of workforce reform, highlight how policies like the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) reinforce neoliberal subjectivity, tying professional legitimacy to compliance with uniform standards and performative professionalism. Moreover, Miller's (2008) UK-based study on Early Years Professionals further evidences this phenomenon: the escalating performative demands fragment professional identity and diminish morale, as educators struggle to reconcile empathic pedagogy with output-focused accountability.

Collectively, this evidence illustrates a systemic shift, not merely curricular, but ideological, towards a delivery-focused model of early education. In this model, pedagogy becomes subordinated to compliance; relational, reflective, and responsive teaching risks being eclipsed by narrowly defined performance metrics that define success in quantifiable terms. The current political narrative in England increasingly situates play within a neoliberal education model, one rooted in market logics of performance, competition, and measurable outcomes (Ball, 2003; Moss, 2019; Wood, 2020). Moss (2013) characterises this as a transition away from viewing early childhood as a public good, towards seeing it as a privatised, quantifiable investment in human capital. In such a landscape, policymakers highlight terms like "school readiness," "intervention," and "outcomes," while words such as "play," "joy," and "childhood" are increasingly conspicuous by their absence, sidelining the intrinsic value of play.

This ideological shift is prominently evident in policy literature and inspection discourses. Neoliberal conceptualisations of education prioritise efficiency and measurable outputs, converting early childhood into a quasi-market space bound by accountability mechanisms. As early childhood education becomes increasingly shaped by market logics, where provision is framed as a service responding to consumer demand, it is progressively distanced from its roots as a collective, democratic public good. This shift has profound implications for pedagogical priorities. As Nicolopoulou (2010) presciently warned, we are witnessing an "alarming disappearance of play" from both policy and practice. This absence is not accidental; it is symptomatic of a political discourse that positions the early years primarily as preparation for school and future economic productivity, rather than as a vital period of social, emotional, and imaginative growth. Such regression, as Haslip and Gullo (2018) argue, compromises children's engagement, experimentation, and holistic development, replacing them with rigid, outcomes-driven models of instruction. While neoliberal discourse in early childhood education manifests globally, its impact is uniquely intense in England due to the highly centralised governance of the Department for Education and Ofsted. The result is a political reframing of play, from a developmental right to an optional, recreational activity, reflecting neoliberal priorities centred on efficiency, economic return, and standardised educational outcomes. Within this context, childhood itself risks being redefined not as a time of agency, curiosity, and creativity, but as a preparatory stage for future productivity.

This instrumental view erodes the democratic and experiential dimensions of early childhood, narrowing its purpose to labour market readiness.

### ***Curriculum control and standardisation***

The 2008 introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was warmly received across the early years sector, uniting three earlier frameworks, Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, Birth to Three Matters, and National Standards for Under-Eight Daycare and Childminding, into a statutory framework that prioritised holistic child development through play and responsive pedagogy (DfE, 2008; Rogers, 2011). Following this in 2010, a series of EYFS revisions (in 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021, with further updates in 2023) increasingly emphasised school-readiness, moulding the curriculum around direct teaching in literacy, numeracy, and formal content at the expense of exploratory learning (DfE, 2012; 2014; 2017, 2021, 2023).

Wood (2019, 2020) argues that this shift reflects a broader ideological transformation, from a developmental, child-led approach to an outcome-driven model privileging direct instruction. Wood observes, “the reoccurrence of the word ‘must’ underscores the pervasive function of the EYFS...and indicates a shift from persuasion to coercion,” further contending that children have been reconceptualised as “knowable” and “measurable” beings to meet performance criteria (Wood, 2020, p.328; Wood, 2019).

The 2017 Bold Beginnings report by Ofsted further entrenched this trajectory, advocating for “short, sharp sessions with specific goals” in phonics and numeracy during Reception and systematically sidelining the term 'pedagogy' in favour of 'teaching', assessment, and adult-led strategies (Ofsted, 2017; Williams, 2018). These insights fed directly into the 2017 and 2021 EYFS revisions, which streamlined the Early Learning Goals and removed statutory provisions concerning the Characteristics of Effective Learning, thereby narrowing educators' scope for creative, child-centred practice (DfE, 2017, 2021; Early Education, 2012; Williams, 2018). The development of Birth to Five Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021) offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant policy framings that marginalise play within English early years education. In contrast to the top-down reforms underpinning statutory frameworks such as the EYFS and Bold Beginnings, this practitioner-led guidance emerged through a process of collective professional agency. As Archer (2024) documents, early years educators and researchers collaboratively reasserted play as a central, non-negotiable feature of high-quality pedagogy, grounded in relational, developmental, and rights-based principles. By drawing on a diverse range of expertise and resisting the reductive logic of outcomes-based accountability, Birth to Five Matters exemplifies how professional beliefs can shape the conceptualisation and enactment of play in meaningful and contextually grounded ways. Crucially, the guidance does not treat play as a vehicle for school readiness, but rather positions it as a foundational mode of learning, deeply connected to children's agency, wellbeing, and expression. This reinforces the argument that reclaiming play requires not only critique of neoliberal policy agendas, but also the sustained collective action of the profession to reframe what constitutes valued knowledge and practice in early childhood education.

The growing dominance of data-driven accountability in early years provision raises important questions about what is prioritised, and what is lost, in children's early experiences. A profound shift in early childhood education in England has been the datafication of childhood, whereby young learners and practitioners are increasingly evaluated through quantifiable metrics (Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) argue that this data-driven culture, driven by high-stakes accountability, redirects pedagogical focus from supporting holistic development to producing measurable outcomes. The Good Level of Development (GLD), a composite score derived from the EYFS Profile, exemplifies this trend by aligning early years assessment with national performance benchmarks, and even drawing on global comparative frameworks such as PISA (OECD, 2016; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). This shift not only narrows the scope of what is valued in early learning but also risks undermining the relational, experiential, and play-based practices at the heart of developmentally appropriate pedagogy. This surveillance extends beyond GLD: baseline assessments proposed for Reception entry, though phased down in 2016, reflect further encroachment of formal testing even at age four (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

However, a significant policy development contributing to the datafication of early childhood in England has been the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA), which became statutory in 2021 following earlier pilots (DfE, 2021). Positioned as a means to measure school-level progress from reception to year 6, the RBA reflects a broader neoliberal shift toward accountability, standardisation, and quantifiable performance from the very outset of schooling. Researchers have raised substantial concerns about the educational and ethical implications of this assessment regime. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) argue that RBA exemplifies the “datafication” of pedagogy, wherein children are transformed into data subjects whose capabilities are measured, stored, and monitored to align with institutional benchmarks. This process, they contend, alters pedagogical priorities, with play and relational practices increasingly displaced by assessment-driven routines. Similarly, Pierlejewski et al, 2025 describe RBA as a “shameful data extraction process,” suggesting that its implementation represents an early induction into a performative culture of schooling. Research by Meechan and Williams-Brown et al. (2022) further critiques the assessment as developmentally inappropriate, with educators reporting heightened stress, curriculum narrowing, and a sense of professional disempowerment. Taken together, these studies suggest that RBA contributes to a technocratic reconfiguration of early education, one in which holistic, child-centred learning is subordinated to systems of measurement and accountability.

Central to this review is an examination of how play is conceptualised within early childhood pedagogy in England. Play has long been positioned as a foundational element of development and learning, yet its meaning and educational value remain contested and shaped by broader policy agendas. Drawing on the work of Thompson (2012, 2024), play is understood not merely as an activity or developmental stage, but as a pedagogical stance, a way of being, relating, and learning that sits at the heart of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). In her 2012 chapter, Thompson outlines how play operates as a space for autonomy, creativity, and relational development, warning against instrumentalist framings that reduce play to a delivery mechanism for pre-defined learning outcomes. This position is further developed in her more recent work (Thompson, 2024), where she critiques the narrowing of early years pedagogy in England and reasserts the importance of child-led, imaginative, and socially situated play as an essential right and mode of learning.

Thompson’s conceptual framing offers a valuable counterpoint to policy narratives that position play as supplementary or preparatory. Instead, her work supports a relational and experiential model of pedagogy, in which play is valued for its capacity to foster emotional security, communicative competence, and intellectual curiosity. This perspective underpins the theoretical lens of the current review and is echoed in the broader literature that challenges the performative and outcomes-oriented turn in early childhood policy (e.g., Moss, 2019; Bradbury, 2024).

By foregrounding Thompson's contributions, this review aligns with a view of play as both a right and a pedagogical necessity, integral to nurturing agency, wellbeing, and democratic learning in early years settings.

### ***Practitioner agency and professional identity***

Empirical studies have documented that curriculum narrowing, with increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy, comes at the expense of play-rich and creative activities. Empirical evidence from the UK and international contexts reveals that curriculum narrowing toward literacy and numeracy significantly reduces opportunities for play-rich and creative learning in early childhood settings. Roberts-Holmes (2015) and Bradbury (2020) demonstrate that practitioners, under pressure to meet Early Learning Goals and school readiness targets, allocate increasing instructional time to structured phonics and numeracy sessions, often at the expense of child-led play and imaginative activities. In a large-scale ethnographic analysis, Kay (2018) similarly reports that Reception classrooms are restructured to prioritise adult-led instruction, constraining free play and creative exploration. Furthermore, Whitebread and Bingham (2011), in a UK-based longitudinal study, found that excessive emphasis on early literacy and numeracy correlates with declines in children's creativity, sustained attention, and problem-solving skills. This aligns with the OECD's (2021) report demonstrating that high process-quality settings, characterised by play, adult-child interaction, and emergent learning, yield stronger developmental outcomes than a narrow skills-focused curricula. Taken together, this body of evidence underscores a marked shift in early years practice: a transition from holistic, play-based education toward performative, target-driven teaching, which empirical studies associate with diminished creativity, engagement, and multi-domain development.

Kay (2018); Gillborn and Youdell (2000) report that practitioners prioritise "short, sharp sessions" to manufacture data success, often abandoning exploratory pedagogy. One troubling phenomenon is the "triage effect", whereby children close to GLD thresholds are pushed into targeted, outcome-driven instruction, while others are overlooked or deprioritised (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). This narrow pedagogy, coined 'schoolification', has been linked to the early years adopting teaching practices traditionally reserved for later years, including ability grouping, structured drills, and formal phonics instruction (Moss, 2012; Alexander, 2009; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Kay, 2018). While literacy interventions can boost early reading, there is evidence that these practices undermine social, emotional, and imaginative learning, which are foundational yet harder to quantify (Whitebread & Bingham, 2011; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016).

The constraints placed on play-based pedagogy in England cannot be fully understood without attending to the policy discourses that shape early years professional identity. Archer (2022) argues that there is a critical discourse analysis of English early childhood workforce policies which demonstrates how neoliberal imperatives, such as credentialism, accountability, and surveillance, construct narrow, compliance-oriented subject positions for practitioners. Within this framing, early years educators are increasingly positioned as deliverers of measurable outcomes rather than as relational, reflective pedagogues. Such discursive bordering restricts the enactment of agency and limits the conditions under which play-based approaches can be valued or sustained.

Archer's work reveals how these policy mechanisms function not only to standardise practice but also to marginalise alternative, child-centred models of professionalism. This insight reinforces the argument that the devaluation of play is not simply a curricular issue but a structural and ideological one, requiring critical interrogation of the ways in which policy frameworks configure what it means to be a 'professional' in early childhood education. Reclaiming play, then, is inseparable from reclaiming professional agency within a surveillance and outcomes-driven system.

Empirical research reveals that contemporary policy directives have markedly reduced early years teachers' professional autonomy. Educators are increasingly positioned not as responsive co-constructors of learning, but as implementers of externally prescribed curricula. Practitioners report that increased emphasis on structured literacy and numeracy activities, driven by EYFS targets and observation expectations, siphons time away from child-initiated exploration (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Indeed, OECD (2021) analysts highlight that early childhood settings operating under highly regulated, formalised curricula consistently score lower on measures of process quality, including rich adult-child interactions, playful learning, and emergent, child-led inquiry. These findings suggest that increased structural control not only narrows pedagogical scope but actively diminishes the quality of children's lived experiences in early education. Collectively, these findings reveal a concerning trajectory: early years professionals are increasingly stripped of the freedom to prioritise play, creativity, and relational pedagogy. In their place, compliance-driven instruction, excessive documentation, and data-focused observation practices have taken hold. In England, political intervention has played a central role in this erosion of practitioner autonomy. Once grounded in developmental and sociocultural approaches, such as those inspired by Froebel and the Reggio Emilia philosophy, early years practice is now being reoriented toward structured, outcomes-driven pedagogy. This shift not only narrows the curriculum but also undermines the responsive, child-centred ethos that has historically defined the professional identity of early educators.

Recent policy developments in England have reconfigured the role of early years practitioners, from responsive facilitators of play and relational learning to enforcers of structured, curriculum-led instruction. This redefinition carries profound implications, not only for pedagogical practice but also for the professional identity and autonomy of the early years workforce. Supporting this policy shift, the Insights Into a High-Quality Early Years Curriculum report (Campbell-Barr et al., 2023) reveals that dominant discourses around school readiness and the transition to Year 1 are increasingly pressuring early years settings to prioritise structured literacy and numeracy activities. As a result, open-ended, play-based learning is being marginalised. Practitioners voiced growing concern that their professional agency, particularly in crafting responsive, child-led environments, is being steadily undermined. Furthermore, Shaw (2019) emphasised that when teachers are unable to meaningfully include children's voices in planning, they are acting more as technicians executing predetermined curricula than as educators engaging in shared sense-making, further marginalising the relational and democratic aspects of early years teaching. This body of work paints a stark picture: practitioners are navigating a regulatory landscape that values performance metrics and curriculum delivery over relational responsiveness and child-led exploration. Their roles are being reshaped from co-constructors of meaning into agents of compliance, often at the expense of rich pedagogical engagement and practitioner autonomy.

## ***Conceptualisation and positioning of play***

Play within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England has frequently been explored in policy documents, highlighting ongoing debates around play pedagogy and the need to clearly define its meaning. It is important to set out the timeline of early years documents at the forefront of practice within England. Since 2010 there have been many interactions from the Department of Education (DfE) in England. In 2008 the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, a statutory framework for all early year's providers, was introduced, bringing together three different frameworks: the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, the birth to Three Matters framework, and the National Standards for Under 8s Daycare and Childminding (DCSF, 2008). The EYFS was largely well received by the sector, and has since been revised in 2012 (DfE, 2012) and updated in 2014 and 2017, 2021 and 2023 (DfE, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2023). However, a real change to the statutory framework was revised in the latest iteration in 2023, Statutory framework for the early year's foundation stage (DfE, 2021;2023). Practitioners have a key role to play in developing a play-based pedagogy and maintaining an enabling environment, but despite a body of research and evidence, adult teaching still dominates the pedagogy.

Parents may have a different understanding of play or how they value play-based learning. More traditional teaching approaches may be more familiar and therefore hold more value for them. An interesting dichotomy is presented by Nicholson (2018) where he indicates that play is often used as an incentive, but this may contribute to the idea that work is learning, and play is recreation. Furthermore, Bubikova-Moan (2019) highlights a prevailing concern within early childhood education, noting that "a common grievance is a view of play as being without a purpose and thus not serving academic learning well" (p. 785). This critique reinforces the need to reposition play as a counter-discourse to the dominant target-driven agendas that increasingly shape early years pedagogy. It is important to emphasise the child-centred principles and practices that are embedded within the Froebelian approach and argue that these should be applied to ECEC in England today. Imagination, creativity, and knowledge of the world were expressed through self-directed play, according to Froebel and further enhanced by the work of Bruce (2012). Children benefit from symbolic activities such as art, music, dance and imagination by nurturing their inner lives as well as developing and expressing their understanding (Bruce, 2012).

In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Wood (2019) conceptualises the complex processes of policy making and the relationship between policy, research, and practice through a kaleidoscope metaphor. She continues by explaining that a kaleidoscope is a tube containing fragments of glass and other materials, as well as small mirrors, and one eye is focused on what the kaleidoscope produces. The authors of this research interpretation of this metaphor are that there are multiple and often conflicting ideologies of play and the way in which play is understood and positioned globally, will therefore differ. McCabe and Farrell (2021) caution that relying on a singular or transactional knowledge model, where learning is viewed as discrete, individual facts, restricts pedagogical complexity. Instead, they advocate for a sociocultural epistemology that recognises meaning as constructed through social interaction, culture, and context.

By contrast, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2022) encourages educators to plan based on children's emerging capabilities, family contexts, and social backgrounds, reinforcing a sociocultural stance rather than adhering to narrow knowledge objectives. Taken together, these sources advocate for an early childhood pedagogy grounded in social constructivist principles, whereby knowledge is co-constructed rather than acquired in isolated units. They emphasise that play, and learning are emergent processes, arising through relational interactions rather than being solely directed by adult-led instruction. Furthermore, they position context, culture, and relationships as foundational to curriculum development. Such theoretical perspectives stand in critical contrast to prevailing policy discourses that prioritise standardisation and narrowly defined, measurable outcomes, thereby offering a robust defence of play-based, socially embedded approaches to early learning.

In early childhood, play is regarded as the foundation for learning and development (Wood, 2013). Play and the position that this has within the place of ECEC policy frameworks remains debated because there is a shared assumption that play should contribute to learning outcomes (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016; Hunter and Walsh, 2014; Wood, 2010). Conversely, play is caught between different discourses, including freedom, child initiated and adult led play, the role of the adult and the challenges of play-based pedagogies, which also includes identifying pre-determined learning outcomes. When defining play, many factors need to be considered. It is important to consider the cultural-historical factors when implementing play within different systems, as documented by Cheng Pui-Wah et al. (2015), and Hedges, Peterson, and Wajskop (2018). There are integrative approaches to play and pedagogy within early childhood (Fleer, 2015) that can support both child-initiated play and adult-driven, playful approaches to learning and teaching.

Due to increasing accountability pressures and the intensification of school readiness agendas, early years practitioners are often compelled to prioritise adult-led instructional strategies over child-initiated play. This shift is largely driven by the need to meet externally imposed targets and demonstrate measurable outcomes (Moss, 2019). In the English context, the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework and associated accountability mechanisms, such as Ofsted inspections, have been shown to dominate and determine the activities on offer in early years settings, thereby narrowing the pedagogical space for spontaneous, self-directed play (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Similarly, Miller and Almon (2009) report that in the United States, a growing emphasis on pre-academic instruction in early childhood settings has contributed to a significant decline in opportunities for free play. This pressure intensifies as children become preschoolers (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Nicholson (2018) refers to the discontinuity of play based learning (PBL) in the EYFS to Year 1, (formal curriculum) but the political discourse is now driving the expectations of outcomes for children much earlier. *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted 2017) highlighted the misalignment of expectations when transitioning from EYFS to Year 1. Hoskins and Smedley, (2018) refer to this as an increased drive to develop children's academic skills as an accountability measure in order to compete in the PISA scores.

PISA is the OECD's (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) programme for International Student Assessment and compares the results of 15-year-olds in core subjects. In response to the increasing marginalisation of play within early childhood education in England, the *Play Matters* document was developed as a sector-led response aimed at reasserting the centrality of play in early years pedagogy.

Produced collaboratively by educators, researchers, and advocates, Play Matters was not intended as a new policy framework, but as a counter-discursive tool, one that sought to challenge the dominance of school readiness narratives and regulatory accountability that have come to define early years practice (Bradbury et al., 2025). The document acknowledges the professional tensions experienced by practitioners as they navigate the challenge of sustaining play-based pedagogies within an increasingly data-driven, outcome-oriented policy environment, a dynamic similarly critiqued by scholars such as Wood (2020) and Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2016). It articulates the foundational role of play in children's development, not merely as a pedagogical method, but as a rights-based approach rooted in joy, agency, and relationships. Positioned within the broader literature that highlights the erosion of play through policy (Moss, 2013; Nicolopoulou, 2010), such developments reflect a concerning trend in which standardisation and accountability increasingly marginalise child-centred approaches in early education. A new document produced in 2025 called Play Matters offers a declarative and values-led statement that encourages professionals to reclaim play as legitimate, necessary, and non-negotiable in the lives of children. As such, it reflects an emerging movement within early childhood education to foreground practice that is ethical, democratic, and child-centred, even in the face of increasingly technocratic policy environments (Bradbury et al., 2025).

There is a continual discourse around how practitioners see play compared to political ideologies. Ofsted affirm that the “play environment is clearly a place for adult intervention (teaching) that enables key learning to become overt” (Ofsted 2015, p 12). Wood (2020, p 333) indicates that “Not only has OFSTED become the sole arbiter of quality, it also produces reports that carry significant authority in defining approved forms of practice, based on selected policy-led evidence (Kay, 2018; Wood, 2019).

Additionally, although Ofsted produces research and reports, they are not subject to the same “checks and balances” required of academic researchers to uphold ethical standards and methodological rigour, such as those outlined by the REF Framework (Wood, 2019). Using short, sharp sessions with a specific goal in mind, particularly in phonics and number, the report includes approaches to assessment, forms of adult interaction, and the importance of direct teaching (Ofsted 2015). Incorporating more formal teaching into the Foundation Stage requires the omission of the term 'pedagogy' and the adoption of the preferable term 'teaching'.

Wood (2020, p. 328) asserts that “the reoccurrence of the word ‘must’ underscore the pervasive function of the EYFS, and, when aligned with the assessment requirements, indicates a discursive shift from persuasion to coercion.” This shift is further reinforced by Ofsted’s Bold Beginnings report (2017), which has been rhetorically analysed as promoting a more prescriptive approach to early education. Similarly, Kay (2018) identifies a movement towards direct teaching for children aged 4–5 as a response to the school readiness agenda. Collectively, these developments are situated within what Wood (2020, p. 328) refers to as the “paradigm of standards, regulation and accountability,” which increasingly shapes early years pedagogy and policy.

The status of ‘teaching’ has long overshadowed the value of play despite the overwhelming evidence that play is essential for children’s learning. However, the complexities arise when trying to ‘measure’ play outcomes, and this requires a distinct set of skills. Observing the millions of potential observable moments and accurately interpreting them requires time and a deep understanding of child development and play.

This would not fit with the prescriptive and narrow nature of the EYFS and the National Curriculum. Linking to effective adult interactions which is initiated by children through play, Goswami (2015) also discusses how mirror neurons may contribute to understanding children's imitation, language, and moral cognition. The importance of warm, positive relationships is well-established, but 'contingent' responses, where an adult responds appropriately to the child's initiation, are also important (DCSF, 2009). These findings coincide with the well-established work on attunement within attachment relationships. A child's ability to learn effectively is also determined by his or her social relationships and cultural contexts (Payler et al, 2017).

This “alarming disappearance of play” (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019) has been observed across both national and international early childhood policy landscapes. The persistent privileging of educational attainment over play continues to pose a significant threat to the wellbeing, agency, and holistic development of young children. As argued in Bradbury (2024), early childhood education should be recognised as the last bastion of democracy a space where children's rights, voice, and freedom to explore through play are protected from the encroachment of neoliberal policy agendas. Defending play within this democratic framing becomes not only a pedagogical act but also a political imperative. It has been observed that a context of academic pressure has developed within early years settings in England due to the emphasis on ensuring children are ready for school and attaining 'school readiness'. Hoskins and Smedley (2019), in their examination of Froebelian practices, note that:

“The current early years emphasis on ensuring young children achieve ‘school readiness’ has contributed to a context of academic pressure in early years settings in England.” They further discuss how this prioritisation of literacy and mathematics "can dominate and determine the activities on offer in early years settings" (p. 73–87)

Throughout the last decade, early childhood education and care (ECEC) have become central to broader neoliberal reforms of education systems (Moss, 2013). The English education system, in particular, has been at the forefront of these developments, characterised by increasing standardisation and intensified accountability measures both nationally and internationally (Bradbury, 2014). This has included a significant rise in the regulation of early years provision, extending to both the professional workforce and the curriculum. In contrast to earlier historical approaches, when early years professionals were afforded greater autonomy and trained in pedagogical traditions such as those of Montessori, Froebel, and Steiner, today's practitioners operate within a tightly governed framework shaped by compliance and performativity (Hoskin & Smedley, 2016; Smedley & Hoskin, 2017). This shift marks a profound transformation in how early childhood education is conceptualised and delivered.

Pedagogical tension between Early Years and Primary Education and the demands of the National Curriculum tends to influence the expectations of the EYFS and school readiness agenda, rather than play based learning infiltrating the National Curriculum. “This leaves EYFS and Year 1 practitioners engaged in a ‘tug of war’ regarding who should compromise their pedagogy to accommodate the others” (Nicholson, 2018). Throughout the last decade, early childhood education and care (ECEC) have become central to broader neoliberal reforms of education systems (Moss, 2013).

This has included a significant rise in the regulation of early years provision, extending to both the professional workforce and the curriculum. In contrast to earlier historical approaches, when early years professionals were afforded greater autonomy and trained in pedagogical traditions such as those of Montessori, Froebel, and Steiner, today's practitioners operate within a tightly governed framework shaped by compliance and performativity (Hoskin & Smedley, 2016; Smedley & Hoskin, 2017). This shift marks a profound transformation in how early childhood education is conceptualised and delivered.

# Methodology

## ***Research Design***

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to explore how play is conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood pedagogy in England. Adopting a critical interpretivist stance, the review drew upon a diverse range of secondary sources, including empirical studies, conceptual papers, and national policy documents published between 2008 and 2025. This timeframe was chosen to reflect a period of significant policy reform and pedagogical transformation, during which early years education in England has experienced intensifying accountability pressures, revisions to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and high-profile debates on school readiness.

The review aimed to interrogate the impact of these developments on the positioning of play in early years settings, paying particular attention to how policy discourse, curriculum mandates, and professional beliefs have shaped both conceptualisations and enactments of play. By focusing on the English policy context, the review offers a focused and critical contribution to wider discussions about early years pedagogy, professional identity, and the erosion of play in neoliberal education systems. The design and rationale for this review were informed by the methodological frameworks of Liu, Solis, and Jensen (2022) and Skene, Reilly, and Radford (2020). Liu et al.'s systematic review on learning through play applied PRISMA-style protocols while embracing an interpretivist lens, offering a model for balancing methodological rigour with thematic sensitivity. Similarly, Skene et al.'s review of play-based pedagogy highlighted the importance of practitioner perspectives in understanding how play is enacted within constrained classroom contexts. These studies provided precedent for combining systematic review structures with critical, theory-informed analysis, particularly within early childhood research.

## ***Review Framework***

The review followed a five-phase systematic design, drawing on the methodological guidance of Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou (2016) and Gough, Oliver, and Thomas (2012). Informed by research conducted by Liu et al. (2022), who employed a multi-database approach and thematic synthesis grounded in pedagogical theory, the review applied a rigorous, transparent, and critically interpretive framework. Each phase, (1) scoping, (2) systematic search, (3) screening and selection, (4) evidence evaluation, and (5) synthesis and reporting, was grounded in engagement with theoretical, policy, and practice-based literature. These phrases, (1) scoping, (2) systematic search, (3) screening and selection, (4) evidence evaluation, and (5) synthesis and reporting provided a rigorous and transparent framework for conducting and documenting the review process. Each phase was underpinned by critical engagement with theoretical, policy, and practice-based literature, ensuring that the synthesis captured the ideological complexity surrounding play within early childhood education.

## ***Phase 1: Review Scoping***

The scoping phase was undertaken collaboratively to define the conceptual and methodological boundaries of the review. The primary research question guiding the process was:

"How is play conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood pedagogy in England, and how do policy, practice, and professional beliefs shape its role?"

Informed by sociocultural and post-structural theories, this phase involved an initial mapping of the field, identifying key themes such as standardisation, school readiness, curriculum control, and practitioner autonomy. Liu et al. (2022) and Skene et al. (2020) in assessing studies based on conceptual during which early years education in England has experienced intensifying accountability pressures, revisions to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and high-profile debates on school readiness.

The review aimed to interrogate the impact of these developments on the positioning of play in early years settings, paying particular attention to how policy discourse, curriculum mandates, and professional richness and relevance to early years pedagogy. Particular weight was given to research that foregrounded practitioner beliefs, pedagogical tensions, or conceptual ambiguity in the positioning of play.

The researchers developed a preliminary conceptual framework comprising:

- Search terms: play, pedagogy, EYFS, school readiness, policy, datafication, accountability, and professional identity;
- Inclusion criteria: literature published from 2008 onward (following the introduction of the EYFS), situated within the English context, and addressing play in relation to policy, practice, or pedagogy including international links where this is needed;;
- Exclusion criteria: studies not relevant to England or International for comparison, that failed to discuss play or pedagogy explicitly, or that employed purely behavioural or biomedical framings;
- Appraisal criteria: adapted from the EPPI-Centre Weight of Evidence framework, focusing on methodological rigour, conceptual clarity, and relevance to the review aims.

This phase enabled the development of a review structure that was both systematic and sensitive to the ideological and contextual complexities of early childhood education in England.

## ***Phase 2: Systematic Literature Search***

A systematic search strategy was applied across multiple academic and grey literature databases. These included:

- Discipline-specific platforms: Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, Journal of Childhood Education and Society.

- Grey literature and professional networks: ResearchGate, Academia.edu;
- Policy sources: Department for Education publications, Ofsted reports (notably *Bold Beginnings*, 2017), and research from the SEED and EPPE/EPPSE programmes.

The search strategy used Boolean combinations of the key terms, ensuring broad yet relevant retrieval. The timeframe (2008–2025) captured the latest policy reforms and professional commentary, particularly the ongoing impact of the revised EYFS and the intensification of performative pressures within early years practice.

### ***Phase 3: Literature Assessment and Selection***

Search results were screened through a two-stage process: an initial review of titles and abstracts, followed by full-text assessment for studies that met the inclusion threshold.

The selection process was guided by pre-established inclusion and exclusion criteria designed to ensure conceptual relevance and methodological quality. Inclusion criteria were developed in direct alignment with the review’s conceptual framework and research question, and focused on the following parameters:

## ***Inclusion Criteria***

<b>Search Term</b>	<b>Inclusion Criteria</b>
Play	Studies that explicitly discuss play as a pedagogical approach, conceptual lens, or developmental right within early years settings in England and comparison in the UK and international perspectives.
Pedagogy	Research examining pedagogical strategies (e.g., play-based, direct instruction, child-led, teacher-led), particularly within the EYFS or Reception class
EYFS	Sources that engage with any iteration of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2008–2023), including associated policy documents like <i>Development Matter</i> , <i>Birth to Five Matters</i> .
School Readiness	Literature that critiques, supports, or problematises the concept of school readiness as a shaping force in policy or practice within early years education
Policy	Articles or reports analysing national policy frameworks (e.g., Ofsted publications, DfE guidance, government strategy documents) relevant to early childhood
Datafication	Empirical or theoretical studies exploring assessment regimes, performance metrics, or data-driven practices such as GLD and Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)
Accountability	Literature that considers how inspection regimes (e.g., Ofsted), performativity, and compliance-driven approaches influence curriculum and practitioner autonomy
Professional Identity	Research examining the evolving role and self-perception of early years practitioners, including issues of agency, autonomy, and pedagogical decision-making

## ***Exclusion Criteria included***

<b>Search Term</b>	<b>Exclusion Criteria</b>
Geographic Scope	Not related to the English or international early years context within terms of play and pedagogy
Topic Relevance	Did not explicitly discuss play, pedagogy, or their interaction with policy or beliefs
Policy Framework	Omitted references to EYFS or associated policy documents
Theoretical Scope	Used solely biomedical or behaviourist framings without sociocultural perspectives
Publication Type	Blogs, opinion pieces, or non-reviewed commentary, excluding articles on policy.
Age Range	Focused on children older than 6 years
Conceptual Focus	General education reforms not related to early years
Time Frame	Published prior to 2008 (unless historically significant)
Language	Not available in English

In addition to thematic alignment, studies were included if they met the following general criteria:

- Publication Date: Published between 2008 and 2025 (post-introduction of the EYFS framework);
- Geographic Context: Focused on the English early years education system, and international perspectives on play and pedagogy;
- Age Range: Addressed early childhood provision for children aged 0–5 years;
- Content Type: Peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical research, conceptual papers, policy analyses, or sector-led reports;
- Language: Published in English.

Studies that met these criteria were retained for full-text analysis and inclusion in the review synthesis. Those failing to meet one or more of these standards were excluded based on the exclusion criteria listed in the subsequent section.

### ***Phase 4: Evidence Evaluation***

All retained studies were subjected to quality appraisal using adapted criteria from the EPPI-Centre model (Gough et al., 2012; Harden & Thomas, 2005). Studies were assessed for methodological transparency, alignment with the research question, theoretical coherence, and relevance to the English context. Particular attention was given to the credibility of findings, policy implications, and contribution to critical debates on play.

To support analysis, a coding matrix was developed to classify sources according to four thematic domains:

1. Political discourse and policy framing
2. Curriculum control and standardisation
3. Practitioner agency and professional identity
4. Conceptualisation and positioning of play

Coding was conducted independently by the team members, with discrepancies resolved through collaborative discussion to ensure reflexivity and consistency. Thematic analysis followed an iterative, constant comparative method, allowing emergent themes to be continually refined.

### ***Phase 5: Synthesis and Reporting***

A draft synthesis of findings was compiled and shared with academic collaborators and early years professionals for validation. Feedback was used to refine the thematic structure, ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, and enhance the interpretive validity of the review. This final phase ensured that the synthesis remained grounded in both academic rigour and sector relevance.

The review drew on three core categories of data:

- Academic literature: Google Scholar, Scopus, ResearchGate, and peer-reviewed journals;
- Government and inspection reports: Bold Beginnings (Ofsted, 2017), EYFS revisions (DfE, 2008–2023), SEED programme reports, and EPPE/EPPSE findings.
-

Sector reviews and professional outputs: Getting it Right in the Early Years (Pascal et al., 2019), BERA-TACTYC Review (2017), Ofsted Annual Review: Early Education and Disadvantage (2012), and Best Start in Life (2022–2024).

This triangulation of academic, policy, and sectoral sources ensured a rich and critically diverse evidence base through which to examine the shifting role of play in English early childhood pedagogy.

## **Review Process**

The review followed a structured and transparent process, informed by the principles of Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA). This approach allowed for a balance between rigour and timeliness, ensuring the review was systematic while remaining responsive to current debates in early years education.

### **1. Scoping**

- The research team collaboratively defined the focus of the review around the central question: How is play conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood pedagogy in England, and how do policy, practice, and professional beliefs shape its role?
- Five sub-questions were identified, focusing on EYFS revisions, accountability and assessment, school readiness tensions, practitioner agency, and counter-narratives.

### **2. Systematic Search**

- Searches were conducted across academic databases (e.g. Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, Scopus, ResearchGate), policy sources (DfE publications, Ofsted reports), and sector-led outputs (Birth to Five Matters, Play Matters).
- Boolean search strings combined terms such as play, pedagogy, EYFS, school readiness, accountability, datafication, and professional identity.

### **3. Screening and Selection**

- Inclusion criteria: English early years context (2008–2025), literature addressing play and pedagogy in relation to policy, practice, or professional identity.
- Exclusion criteria: studies not relevant to England, those without a clear focus on play/pedagogy, or purely biomedical/behaviourist framings.
- Both peer-reviewed and grey literature were included to reflect the richness of policy and practice debates.

### **4. Quality Appraisal**

- Studies were appraised using adapted EPPI-Centre criteria, assessing methodological transparency, conceptual clarity, and relevance to the review aims.
- Particular weight was given to research that critically engaged with policy developments and practitioner experiences.

### **5. Thematic Synthesis**

- Evidence was coded and organised into four overarching domains:
  - i. Political discourse and policy framing
  - ii. Curriculum control and standardisation
  - iii. Practitioner agency and professional identity
  - iv. Conceptualisation and positioning of play
- Findings were then mapped against the five sub-questions to ensure alignment with the review aims.

### **6. Validation and Reflexivity**

- Draft findings were shared with academic experts and early years professionals for feedback, ensuring sector relevance and interpretive validity.
- The process was underpinned by critical reflexivity, recognising the political and ideological dimensions of early childhood education research.

## Results and Findings

### ***Synthesising the Evidence: Conceptualising, Valuing, and Enacting Play in England’s Early Years Landscape***

The literature reviewed offers a nuanced and critical account of how play is conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood pedagogy in England, revealing a complex interplay between national policy frameworks, professional practice, and broader ideological currents. Situated within a context increasingly shaped by accountability, standardisation, and performance-driven reform, the role of play in early learning has become a site of tension, negotiation, and resistance.

#### ***Conceptualisation of Play***

Across the literature, play is conceptualised through contrasting epistemological and political lenses. Within official policy frameworks, most notably successive iterations of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and associated guidance documents, play is acknowledged, but only superficially embedded (DfE, 2012; 2021; 2023). References to play often frame it as a vehicle for achieving externally defined learning outcomes, rather than as a holistic, emergent process central to child development and wellbeing. This instrumental view contrasts sharply with perspectives grounded in developmental theory, Froebelian pedagogy, and sociocultural approaches, which conceptualise play as relational, creative, and agentic (Bruce, 2012; Wood, 2020; Zhou, 2024). Scholars have argued that play, when authentically embedded, facilitates meaning-making, cultural participation, and identity formation, qualities notably absent in performativity-oriented policy discourse (Hedges et al., 2018; Hertkupu et al., 2022). At the heart of this review lies the contested conceptualisation of play itself. In developmental and sociocultural theory, play is framed as a fundamental mode of learning—supporting emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, creativity, and social development (Bruce, 2012; Hedges et al., 2018). However, under policy scrutiny, play is often reframed as either a tool for targeted learning or a non-essential activity to be scheduled around formal instruction. What emerges is a layered picture: play is simultaneously upheld as pedagogically sound, politically sidelined, professionally contested, and practically constrained. As the literature reveals, its enactment depends on the interplay between policy conditions, institutional culture, and practitioner interpretation.

#### ***Political discourse and policy framing***

The review highlights a persistent devaluation of play in national policy rhetoric. Despite claims that the EYFS supports play-based learning, critical discourse analyses (e.g., Kay, 2021; Bradbury, 2018) show how documents such as *Bold Beginnings* (Ofsted, 2017) elevate direct teaching, assessment, and “short, sharp” instructional sessions, marginalising play as recreational or secondary. The statistical disparity in policy texts, e.g., the term “play” appearing 20 times in EYFS compared to over 200 in Scotland’s *Realising the Ambition* (2020), underscores this misalignment in educational priorities.

In contrast, early years practitioners and researchers consistently articulate play as a pedagogical priority and developmental right. However, the value placed on play in practice is mediated by professional autonomy, institutional expectations, and inspection pressures. Many educators are forced to justify play-based pedagogy in terms palatable to a performance culture, often by evidencing outcomes that align with school readiness frameworks (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016; Turnbull, 2023). This dual valuation, intrinsic and extrinsic, reveals an ongoing struggle over the professional legitimacy of play in English early years education.

### ***Curriculum control and standardisation***

The enactment of play within early years settings is marked by considerable variability and constraint. While pockets of practice continue to nurture play-rich, relational environments, these are increasingly threatened by the dominance of standardised curricula and data-driven performance targets (Moss, 2019; Kay, 2018). Reforms to the EYFS, including the removal of the Characteristics of Effective Learning and emphasis on revised Early Learning Goals, have contributed to a pedagogical narrowing that privileges formal instruction over exploratory learning (DfE, 2021; Pascal et al., 2019).

This narrowing is further exacerbated by accountability mechanisms such as the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and Good Level of Development (GLD), which incentivise adult-led instruction and measurable outcomes from the earliest stages of education (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Studies consistently report that practitioners must adapt or limit play-based approaches to satisfy inspection criteria or prepare children for Key Stage 1 transitions, often referred to as the “schoolification” of early years (Alexander, 2009; Nicholson, 2018). This dual positioning has profound implications for how play is valued in practice. In the EYFS and associated guidance, play is rhetorically endorsed but procedurally marginalised, often reduced to structured activities led by adults. In contrast, practitioner-led frameworks such as Birth to Five Matters (Archer, 2024) offer a more expansive vision of play, rooted in children's agency, cultural context, and curiosity. These competing conceptualisations reflect broader ideological tensions between neoliberal governance and relational pedagogy.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence of pedagogical resistance. Some educators continue to enact play in creative, subversive ways, maintaining child-led approaches within the constraints of statutory frameworks. These enactments often rely on practitioner confidence, institutional support, and professional networks that reaffirm the ethical imperative of play (Bradbury et al., 2025; Wood, 2020).

### ***Practitioner agency and professional identity***

Taken together, the reviewed literature illustrates that the role of play in English early childhood pedagogy is shaped by dynamic and often conflicting forces. National policy, driven by neoliberal imperatives of efficiency, measurement, and early intervention, tends to frame play in instrumental terms. These framings position educators as curriculum deliverers rather than relational facilitators of learning, thereby narrowing pedagogical possibilities and constraining professional identity (Miller, 2008; Kay et al., 2019).

Archer (2022) introduces the concept of “bordering professionalism,” arguing that workforce policies construct narrow subject positions that reward compliance and constrain agency. Educators are increasingly positioned as implementers of curriculum rather than critical professionals, reducing their capacity to interpret and adapt pedagogy in ways that centre play. This is reinforced through inspection regimes and performance metrics that reward observable outcomes rather than deep learning processes.

Yet, the review also highlights moments of resistance. Practitioners have developed strategies to subvert policy narratives, for example, by embedding child-led play within required observational formats or reinterpreting assessment criteria in developmentally appropriate ways. Archer (2024) further demonstrates how collective practitioner advocacy, as exemplified in the co-construction of Birth to Five Matters, can reclaim play as a central and legitimate pedagogical mode. This guidance challenges the deficit-focused, outcomes-driven discourse of state policy by asserting a holistic vision of education rooted in children's rights and educators' professional knowledge.

Conversely, practitioner beliefs often align with relational, developmental, and rights-based understandings of play. These beliefs are grounded in both theoretical knowledge and embodied practice but are frequently compromised by institutional demands for documentation, outcomes, and compliance. The resulting tension manifests in daily decision-making, where educators must balance professional ethics with policy expectations (Feeney & Freeman, 2016; Turnbull, 2023).

Thus, play is not only a pedagogical concern but a political one. Its conceptualisation, value, and enactment reveal broader struggles over the purpose of early education, the nature of childhood, and the autonomy of the workforce. The literature affirms the need to reclaim play as a legitimate, non-negotiable feature of early years education, one that honours children's agency, supports practitioner professionalism, and resists reductive policy narratives.

## Evidence-to-Action Matrix

The evidence-to-action matrix provides a clear map of how the findings from this review translate into practical recommendations. Each of the five sub-questions used to structure the review highlights a specific area where play has been conceptualised, valued, or constrained within England’s early years policy and practice. The matrix shows how the ten proposed action points link directly to these themes, ensuring that recommendations are grounded in evidence rather than presented in isolation.

For example, the theme of Revisions to the EYFS and the Value of Play connects to recommendations that call for play to be reasserted in policy frameworks and for research evidence to inform future revisions. Similarly, the theme of Accountability and Assessment Mechanisms aligns with action points on rebalancing GLD and RBA, ensuring that these measures do not continue to narrow pedagogy.

The theme of Tensions Between School Readiness and Play-Based Pedagogy demonstrates the need for more balanced approaches that integrate play with purposeful teaching while safeguarding children’s rights. In turn, Practitioner Agency and Professional Identity points towards the need to strengthen autonomy, invest in professional development, and amplify practitioner voices in decision-making. Finally, the theme of Conceptualisation of Play brings together several action points, highlighting that how play is understood, whether as a right, a pedagogical principle, or a tool for outcomes, has profound implications for practice.

By linking evidence directly to actions, the matrix offers a practical bridge between research findings and policy or practice change. It ensures that the recommendations are not abstract but are clearly tied to the lived issues identified in the literature, supporting policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to respond in targeted and meaningful ways.

### Evidence-to-Action Matrix

Sub-question / Theme	Linked Action Points	Explanation of Link
<b>1. Revisions to the EYFS and the Value of Play</b>	1. Reassert play in policy frameworks 7. Bridge research and policy	EYFS revisions have reframed play as supplementary; policy must explicitly embed play, informed by robust research.
<b>2. Accountability and Assessment Mechanisms</b>	2. Rebalance accountability measures 7. Bridge research and policy 10. Commission further research	GLD and RBA have entrenched datafication; reforms and new research are needed to ensure accountability supports play.
<b>3. Tensions Between School Readiness and Play-Based Pedagogy</b>	3. Promote balanced pedagogy 5. Embed children’s rights in practice	Policy often pits play against school readiness; guidance must affirm both rights-based and balanced pedagogical approaches.
<b>4. Practitioner Agency and Professional Identity</b>	4. Strengthen practitioner autonomy 8. Invest in ongoing professional development 9. Amplify practitioner and child voices	Practitioners face compliance pressures; autonomy, CPD, and recognition of professional/child voice are key to reclaiming play.
<b>5. Conceptualisation of Play</b>	1. Reassert play in policy frameworks 3. Promote balanced pedagogy 5. Embed children’s rights in practice 7. Bridge research and policy 9. Amplify practitioner and child voices	How play is understood shapes pedagogy; play must be conceptualised as a right, a pedagogical principle, and informed by lived practice.

## **Conclusion**

This review has critically examined how play has been conceptualised, valued, and enacted within early childhood education and care in England between 2010 and 2025. Across the evidence base, a consistent narrative emerges: play, once central to early years pedagogy, has been progressively subordinated to the imperatives of accountability, school readiness, and performative measurement. While the EYFS continues to reference play, the weight of evidence demonstrates that these references are rhetorical rather than substantive, with statutory revisions and inspection frameworks privileging direct teaching, phonics, and numeracy over open-ended, child-led experiences.

The implications of this trajectory are significant. First, curriculum narrowing risks eroding the breadth and richness of early childhood experiences, reducing play to an instrument for meeting externally defined outcomes rather than recognising it as a developmental right. Second, the increasing datafication of children's learning through mechanisms such as the GLD and Reception Baseline Assessment shifts the focus of pedagogy from relationships and exploration to compliance and measurement. Third, the professional autonomy of practitioners has been systematically constrained, with educators positioned as deliverers of outcomes rather than reflective pedagogues. This redefinition of professionalism fragments identity and undermines the relational, responsive ethos historically embedded in early years practice.

Yet, the review also reveals counter-currents. Sector-led initiatives such as Birth to Five Matters and Play Matters illustrate the capacity of the profession to collectively resist reductive policy framings and reassert play as a non-negotiable pedagogical principle. These movements underscore that the conceptualisation of play is not fixed but contested, situated within broader ideological struggles over the purpose of early childhood education. Where policy aligns play with economic productivity and future attainment, practitioners and researchers continue to defend it as central to wellbeing, agency, and democratic participation.

The evidence also highlights unevenness. While there is a strong body of research critiquing policy reforms and documenting their effects on curriculum and professional identity, there are notable gaps in empirical studies capturing children's own perspectives and longitudinal data on the consequences of diminishing play. This absence is itself significant, suggesting that children's voices remain marginalised in both research and policy debates that directly affect them.

Taken together, these findings point to a fundamental contradiction in England's early years landscape: the rhetorical endorsement of play within national frameworks versus its practical erosion through accountability-driven structures. This contradiction demands urgent attention. Reclaiming play requires more than rhetorical recognition; it necessitates structural change in policy, inspection, and professional development. Unless play is defended as both a right and a pedagogical necessity, there is a risk that early childhood education will continue to be reshaped into a preparatory stage for schooling, stripped of the relational, creative, and exploratory dimensions that are essential to young children's learning and lives.

In conclusion, play in England's early years remains at a crossroads. The direction taken will determine not only the character of early childhood education but also the extent to which the sector honours children's rights, practitioner professionalism, and the democratic purpose of education itself.

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