Spaces of early education and care: exploring ethos, choice and parental engagement

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Abstract

The Early Years period is increasingly acknowledged as an important building block for the successful education of the child. Political interest in the Early Years stems not only from envisaging early education as an investment to ensure responsible, productive and aspirational citizens, but also as a way of governing the family through forms of surveillance. Despite its importance, there is a paucity of academic research which examines the role Early Years education plays in social reproduction. This thesis fills this lacunae through an examination of the diversity of the Early Years landscape and its implications for parental involvement. The research draws upon the voices of both parents and professionals, with interviews conducted across four settings with different educational ethoses in one town. The participants typify the under-represented 'just about managing' (May, 2016) class, which is neither rich nor poor. The focus on this group, living in a small deindustrialised town, provides an original contribution as both these populations and locations are under researched in the literature. In a progressively privatised and diverse market, parents must choose between childcare settings. However, the research findings demonstrate that they are unable to act as truly Neo-liberal, rational citizens because their decisions are influenced by emotions and human-interactions. The market landscape exemplifies a multiplicity of different ethoses around the education and care of the child which are communicated through the practice and provision in these individual settings. Conversations with parents and professionals explored the implications for children that stem from this diversity. This thesis has illustrated that parents' choices impact even very young children, and thus proposes that the association between class and educational outcome starts prior to school age. The increasingly interventionist role of the state, accompanied by emphasis on parents to take responsibility for children's outcomes was examined. This illustrated the complex interplay of power shared by and between professionals and families as each sought to influence the other to achieve a shared vision of early education. This thesis has demonstrated that parents of even young children are expected to take an active role in their children's home learning in a way that was previously associated with older children. In doing so it has illustrated the challenge for Early Years settings in achieving levels of engagement that respect the individual capacity of each parent, based on their social, cultural and financial capital. Regardless of their class position, this thesis showed that different techniques were employed by mothers, which demonstrate their ability to be powerful advocates for their children by influencing, and at times exploiting the Early Years workforce. In conclusion, the thesis highlights the three innovative contributions the research makes to: Geographies of Education; Geographies of Children, Youth and Families; and the Sociology of Education.

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the policy emphasis on the state's need to provide childcare to help disadvantaged children was overtaken by the notion that the private sector has an important role to play in providing childcare for working mothers (Moss et al.., 2000). Today, the dominant discourse has shifted once again as greater weight is being placed upon the value childcare has in educating, rather than minding, children. This attention stems from the growing acknowledgement that early experiences are crucial for brain development, as influenced by the work of neuroscience, developmental psychology and early childhood studies (EPPE, 2004; DfE, 2011). Social investment perspectives have influenced policy, envisaging children as future workers and discouraging welfare dependency. These policies have brought sustained interventions in family life, parenting and Early Years education, as this is seen to have the potential to break cycles of reproduced disadvantage. Implementation of this agenda has necessitated the increasing promotion, politicisation and formalisation of the early years' curriculum and a professionalisation of the workforce in order to help children start their primary education 'school ready' (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006; Lister, 2003, Cameron et al.., 2002, Gallagher, 2013c).

There is much debate about what 'school readiness' means and there is presently no nationally set baseline which defines the term (OFSTED, 2014). Consequently, definitions and expectations differ depending on the pedagogical approaches that inform the ethos of individual settings. Recent reports, however, have arbitrarily surmised that a child is school ready if they are able to participate in the curriculum and school life upon reaching compulsory school age (NAHT, 2017). The age appropriateness of some school ready expectations has been questioned, with critiques levied on the potentially negative effects they can have on family life and children's wellbeing (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012). It is noteworthy that this emphasis on the need for state intervention in some families' lives, in order to ensure the proper education of children, has emerged alongside a contradictory neoliberal discourse which recasts parents as expert consumers with individual responsibilities to source and support their children's early years' education. Neither discourses around parents as deficient, nor those

concerned with parents as consumers, acknowledges the diverse and challenging contexts in which parenting is performed (Vincent et al., 2010b; Wainwright and Marandet, 2017).

1.2 Research question and aims

Geographical interest in childcare focuses on the changing role and expectations of mothers within the workforce and ideas of good citizenship which promote paid work over re-productive labour (Gallagher, 2013a; Wainwright et al.., 2011, Braun et al.., 2008; Power, 2005; Lister, 2006). This interest has therefore concentrated on early years provision as a form of substitute maternal care and has examined the subsequent, and implicitly gendered, challenges women face in both choosing and balancing employment alongside childcare arrangements (Holloway, 1998; 1999, England, 1996; Dyck, 1990, McDowell et al.., 2005). Social constructions of childhood (Jenks, 1996) have provoked geographers to conceptualise idealised spaces for children based on women's preferences (Duncan, 2004, Vincent and Ball, 2001), which are influenced by pervasive discourses around attachment (Bowlby, 1969), as well as social and cultural influences on our definitions of 'good mothering' (Braun et al.., 2008; Vincent, 2004). Other research has explored the relationships and emotions within institutional and politicised spaces, for example in Sure Start Centres (Horton and Kraftl, 2009; 2011, Jupp, 2013). The influence of policy has also been explored in other contexts, such as schools (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017; 2016) and in its reach into family life through forms of governance, surveillance and 'nudging' (Thaler and Sustein, 2008) behaviour-change initiatives (Jones et al. 2010, 2011; Pykett 2013, Lavelle 2015).

However, there is presently a lacuna within the geographical literature in thinking about family settings and childcare as forms of early education. Geographers have not fully engaged with the fact policy influences in the form of the early years curriculum (The Early Years Foundation Stage), and increased regulation from The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), have professionalised the workforce and now shape the practices and provision within individual settings in diverse and interesting ways. Expectations for children around school readiness in line with social investment perspectives that envisage the child as a future worker mean that it is not only primary education, but also early education that has a focus on formal learning. There is, therefore, an urgent need to explore how this drive towards school readiness is negotiated and translated into practice by individual settings with diverse education ethoses.

In line with the increased political interest in early education is the sustained scrutiny on parenting, this is mobilised through the semi-permeable boundaries that are now encouraged between educational settings and the home. Research is required to examine the role of parents as co-educators and the individualistic, neoliberal policy climate that encourages them to act as experts in their children's education, in ways that have been traditionally expected only for parents of older children. These expectations of parents disregard the diverse contexts in which parenting is performed, but classed and geographical differences warrant academic attention as they influence children's achievements in their earliest years through the transmission of capital and continued cycles of disadvantage.

This research proposes to attend to these lacunas by focusing on the experiences of parents and professionals within family and childcare settings which represent diverse spaces of early education and care with varied learning ethoses. Only by listening to the voices of professionals as they articulate the ways they negotiate and translate their educational ethos into practice can we reveal the diversity of individual settings' understanding of the purpose of early childhood education. Conversations with parents can uncover the choices parents make in selecting and using settings, and the extent to which they feel involved and engaged. By doing so, the degree to which families have been influenced by the setting in their parenting and home life can be explored. As such, the aim of this research is:

'To explore the diversity of the early years landscape and it implications for parental involvement.'

The four research questions are as follows:

- How do Early Years' professionals articulate the ethos of their different settings?

- Why do parents use Early Years' Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?

- To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years' setting?

- What expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?

1.3 Thesis structure

Chapter two will situate the thesis within the wider academic literature by examining the feminisation of the labour force and the subsequent promotion of pre-school education which has in turn impacted on the role of parents.

The methodological process discussed in chapter three reflects on the use of interviews with parents and professionals, and the feminist epistemological standpoint taken by the researcher. The rigorous process of designing the interview schedule demonstrates the mapping of the research questions and how this subsequently informed the interview schedule. The chapter concludes with a reflection of the researcher's positionality, which revealed interesting considerations about her status as an Early Years Educator and researcher who became pregnant with her first child during the research process.

The empirical findings from the research are presented in chapter four, five and six. Chapter four examines the individual ethos of each Early Years' Setting, in particular exploring the way this was negotiated and communicated by professionals in their every day practices and interactions with parents. Chapter five discusses mothers' experiences of leaving the home sphere and participating in paid work and the subsequent arrangement of replacement care in their absence by examining their choice processes. Chapter six explores the way that parents engage in partnership with professionals, and take on the role of co-educators via various parental engagement strategies developed in the settings.

Chapter seven draws together the main findings of this thesis and reflects on the existing literature to explore the original contributions made by this research. The discussion is presented in four parts which reflect the themes that were identified in the research; setting ethos, choice, power and the professionalisation of parenting.

Chapter eight presents the conclusions of the thesis. This chapter concludes that Early Years settings have diverse, and sometimes poorly articulated, ethoses that are translated imperfectly through professionals, influenced by policy messages and individual experiences and professional understandings. The idea that parents have a landscape of choice for their decision making for their young children is presented as a fallacy, with the ability of parents to be truly Neo-liberal and individualistic critiqued. The increasingly normalised, classed expectations for parents has demonstrated that even in the Early Years, parents are required to engage in their young children's learning. Further, Early Years settings are demonstrated as sites of control and regulation, where professionals and parents exercise power over themselves and each other in subtle and classed ways.

2.1 Introduction

This review of the literature combines an exploration of the sub-disciplines of Geographies of Children, Youth and Families, Geographies of Education and Sociology of Education. Research within the sub-discipline of Geographies of Children, Youth and Families explores the experiences of children and families in diverse geographical contexts, examining the spaces where socio-spatial ideas and practices emerge, which include the home, schools, and public spaces. Geographies of Education are concerned with the importance of spatiality in the construction and consumption of education, which includes: 'provision, take-up, quality of and outputs from educational resources.' (Gregory et al., 2009, p.186). Research within the Sociology of Education focuses on the structures, processes and interactions that occur within educational institutions.

In reviewing these three bodies of work, this chapter focuses on three themes: the feminisation of the labour market, the promotion of pre-school education and the changing role of the parent. The feminisation of the labour force has led to more women in paid employment, thus necessitating the use of replacement maternal care in the form of childcare. Simultaneously, there has been a reimagining of the purpose of early education, and pre-school experience is now promoted as an important factor in school readiness and reducing inequalities and cycles of disadvantage. The role of the parent has changed and parents are now tasked as 'partners' and 'co-educators' in their child's early learning experiences, as encouraged by childcare settings and Early Years Professionals. Each of the sub-disciplines detailed above explore these changes from their own perspectives, this chapter explores these, including the way space and place influence educational experience as well as how both children and their families' individual experiences shape the way they interact with education.

Research within Geographies of Children, Youth and Families is inspired by feminism, motherhood and children, and the changing nature of women's lives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Women are now included into the connecting spheres of family, home and employment: 'offering new capacitated and equalised futures to be activated by achieving subjects' (Taylor, 2012, p. 66). Feminist geographers argue that a twentieth-century Fordist model of gender-work relations positioned childcare firmly as the mother's responsibility within the home (Boyer, 2012). In the post-war period the male breadwinner/female caregiver model was dominant, placing women in the private sphere and men in the labour market. However, over the last twenty years (Holloway et al., 2011) there has been an increasing feminisation of the labour force across the Global North, this is partly in response to feminist and cultural trends which highlighted the lack of equality in a system in which women were financially reliant on their male partners. More recently, due to economic downturns increasing numbers of women have turned to paid employment in order to provide a second income for their household. In the U.K. the proportion of families dependent on only a single wage earner has decreased from 42% in 1975 (McDowell et al., 2005) to 23% in 2016 (IFS, 2017). This has necessitated a new focus on the way women negotiate the balance between childcare and paid work, and on the relations between working parents and the substitute care they choose for their children.

Being in, or getting into, employment has been promoted as the main route out of poverty (DfES, 2004; HMT, 2009), a key aspect of neo-liberal social policy. As Lister (2006) explains, participation in paid work is thus a key component to achieving 'full citizenship' and social and economic participation in society. Geographers have examined how neo-liberal social policy has forced citizens to be individualistic and take responsibility for the trajectory of their own life, so that 'the ability to improve the conditions of your life are in your hands' (Gallagher, 2013b, p.162). These social and cultural changes have all contributed to the increased participation of women in paid work. In line with this changing political and economic expectation around women's employment (McDowell et al., 2005) there has been a re-envisioning in policy on the role of the mother and the education of the child (Gallagher, 2013a). This has been explored by geographers such as Wainwright et al. (2011) who argued that U.K. government policy is increasingly shaped around its citizens as potential workers, where the 'good mother' is associated with engagement in paid employment which is valued over re-productive labour.

The feminisation of the labour force has opened up new spaces of care for children, outside of the home. For geographers this presents a new challenge to explore the way women's paid employment changes our historic, spatially and socially specific understandings about good mothering and the spaces babies and young children should occupy (Ansell, 2009; Holloway, 1999).

2.2.1 Substitution for absent maternal care

The need for care outside the home brought about by the increasing numbers of women entering the labour market has meant 'childcare has become a critical service located at the centre of new work incentivisation strategies, as a means of 'freeing up' unemployed parent(s) to pursue retraining and to allow them to (re)join the labour market' (Gallagher, 2013b, p.162). Childcare has become a public, rather than private concern, since the inability to care for children within the family has changed how, and who cares for children. This is because as demand for childcare has risen so too have the concerns over the lack of quality and availability of childcare places, with the 1980's described by The Daycare Trust (2007) as a 'childcare desert' (p.3). Despite government initiatives to increase childcare provision there are geographical differences in the amount of, and quality of affordable childcare places (Penn and Randall, 2005).

Feminists have long argued that motherhood is a socially constructed experience, but it has not been a major focus within geography despite motherhood being both spatially and temporally variable (Holloway, 1998). Feminist geographers argue that the outsourcing of care labour has produced new intra-gender inequalities in society as the expanding childcare work-force is made up of some of the lowest paid women in society reflecting 'a growing gap in employment and pay opportunities *between* women, more than between men and women' (Gallagher, 2013b, p.166). A range of scholarship has outlined the low power positions held by childcare professionals as well as the low value ascribed to their work (Cameron et al., 2002; Elfer, 2015). Indeed, one review highlighted the salary discrepancies between Early Years Professionals and primary school teachers, and the associated struggle to employ high calibre graduates (Family and Childcare Trust, 2016).

Geographers have also been interested in the impacts of childcare provision for parents as service users, considering the impacts of uneven provisioning for working households and their consequent differential access to employment (Dyck, 1990; England, 1996, McDowell et al., 2005). Van Ham and Mulder (2005) argue that limited access to childcare is an important factor in reducing women's ability to participate in the labour market as they must

negotiate the location of their work and child care providers in order to meet drop off and pick up times around their working hours. Feminist writers have sought to explore the way in which responsibility for childcare rests almost entirely on mothers, aiming to illuminate the impact negotiating childcare alongside paid work has on women (Vincent and Ball, 2001; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). However, the gender neutral language of 'parents' and 'parenting' in government policy discourses obscures the gendered implications of family and social policy (Featherstone, 2006; Lister, 2006). This is disappointing because in most contexts mothers continue to 'shoulder the lion's share' (Braun et al., 2008, p.536) of responsibility for the care and education of their young children.

2.2.2 Childcare: the landscape of choice

Rising maternal employment means parents, particularly mothers, have to make choices about how to reconcile the care of their children with employment commitments that may require challenging flexibility. Sociologists often use the metaphor 'the landscape of choice' to illustrate the varied and multi-layered contexts childcare decisions require (Ball and Vincent, 1998, p.391). 'Childcare' refers to formal care such as nurseries, pre-schools, children's Centres and child minders, as well as informal care where childcare responsibilities are given to family, friends or neighbours, often free of charge or in exchange for reciprocal childcare agreements. Private care is usually in the form of day nurseries and childminders which offer flexible sessions in response to parents' employment requirements (Gorry and Thomas, 2017). The voluntary sector provides play-groups or play-schools which are usually less expensive but offer shorter sessions and normally on a term-time basis for children aged three and over. The state-maintained sector provides local authority nurseries or nursery schools, often attached to or in the grounds of existing primary schools, which are led by qualified teachers with a strong emphasis on preparing children to be school ready (OFSTED, 2014). Sure Start Centres, were a New Labour UK Government programme that began in 1998 with the aim of tackling social exclusion and child poverty by the provision of multi-agency programmes in 'deprived' localities for children (under five) and their families. Typically, Sure Start Centres are either purpose built or refurbished institutional spaces with integrated services, which aim to meet the particular needs of the neighbourhood (Jupp, 2013; Horton and Kraftl, 2011). All of these formal settings are inspected by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) where practice and provision is observed, assessed against standards and where necessary notice is given and progress monitored. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the statutory curriculum for under-fives is adhered to, and typically all settings follow this. The intention of OFSTED and the EYFS is

to monitor quality of practice and provision, and ensure safeguarding standards (GOV, 2014b). Inspection results are published and can facilitate parental decision making about child care choices.

The consumerism of childcare can be traced back to 1979 when Margaret Thatcher began to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' (Butler and Hamnett, 2011, p.480). Less state support allowed individuals greater freedom to exercise choice in the market. As such, users of services were repositioned as consumers in an increasingly 'DIY' welfare state (Gallagher 2013b). The Labour Government (1997-2010) was committed to this consumerist role for parents and a mixed economy of provision in childcare, with financial subsidies, such as tax credits, offered to (lower income) parents, to help them 'buy' childcare (Vincent et al., 2010b), and some tax relief was available to employed parents in the form of salary sacrifice childcare vouchers. Despite some state intervention, in today's neo-liberal climate the majority of childcare is still private and expensive, and most parents are expected to take responsibility for choosing and using care, with limited intervention from the welfare state (Ruddick, 2007). Through exercising their agency as 'rational economic actors', parents are expected to regulate both the type of services required and the cost of such services (Gallagher, 2014, p.1110). This form of neo-liberalism has given parents the responsibility to source care (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017), and led to a market of 'choice' between mostly private provision. Despite the supposed benefits of a free market there are many critiques; not least that the 'reliance on market mechanisms to fuel and regulate a childcare sector has served to produce patchy and limited provision with soaring care costs for parents' (Gallagher 2013b, p.164). Changes in working patterns, in particular around mother's employment necessitates that most working parents still need to source childcare from across the diverse economies of care which often necessitates a combination of private, voluntary, maintained and informal care to fit around the needs of the parent's working day (NCSR, 2006).

Mothers' choices around paid work and childcare are socially and culturally created because parenting is not practiced in isolation (Holloway, 1998), rather choices 'become social moralities [that are in turn] geographically and historically articulated' (Duncan, 2005, p.72). Sociologists have focused on how choice is particularly problematic for some groups of parents, because the assumption that choice is something which can be exercised equally by all has been shown to be flawed. The Coalition government accepted that there were problems and barriers in equal access to childcare, but located the blame with parents. These parents were understood to lack adequate knowledge of make informed decisions about their child's early care and education. In response, the recommendations from the DfE (2015a) report into the information available to parents on childcare options noted there was a need to improve

the guidance for parents in choosing between different types of setting. The report acknowledged:

> 'while people generally welcome choice, there are a minority of people who – for a variety of reasons – are excluded from the benefits this can bring often because they lack the confidence, the information, or the advice they need to make the most of them…while educational standards matter to parents, so too does behaviour, atmosphere and other key factors. The information offered to parents, however, does not recognise all of these concerns' (DfE, 2015a, p.23)

Nevertheless, Vincent et al. (2008) maintain that income variation is a significant predictor in shaping the ability of parents to choose between different childcare services.

Policy messages that promote the importance of children having a pre-school experience (which is further explored in section 3.0) mean that parents individualise the responsibility to source provision that not only works around their employment commitments, but also provides a good standard of early education. In relation to school education, research has demonstrated that parents' ability 'to play' the school choice system is clearly classed: '[middle class] families are generally skilled consumers…possessing and able to activate appropriate resources of economic, social and cultural capital to help them realise, as far as possible, their preferences' (Vincent et al., 2010b, p.290). The middle class parent is described as being 'an informed and active consumer of care and education services' (ibid, p. 282) and a 'self-directing individual agent encountering a multiplicity of possibilities created by many providers' (Clarke et al., 2006, p.327). Middle class parents are more likely to use their cultural capital, as well as their social capital; their social networks and 'personal contacts and influence' (McDowell et al., 2006, p.2179) in their choice processes.

Working class families, as McDowell et al. (2006) argued, have more limited means and so are at a disadvantage compared with middle class parents in regards to building up social circles and networks. A perceived lack of entitlement can make it difficult for working class families to comply with the free market spirit of choice. The landscape of choice thus enables the reproduction of middle class privileges as the economic, cultural and social capital possessed by the middle classes allows them to engage in exclusionary practices (Reay, 2004). In doing so, the middle classes successfully mobilise choice in a Neo-liberal system which 'whilst sounding progressive, positive and beneficial, has worked discursively to sanction and exacerbate inequalities' (Reay, 2012, p.592). Indeed, OFSTED's 2012/13 annual review of the Early Years sector acknowledges that choice is not equitable across all families:

"The choice of an Early Years provider can be too difficult …There is too much complexity in the words we use to talk about early education and childcare, how we compare quality, and how we publish details about providers. All these need to be much simpler, clearer and more accessible, particularly to those families whose children would most benefit from access to the highest quality provision" (OFSTED, 2013, p.8)

Furthermore, as Reay (2012) states the current policy values choice, whilst simultaneously failing to recognise that choices come from resources that remain unequally distributed.

This reading of the geographical and sociological literature demonstrates that though Neo-liberal subjects are forced to be individualistic in sourcing care their decisions are not rational, or economic, but rather determined by their class and social and cultural capital. This discourse suggests that Neo-liberal subjects have a landscape of choice for their decision making is deeply flawed, given that provision is patchy, diverse and poorly articulated. Middle class parents have been shown to be skilled consumers and their ability to mobilise their choices further divides the most and least advantaged children. However, even for middle class parents possessing the ability to choose is not without costs, as childcare in the private sector is expensive (Roberts and Speight, 2017).

Although reviews of childcare cite the importance of cost (Rutter and Stocker, 2014; Roberts and Speight, 2017), in Vincent and Ball's (2001) study the mothers spoke emotionally about the choices they had made; unlike most market relationships which result in financial transactions, these transactions are particularly personal and embodied and not necessarily rational. These decisions are made in a market described as 'theatres of emotion' (ibid, p.643). In Duncan and Strell's (2004) research on combining motherhood with employment in Norway, they identify that policy making is dominated by the assumption that mothers are rational economic actors who make 'individual utility calculations about the costs and benefits of taking up paid work' (p.41), which they term a 'rationality mistake', because the assumption is that a mother's rationale is the same as an 'rational economic man', and of course, rational economic man does not exist. This discourse assumes a-priori how mothers behave, believing that parents' decisions about childcare and paid work is individualistic and impersonal (Vincent et al., 2010b). This is despite it being shown that people do not make rational or economic decisions in response to policy change, but rather they make reference to their moral and social views. Decisions thus vary between the habitus of social groups, neighbourhoods and welfare states (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Glover, 2002; Himmelweit, 2002; Neale and Smart, 2002; Duncan et al., 2003a). Though many of the mothers in Vincent and Ball's (2001) study were not financially restricted, they communicated a deep sense of unease in negotiating care where there was a strong emphasis on a financial transaction. One mother described a nanny as

'cold and calculating' (ibid, p.643), a nanny agency as operating like an estate agent with no concern for the individual needs of the mother or child, and nurseries that were too 'businessy' (ibid, p.643).

2.2.3 'Good mother' discourses and the adult worker model

Choices regarding care are seen as an important part of mothers' perceptions of their place within 'good mother' discourses. Mothers' attitudes towards the acceptability of being in employment have changed in line with the observed behaviour of other mothers with preschool age children. Mothers internalise a dual pressure to be both good mothers and good workers (Vincent et al., 2010a). Mothers' decision making regarding the balance between work and home is influenced by mothering identities they observe in friends and families, and within their cultural and ethnic groups (Braun et al., 2008). However, the process of choice surrounding childcare is set within a wider context of decision making by women concerning the conditions of their employment after childbirth. The general trend for mothers with young children to engage in paid employment has impacted on some social groups more than others, with employment being more likely if mothers live in a couple household; have higher qualifications; and are white (Vincent and Ball, 2001). There are strongly classed state-generated discourses about 'not good enough' and 'bad' mothers in regards to employment and mothering, despite the difficulties and complexities of many working class mothers' lives, which Vincent et al. (2010a) describe as being 'pervaded by fragilities and constraints' (p.128)

Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) demonstrate that as employment rates of mothers with young children has risen, fewer mothers have been concerned about potential negative effects of Early Years settings on their children. In Braun et al.'s (2008) study, working class women were interviewed about their return to work after motherhood. In general, part-time childcare was described positively, as offering something the mother alone could not, and as allowing the mother and child to have independence from each other: 'the government message that being part of the labour market should be a positive and defining aspect of every adult's life has thus been taken aboard…In this framing, work provides diversity and offers an independent adult identity' (ibid, p.539). Mothers in a similar study by Vincent et al. (2010a) described work as a way of providing a better life for their children and that 'acting responsibly' (p.134) helped them to be positive role models to their children and improved their feelings of self-worth and pride. However, although middle class mothers also described work positively, despite being able to survive on their partners income (McDowell et al., 2006), there was less acknowledgement of the importance of childcare as making up for their personal deficits as

mothers. Instead, the mothers' positivity stemmed from their recognition that their personal identities were shaped by their professional employment. However, these mothers were forced to compromise their working preferences because in order to continue working in a competitive market many returned to work whilst their babies were still young, and both their roles and the cost of childcare necessitated they take on long working hours.

Despite many women feeling positive about working, the balance of work and mothering is a pervading struggle. The adult worker model, whereby men and women are perceived by policy makers as primarily workers in the labour market, pooling their income, is problematic in Britain. Despite labour market shifts, gendered divisions of labour remain unequal, and women continue to take the majority of childcare responsibilities (Faircloth, 2013). McDowell et al. (2006) highlight this, describing middle class mothers working situations as a struggle with little help from their partners;

'how to combine waged employment with childcare and find satisfactory, if not ideal, replacement care was the key issue in these women's lives and all of them spoke movingly of the dilemmas that they faced[...]as arrangements broke down, transport was unreliable and, for most of them, their partners were unwilling or unable to help' (McDowell et al., 2006, p.2179).

Working class mothers expressed anxiety over the amount of time their children spent away from them and emphasised that a lack of flexibility in paid employment interfered with their role as a mother (Braun et al., 2008; Vincent et al., 2010a). This resonates with social attitudes in the UK which disapprove of mothers who work too many hours (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004), and intensive mothering discourses which prioritise mothers in the home. These discourses promote mothering that is 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive' (Hays, 1998, p.8). This intensive mothering is perhaps more achievable by middle class mothers, who with stronger positions in the labour market are better able to negotiate their working hours, and can afford to supplement their home learning environment with extra-curricular experiences (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). Mothers experience a tension between the self-worth of work and the selflessness expected of motherhood, because 'mother breadwinners are required by the economy but not desired by the moral order' (Vincent et al., 2010a, p.134). Working mothers particularly, Hays (1996) argues, are caught in a contradictory double-bind as to how best to balance two seemingly irreconcilable sets of pressures.

In Speight et al.'s (2010) study, some working class parents' preference not to use childcare was tied to the value they held for the home space and their perceived belief that their children preferred to be at home. However, most of the working class women in Braun et

al.'s (2008) study still decided to work in some way. This demonstrated a 'strong work ethic…concur[ing] with the direction of Labour Government policies which have been designed to encourage just such a transition' (p.544). However, they did not always feel positive about their employment when balanced with the cost of forfeiting state benefits and the price of good quality childcare which contributed to a preference to stay at home and look after their own children. Even if the mother's work made an important financial contribution to their households' income, the mothers' narratives positioned their children's needs first, above their own personal development or fulfilment (Braun et al., 2008). Speight et al. (2010) found that employed low income parents described their jobs as a means to an end and were uncomfortable with the idea of paying someone else to bring up their child. This is reflected in Roberts (2008) study on low income parents, where the mothers stated that the government should encourage parents to stay at home with their children when their children are young. Roberts (2008) critiqued policy documents that positioned children at home as a negative choice: 'the literature does not reflect low-income parents' prioritisation of the family' (p.32). The preferences of these working class mothers contrasted with McDowell et al.'s (2006) study where the middle class mothers spoke negatively about looking after their children full time. They felt the experience would be exhausting and isolating, that they would be depressed, that they would lose their sense of identity and miss the sense of 'being important'. This demonstrates that there is a reworking of traditional visions of maternal responsibility which take on different forms in different income and class areas; as Holloway (1999) states, combining part-time work with mothering (re)defines good mothering. These considerations demonstrate that the influence of social and economic factors on parents' attitudes to work and childcare need to be recognised as impacting on choice, engagement and expectations about Early Years settings.

2.2.4 Spaces of care

With the increasing feminisation of the labour force and the subsequent demand for substitute maternal care, parents, in particular mothers, have had difficult decisions to make about the spaces in which childcare is carried out. 'Good mothering' is associated with certain spatial preferences for care (Duncan et al., 2004). Children's Geographers looking at children's access to space have focused on play in diverse places (McKendrick et al., 2016; Horton and Kraftl, 2017). They have focused on how spaces are designed and how parenting cultures impact on children's ability to navigate their landscape, in different urban and rural environments and their perceptions of safety, protection, and children's agency. Traditionally, children's place was seen to be in the home, and the social construction of childhood was highly

spatialised. In contemporary Britain, this has changed and children now occupy a wider environment. However, preferences for home-like spaces endure (Gallagher 2013c, Gregson and Lowe, 1995; Ansell, 2009) because of pervasive discourses around attachment originating from the work of John Bowlby (1969) and colleagues.

Social constructions of childhood impact upon parents' preferences for care, and thus their decision making. During the 1980's and 1990's there was a sustained interest in the social constructions of childhood, which highlighted the dominance of essentialist assumptions that children were subjects awaiting both biological and social maturity. Jenks (1996) identified two distinct ways of thinking about childhood; Dionysian understandings of children, characteristic of 17th Century Puritanism (Murphy, 2007), framed them as 'little devils' who are inherently unruly and Apollonian views of childhood, which emerged later, perceiving children as 'angels', holding of potential skills and talents, that are worthy of adult nurturing. Both of these contrasting views of childhood exist within western societies (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b) and 'underpin diverse policy orientations towards children' (Murphy, 2007, p.108). Contemporary geographers have shown how ideas about childhood can inform our understanding of the spaces young people occupy, including the home, institutions and public spaces. With a growing emphasis now on the importance of parents educating their young children in stimulating environments which aid school readiness, it is clear that for many parents decisions are more complex than ever before. Enduring preferences for home-like spaces, previously viewed as the ideal space for children to learn and develop (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b), are therefore challenged. As such, spatial discourses are significant; they inform social-spatial practices which both challenge and reinforce notions of childhood (Holloway and Valentine, 2000a).

Providers and professionals working within different formal settings acknowledge that parents highly value home-like spaces, '[providers] felt strongly that the continued use of a home-like space was a defining aspect of their service which allowed them to meet policy expectations around educational care within accepted spatial norms around childcare' (Gallagher, 2013c, p.209). Gregson and Lowe (1995) suggest that forms of care continue to be associated with particular sites even after the care practices themselves have changed, for example childminding has become increasingly formalised and regulated in line with the standards of Early Years settings, yet for parents who seek home-like 'home from home' care (Brooker, 2016, p.75), childminding is still preferred. Childminders in Brooker's (2016) study discussed how parents liked that their babies could 'sleep when they want to' (p.77) and that their older children were made comfortable on the sofa if they were 'off-colour…feeling poorly…needing a lie down and a cuddle…rather than a programme of learning activities' (ibid). This stresses the spatial as well as social and ideological aspects to delivering care. This kind of care is considered to be responsive, 'an extension of mothering' (ibid), where

parents prioritise the childminder's ability to care over their ability to educate their children. The mothers in Vincent and Ball's (2001) study desire for home-like spaces led them to 'personalise the transaction, to build relationships with the providers, to emphasise the affective' (ibid, p.643). The mothers spoke positively about finding 'motherly' figures in individual carers; those who were tactile and affectionate with their children, who were like 'second mums' to their children and provided the mother herself with emotional reassurance. Page (2011) described the relationship between the caregiver and the child to be of 'critical importance' (p.3) to parents, furthermore, she found that for mothers 'love was a crucial phenomenon within the decision-making process about whether to leave their child(ren) and resume paid employment' (p.320). Elfer (2007) asked important questions about the purpose of childcare, claiming that 'whether nurseries should be modelled on the intimacy and spontaneity of family interactions or the more professional and planned interactions of school has remained largely unaddressed' (p.169). This is an important question which this thesis will address.

In contrast with the spatial preference some parents have for home-like care spaces, is a sense of distrust other parents have in individual carers, such as childminders and a reassurance about the formalised aspects of setting-based care. Working class mothers are frequently cited as preferring informal care by friends and family (Vincent et al. 2010b); however, Fuller et al. (2002) warned that the high cost of childcare distorts this assumption 'unless the full range of childcare options is truly available and affordable, low-income parents' frequent reliance on kith and kin cannot necessarily be interpreted as their true preference' (p.10). Roberts' (2008) study found that working class mothers were distrustful of childminders, and were reassured of their children's physical safety in formalised non-home-based settings. Likewise, in Braun et al.'s (2008) study, the working class mothers described 'the formal nature of nurseries that involved inspection reports, activity sheets, defined staff roles, etc. as giving them peace of mind' (p.543). The working class mothers also emphasised the value of formal settings because they felt that their home environments were 'boring' and not stimulating enough (Vincent et al. 2010b). They described 'being at home with young children when money and space are limited [as] stressful' and 'not having enough money to enjoy time at home with their children was felt acutely' (Braun et al., 2008, p.543). Braun et al. (2008) found a surprising result of their study was an 'enthusiasm for childcare, especially nursery care …This positive attitude towards the 'expertise' of childcare workers corresponds well with policy messages around child development' (p.544). Although middle class mothers recognised the benefits of formal childcare, their reasons for choosing formal settings for their older children for example private day care, was more motivated by flexibility around their working hours than their insecurities about their child's home learning environment or their deficits as mothers. This confidence in their own skills and abilities parallels work by geographers such as

Kraftl (2014, 2015), who has focused on how middle class parents also reject some mainstream educational settings for their children, using their expertise and social and cultural capital to navigate alternative provision, such as Montessori, democratic or forest school settings. As such, they are confident in their ability to navigate different settings to secure provision that most reflects and supplements their beliefs around appropriate spaces for early education and care. Attitudes and perceptions held by parents about childcare providers are complex and inevitably impact on their relationships with Early Years' settings, thus warranting further exploration.

2.2.5 Summary.

Discussion around the feminisation of the labour force has seen childcare in terms of care and the impact on the mother, rather than a form of education. Childcare has been perceived as a substitution for maternal care that facilitates paid work (Holloway 1998; 1999; McDowell et al., 2005) as opposed to an important service for children. There has been sustained interest in exploring the difficulties mothers have in negotiating paid work and their perceived moral and emotional responsibilities as mothers (Vincent et al., 2010a; Braun et al., 2008), which impacts on their ability to be Neo-liberal and individualistic in their choice making (Duncan, 2005; Gallagher, 2013a). However, in doing so there has been an oversight in examining Early Years settings as sites of education, not just care. Considering the changing expectations the state, and as a result parents, have for Early Years settings, geographers should attend more to the selection process of childcare settings based on their specific learning ethoses. Neo-liberal and aspirational citizens are positioned as powerful consumers in a landscape of choice; however, universal choice appears to be a fallacy, and the challenges working mothers have in sourcing, choosing and combining appropriate care warrants further attention. There are contradictions existing within the literature about parents preferences for the spaces their young children attend that need to be unpicked. Enduring tensions exist between mothering, children and the home. Some parents are reassured by the more formal, and regulated aspects of certain childcare settings, and middle class parents often favour professionalised settings that focus on school readiness and formal learning. However, much of the existing literature focuses on 'middle class' or 'working class' groups as if they are clearly defined entities. This can over-emphasise the differences between them, and ignores overlapping and contradictory viewpoints held by some members of each group. Moreover, people who fall between being clearly middle class or working class have been relatively overlooked in the existing literature, thus there is a need for research which explores the perspectives of people who are 'just about managing'.

Traditionally childcare has been viewed as a replacement for maternal care. However, along with the increasing demand for the (re)integration of mothers into paid work, we have also seen the reimagining of childcare. Childcare has become part of new social and economic productivist policy agendas that acknowledge the potential economic benefits of social spending in the early years (Gallagher, 2013b).

Integral to the changing role of childcare has been the recognition that services should provide more than just care. By providing a form of early education, childcare providers are envisaged as potentially making up for some of the deficits of 'poor' parenting. This has been described as a 'social investment' perspective (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006; Lister, 2003). Spending in early childhood is considered justified due to its positive impact on disadvantage later in life, not least as research has suggested that early education has the potential to reduce crime and labour market inactivity in the future:

> *'there is a growing tendency to see childcare services from a social pedagogical perspective. In this perspective the main policy rationale is no longer the reconciliation of work and care, but rather the contribution of childcare services to child development and socioeconomic integration.'* (European Commission, 2009, p.7)

With this change in focus and new concerns over family competence in many aspects of domestic life, the family has become highly politicised. Everyday family and parenting practices are now considered factors linked to outcomes for not only the individual child but society as a whole (Gillies, 2011).

In advanced capitalist societies like the U.K., high levels of educational attainment are seen as necessary for the reproduction of knowledge economies (Cook and Hemming, 2011). Geographers have examined how investment in education is a tool to increase social mobility and decrease welfare spending (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). The OFSTED Early Years annual report 2012-13 (OFSTED, 2013) states that the government's three aims were that high quality affordable childcare provision would: 'help to improve children's outcomes[...].putting them on the path to success in later life, enabling parents to work, if they want to make that choice [...].[and] to provide an opportunity to identify and intervene earlier in potential problems' (p.9). A commitment to offering high quality childcare comes from a considerable body of evidence showing that access to these settings can make a significant difference to children's development and wellbeing (Mooney and Munton, 1997; Melhuish, 2004; Vandell and Woolf, 2000). As highlighted by Shonkoff and Phillips (2000): 'the positive

relationship between childcare quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science…The conclusions derive from experimental research of high quality interventions for children' (p.313). Longitudinal studies both in the UK and US have found that good quality childcare settings continue to have a positive impact on children's development well into the school years (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; EPPE, 2004), also influencing positive outcomes in later life (Campbell et al., 2002; CED, 2006; Schweinhart, 2005). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project is an example of this; the project was a major European longitudinal study of a national sample of young children's development between 3-7 years old, investigating the effects of pre-school education. The project was funded by the UK Department for Education and Skills, and has been influential in subsequent policy documents. The project found that when children have a pre-school experience prior to school age their development was advantaged, and starting younger also had positive impacts: 'high quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children' (EPPE, 2004, p.2). Similar studies by Melhuish (2004) and Goodman and Sianesi (2005) also stress the importance of Pre-school education.

In contrast to these arguments, concerns are now being voiced about the 'schoolification' of services which reflect new expectations around school readiness. There has been a growing concern across a range of disciplinary perspectives (Ailwood, 2004, 2008, Gallagher, 2006), especially within Education and the 'Early childhood' disciplines about some aspects of early education and care: such as the 'top-down' pressure on young children to learn and the formalisation of the curriculum (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014). These disciplines have promoted alternative methods to engage young children in learning. A project launched by the OECD Education Committee (OECD, 2004) examined debates around Early Years curricula and pedagogies from around the world. The High/Scope Curriculum was developed 50 years ago in Michigan to help children from disadvantaged areas, and is based on active learning through key experiences and focuses heavily on free choice for children to pursue their own activities, music and movement and developing social relationships. Print rich environments and the availability of materials that encourage number recognition and counting are provided as opposed to sequenced activities based on literacy and maths objectives. Similarly, the Reggio Emilia approach to learning is an educational philosophy developed for preschool and primary education by Loris Malaguzzi, first developed in the villages around Reggio Emilia in Italy after World War II. This approach is hailed as an exemplary model of early childhood education, central to the approach is the belief that the child has rights, and is a competent, active learner. Projects are fluid and led by the children's interests, known as an 'emergent

curriculum' (OECD, 2004, p.14). Rights of the child are also respected in Te Whāriki, a curriculum designed for early childhood education in New Zealand. It takes a socio-cultural approach to the curriculum based on a desire to nurture learning dispositions: 'it makes a strong political statement about young children; their uniqueness as learners, their ethnicity and their rights in New Zealand society' (ibid, p.17). The principles of this curriculum are based on empowering the child, providing a holistic response to children's learning interests and cultivating responsive and reciprocal relationships. In Sweden the curriculum is led by highly trained professionals. This approach is grounded in play and meaning making, social interaction, exploration and creativity. Central to all these curricula is an avoidance of a formal approach to early education and an emphasis on play and freedom of expression.

From this play based learning perspective, the EYFS, the U.K.'s curriculum for under-fives has been heavily criticised, dubbed the 'national curriculum for babies' (Guardian, 2008). It has been seen as symptomatic of an increasing obsession with childhood development. Critiques were levied around its stifling of creativity, preoccupation with early reading, writing and number awareness and constant assessment (House, 2011). House (2011) claims that in the U.K, children's lives have been sped up by commercialisation and 'adultification' which 'schoolifies' them and pushes quasi-formal learning too soon. This reinforces Palmer's (2007) argument that forcing children to write before they are physically able means many will be put off writing for ever. Instead, play-based learning advocates are concerned with 'play malnourishment' (Cole, 2005) as they argue 'It is through play that [children] develop skills and abilities…play…should be regarded as one of the fundamental building blocks of life' (Cole, 2005, p.1).

A review by Whitebread and Bingham (2011) critiqued the emphasis on school readiness favoured by the U.K. arguing that 'from a pedagogical perspective this approach fuels an increasingly dominant notion of education as 'transmission and reproduction', and of early childhood as preparation for school rather than for 'life'. They go onto discuss the increasingly interventionist approach of the government and criticised the idea that school readiness is a finite construct that is able to raise standards, ignoring the individuality and developmental capacity of each child. Likewise, the independent report into primary education in England (Primary Review, 2008) examined some aspects of formal education for very young children, and states that the belief that formal early learning is beneficial for children's later attainment 'is not well supported in the research and there are concerns about the appropriateness of provision' (p.19). It went onto say that the U.K.s young school start age in comparison with other countries does not reflect: 'any developmental or educational criteria[...].' (p.6); instead, it is rooted in historic concerns about child protection and exploitation.

Given these contrasting views can permeate the ethos of the setting it is important to consider what has shaped different settings and how their ethos is negotiated into practice during everyday interactions between professionals, children and families.

2.3.1 Disadvantaged children

The previous section has argued that childcare has appeared on the policy landscape as a service with the potential to reap both social and economic benefits for society. Over the last 10 years childcare policy has been increasingly directed at those thought to be either socially or economically disadvantaged, with a specific focus on single-parent families and the long term unemployed. Policy discourses around social exclusion have contributed to the perceived importance of parenting skills, implying that intergenerational disadvantage is reproduced through 'bad' parenting. When parents 'choose' not to work they are seen to not only perpetuate social and economic disadvantage but also to set a poor example to their children (Gallagher, 2013b).

The EPPE project (2004) looked at different pre-school settings and found that high quality practice was grounded in an emphasis on not only care, but also education. The project stressed the importance of staff qualifications which they believed led to 'pedagogy …traditionally associated with the term '"teaching"' (EPPE, 2004, p.1). Their key findings implied that nursery schools employing trained teachers were positively associated with children making good progress. There has been a government commitment to encouraging more schools to offer pre-school places in nursery schools attached to primary school, extending provision from 8am-6pm (GOV, 2013). Sam Gyimah, previously the Parliamentary Under-secretary of State for childcare and education, voiced his commitment to encouraging schools to offer more provision for children before school age, stating that when they did there were benefits. He described schools being able to get to know children and their parents and thus tailoring their support, avoiding children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind and struggling with the school transition (Gyimah, 2014).

The government's stance regarding the importance of very young children being educated in professional childcare settings is particularly notable in relation to children deemed to be growing up disadvantaged by their economic situation. The EPPE (2004) project found that: 'Pre-school *[meaning here different childcare settings used prior to school]* was particularly beneficial to children who are more disadvantaged… pre-school can be an effective intervention for the reduction of special educational needs (SEN), especially for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children' (p.3). The EPPE project found that disadvantaged children

did particularly well in high quality settings which could offer specialist support in language and pre-reading skills. High quality settings were also found to reduce anti-social behaviour and to promote social inclusion.

The U.K. independent policy review by Labour MP Frank Field entitled: 'The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults' had the aim of exploring what factors help children participate best and succeed in their schooling experience. Field (2010) claims that by the age of three a child's brain is 80% formed, and that their experiences prior to this shape the way the brain will grow and develop. Field (2010) stresses the importance of school readiness, stating: 'ability profiles at [the age of three] are highly predictive of profiles at school entry. By school age there are wide variations in children's abilities and the evidence is clear that children from poorer backgrounds do worse cognitively' (p.5). He says of investment into childcare, high quality early education not only improves the skills of children aged three and four, but in particular has most effect on the abilities of the poorest children. If we accept this causal link between poverty, class and achievement the implications this burden has on early years professionals, who are described later as being undervalued and underpaid, is worthy of exploration.

2.3.2 Sure Start Centres

The commitment to disadvantaged children illustrated above is demonstrated by the implantation of Sure Start Centres. Sure Start Centres were a New Labour Government programme with the aim of tackling social exclusion and child poverty by providing multi-agency programmes in deprived localities for children (under five) and their families. The programme's objectives are to provide health, education, childcare and family support, in a one stop shop of services: with the overall outcome of providing children with better life chances and tackling cycles of disadvantage (Jupp, 2013; Horton and Kraftl, 2011). Geographers like Jupp (2013), Wainwright and Marandet (2017); Horton and Kraftl (2009) and Gallagher (2013b) demonstrate that Sure Start Centres are an example of the increasing politicisation of particular forms of childcare. This is through the Centres' every day interactions with families through a focus on parenting competence. Sure Start Centres aim to prevent and change negative parenting behaviours that reproduce disadvantage by equipping parents with the skills they need to support their young children's learning and development whilst also minimising their likelihood of abuse and neglect. When children and families are particularly 'troubled' or at 'risk' their involvement with professional childcare settings safeguards them, as development and wellbeing can be monitored by professional staff (NQIN, 2010). When necessary, they can refer

parents to other professionals who may need to intervene in and initiate change within families and then continue working with the family in a multi-agency way.

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was an evaluation The Department for Education commissioned to assess the impact of Sure Start Local Programmes from NESS findings of children aged three, five and seven. The reports showed that at age three children who attended Sure Start Centre's experienced less 'negative' parenting and had better home learning environments (NESS, 2008). At both five (DfE, 2010) and seven (DfE, 2012) the children experienced less 'chaotic' lifestyles and had more stimulating home environments. However, NESS, which cost 20 million pounds to implement, has not been without its critiques. There have been concerns about how we define chaotic, dysfunctional, troubled or anti-social families and of implying it is possible that short term interventions can be solutions to structural inequalities surrounding poverty, race and injustice. NESS's failure to provide conclusive impacts on children's wellbeing fuelled a sense that Sure Start Centres were failing and a waste of money which meant Centres were negatively represented in national political discourse (Horton and Kraftl, 2009). Others have argued about the challenges in being able to recognise the long term impacts of Sure Start Centres at a relatively early stage (Lloyd and Harrington, 2012). As such, their effectiveness is inconclusive. Under the Conservative government, Sure Start Centres have began to decline: 'The Conservative government, with its free market passions, was not going to spend on programmes to reconstruct 'active citizens'. They emphasised individual responsibility and small government—sink or swim' (Featherstone et al., 2014, p.1739). Studies by geographers Horton and Kraftl (2010) and Jupp (2013) show that they are important and valuable cites for relationships and are rich with emotional interactions, meaningful for both the parents and children who attend. Jupp (2018) demonstrated that the decline of Sure Start Centre's, 1,000 of which have closed since 2009, has negatively impacted on the lives of parents and young children. Jupp's (2013) research showed that Centres were valuable key spaces for support and socialisation for diverse families, as well as access points for other services for the parents in her research (Jupp, 2013). She described Centres as a victim of austerity, citing the Sutton Trust (2018) research into the amount of closures, reorganisations and dismantling of services. In particular, there has been large numbers of Centres merging, and transforming into new hubs where there are less universal services and facilities in favour of targeted interventions for those in need. This is due to statutory duties placed on local authorities to provide Centres that meet local need, and that means some councils claim that new, rebranded and merged Centres are providing a better service than they did before:

> 'There are proven benefits and economies of scale derived from co-locating teams and agencies…It is anticipated that the co-location of a Children's Centre…within a locally

based hub will enable the provision for more integrated working with families and a wider range of services, and improved continuity of support' (Medway Council, 2007, p.4)

Jupp (2018) however, holds that universal services which do not stigmatise parents are usually more effective than targeted referrals and 'invitations' from professionals.

2.3.3 Free entitlement funding

Since 1998 all children in the U.K. have been entitled to fifteen free hours a week in an early years setting after their third birthday, demonstrating the government's commitment to 'school readiness'. This can be used in any approved state-funded or private childcare provision, as well through registered childminders. The intention of this free early education is to help children access good quality Early Years care and education. In 2006 a pilot programme was launched to allow eligible two year old's to access the same free early education if they are deemed to be experiencing disadvantage. Children met the eligibility criteria if they had unemployed parents, or working parents with a low income, if they had a statement of Special Educational Needs or a parent with a registered disability, or if they were in care or had been adopted (DfE, 2018). According to the DfE (2011), this was in response to growing evidence that home learning environments impact children's cognitive and social development from a very young age, indicating that high quality early education could counter the potential negative effects of living within circumstances that do not facilitate 'good' development (HM Treasury, 2004). This suggests, through the targeting of and investment in even younger children, that the government sees early childcare as a resilience factor for children considered at risk. Offering free early education was seen to provide a way of improving disadvantaged children's social and cognitive outcomes so that by age five, they were as ready to learn and succeed at school as their more advantaged peers. Central to the initiative has been the need to support parents, and where necessary to refer them to the services they may need in order to help them deal with their challenging circumstances. In 2017 it was announced that all working parents of three and four year olds were to be entitled to 30 hours free childcare if they earnt at least £120 a week, equivalent to 16 hours at the national minimum wage. This is an example of policy responsiveness reflective of a concern about Britain's 'squeezed middle' a phrase adopted by former Labour Party leader Ed Miliband. The term is used to describe 'hard working' people who financially suffer as a result of cutbacks, falling wages and higher costs associated with home ownership (Thomas, 2016). The Childcare Survey (2017) found that such

families spent 45% of their disposable income on childcare costs, and that there were 'en-trenched problems of affordability' (p. 4) meaning for those with high childcare costs and a working partner there was often 'no financial gain from moving into work' (ibid).

2.3.4 Summary

Examining the literature on the promotion of pre-school education reveals that early-years education is increasingly critiqued as focused on school readiness, the appropriateness of which is questioned. How settings' individual ethos effects the delivery of the early education they provide, and the extent to which this is based on school preparation or alternative peda-gogies, has been ignored within geography. Early Years education is still positioned as hav-ing the potential for making up for the deficits of 'not good enough' parenting, breaking cy-cles of disadvantage in the form of surveillance, early intervention and safeguarding, and ed-ucating parents through behaviour change initiatives aimed at (re)education, for example those offered in Sure Start Centres. Whilst geographical attention on the way middle class parents mobilise their children's education as a strategy of staying ahead is well docu-mented, the way that parents and the state use education for babies and young children for this purpose goes largely unexplored.

2.4 The changing role of parents

As well as envisaging early education as a disruption to enduring cycles of disadvantage, there has been an increased concern with the impacts of family competence, and parenting has thus become highly politicised. Everyday family and parenting practices are now considered factors linked to outcomes for not only the individual child but also society as a whole (Gillies 2011). The family is becoming a site of not only education and childcare, but also of increasing intervention into family life (Wainwright and Marandet, 2013), mobilised 'through a set of broader sites and spaces of home, school, work, community and nation, aimed at producing concomitant normative identities of a 'good' mother, educator, worker, neighbour and citizen' (Wainwright and Marandet, 2017, p.226). Practices of parenting are clearly bound up with wider social, cultural, political and economic dynamics in diverse ways. The late 20th century research focused on moral geographies of parenting; how neighbourhoods were influencing ideas about how children should be raised, shaping children's experiences as parents chose to reject or conform to local models of parenting (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

There is a small but significant body of research on geographies of parenting (Dyck 1990, Holloway 1998, McDowell et al. 2005), much of which has been informed by feminist insights into social reproduction and economies of care that reveal how geographies of parenting are shaped by class and labour market position (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013). Giddens (1998) first coined the phrase 'social investment state' to demonstrate the shift away from a traditional welfare state to a state promoting human capital and future workers, wherever possible. Jupp and Gallagher (2013) discuss how, from a social investment perspective, politicians and policy makers are interested in shaping young children's lives through parenting and family intervention, which has also been echoed by a media fascination for defective parenting (Jupp, 2012). Although it is not new for policy makers to take an interest in parenting, 'Third-way' approaches (Giddens, 1998) to the family and the community are seen as 'crucial arenas in the constitution of citizenship' (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013, p.156). As such, early education as a form of early intervention is seen to benefit not only the child, but also to shape the family through improving parenting, thus benefiting society as a whole. This expenditure is envisaged as having the potential to save on welfare expenditure later in life, whilst locating responsibility for social mobility and welfare within individual families. Featherstone et al. (2014), discussing the role of professionals in Sure Start Centre's, argue for an overhaul of the way family intervention works, in particular its emphasis on individualisation:

> 'Family support [would allow] for a recognition of the chronicity of need; it is not intrinsically tied to individualised change—'responsibilisation' or to a tyrannical and unforgiving notion of time… policies should recognise and support human flourishing in the context of our interdependence [interventions] cannot be chopped up into short-term, time-limited, discrete 'interventions' delivered by disembodied experts' (Featherstone, 2014, p.1744).

Geographers have examined how intervention into family life is delivered in increasingly subtle ways, a form of 'preventative surveillance' (Parton, 2006) through libertarian paternalistic policies which promote behaviour change (Jones et al., 2010, Jones et al., 2011), for example those delivered through Sure Start Centres. Wainwright (2003), discusses how health visitors are an example of 'temporal surveillance' (p.172) through supervisory strategies which identify mothers who are 'irresponsible and positioned outside the material norm' (ibid). Other geographers (Philo, 2000, Elden, 2016) have also used a Foucauldian lens to examine the way that power is mobilised through educational settings, to produce 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977) in the form of engaged pupils and parents (Gallagher, 2011, Ball 2013). Techniques such as surveillance from professionals and between parents, and the use of panoptic-like spaces (Foucault, 1975) are examples of how 'the government operates at a distance' (Lavelle, 2015, p.583).

The rise of Neo-liberalism has led to government parenting policies that emphasise parenting skills and an increasing responsibility for parents to produce citizen workers of the future, requiring them to work in closer partnership with schools. Geographers like Wainwright and Marandet (2016, 2017) and Holloway and Pimlott Wilson (2016) have argued that this results in a professionalisation of parenting that discriminates against some parents, in particular working class and ethnic minority parents, representing their parenting and commitment to their child's education as inferior. As part of broader moves towards Neo-liberalism discussed above, there is an emphasis on market-led economic policies which seek to minimise a 'dependency culture' and heavy state intervention. Under Neo-liberalism, there is an emphasis on the state being an 'enabler' as opposed to a 'provider' of welfare and public services (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). In a Neo-liberal climate, the family is increasingly expected to support their own family members and to be responsible for the wellbeing of their own children (Ruddick, 2007). Further attention is needed to understand how government regulated institutions such as Sure Start Centres and state maintained childcare settings and how schools in this climate act as a mediating force between the state and the people, promoting good quality parenting in order to prevent the cost of referral to welfare services, and young citizens growing into non-worker adults requiring the support of welfare benefits.

The repositioning of parenting as an expert skill, has ignored the fact that parenting is performed in diverse and often challenging contexts. The state has taken on a 'muscular interventionist stance' (Featherstone et al., 2014, p.1740), with a specific focus on anti-social families:

> *'…The families with chronic levels of risk who were considered to present high costs to society…The policy discourses surrounding these initiatives identified such families as failing but primarily failing to access and utilise the change opportunities presented by the various prevention programmes' (Featherstone et al., 2014, p. 1740)*

Lambert and Crossley's (2017) reflection on the Troubled Families Programme, a 2011 scheme aimed at decreasing generational patterns of poor parenting, crime and anti-social behaviour findings echoed this. They reflect on how the programme is part of a wider spectrum of policies which locates problems within the family, as a costly 'underclass', rather than in wider social and economic disparities. After the election of the New Labour Government in 1997, there was a sustained focus on the minutiae of everyday parenting. The state has focused on taking increased responsibility for instilling the 'right' parenting skills into families, responding to those parents believed to need advice and educating those deemed 'too ignorant or recalcitrant to recognise[...].and to ensure the rearing of responsible future citizens' (Edwards and Gillies, 2011, p.142). There is concern that family intervention programmes are

an example of a discursive shift from family support towards 'a disciplinary form of technology, acting to both contain and control behaviour' (Nixon et al., 2010, p.313). The disregard of poverty and disadvantage in 'suboptimal' parenting practices reformulates parenting as an expert skill, where middle class children enjoy the 'successes and privileges…credited to the proficiency of their parents' (Gillies, 2013, p.90). There is, therefore, an interesting juxtaposition, whereby the state is rolling back its support in order to create aspirational citizens whilst simultaneously becoming more interventionist.

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2. 4.1 Parents as co-educators.

Whilst the demand for childcare has risen in line with women's (re)integration into the labour force, childcare has been reinvisioned as a positive force to raise standards of achievement. Parents, particularly mothers, however are expected to have more responsibility and accountability for their children's behaviour and development in educational settings and the local community than ever before. They are faced with two imperatives;' to be a "good" self-reliant worker-citizen and a "good" mother of well-behaved, achieving children' (Braun et al. 2008, p.534). This is because at home 'good' parenting is considered to have a positive effect on children's achievement and 'good' parents are seen to be those deeply embedded in their children's education through the day to day activities of home life (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Gerwitz, 2001). Wainwright and Marandet (201) suggest that 'the intergenerational legacy of educational achievement, marshalled through a discourse of social mobility, is intrinsic to UK government policy' (p.507). The School Standards and Framework Act, introduced in 1998, sought to introduce home-school agreements as a way of providing a firm base for home-school links (Edwards and Alldred, 2000), The Act provided a rationale for strengthening home-school links with the DfEE's now famous statement: 'parents are a child's first and most enduring teachers' (DfEE, 1998, p.3). Home-school agreements have been controversial; they are a contract held between the school and the parent, outlining in detail the role the parent is expected to play in their child's education at home, for example, homework assistance, reading support, and written dialogue on progress between the home and school. They have required parents to be more involved but at the same time see parents as less skilled, needing the formal guidance and structure of the school's homework policies (Gillies, 2011).

The relationship between parents and schools has been well documented; however, there is a significant lack of literature on the relationship between parents and childcare settings. Numerous studies illustrate how parental attitudes towards, and involvement in, chil-

dren's learning has an influence on children's development and attainment at all ages (Epstein, 2001; Harris and Goodall, 2008). Across the political spectrum, parental involvement and home-school partnership are regarded as enhancing the educational performance of children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds, and as an important approach to improving school effectiveness for all children (Crozier, 1998; Gerwitz, 2000; O'Brien, 2007; Reay, 1995). The extent to which public policy in the U.K. has had an interventionist agenda in relation to family and parenting has been documented by Gillies (2011) who argued that;

> *'perhaps, the clearest example of this transformation in the construction of state/family relations concerns the semi-permeable boundaries that are now expected to be maintained between family homes and schools' (p.4).*

It was the recent Labour government that arguably had the most far-reaching role in relation to family and parenting (Daly, 2010). Parenting in particular has been increasingly subject to more sustained and broadening policy intervention (Gillies, 2005), enhancing home–school relations with parents as 'active partners' in their children's education as just one example (Crozier 1998). The government has increasingly 'regulated' parents, especially mothers, to ensure they take responsibility for producing responsible future citizens (Lister 2006). Directly linked to its Big Society agenda, the coalition and conservative governments were keen to be seen to embrace activities supporting the development of individuals, families and communities (BIS 2010), this included parenting classes. Gillies (2013) translates this as the well-off being 'set free from state interference…encouraged to mobilise all their resources to secure the best outcomes' (p.90) whilst the poor are incentivised to take greater responsibilities for their failings and their children's poor outcomes.

Improving and maintaining good standards of children's home learning environments has been a focus for educational settings. EPPE (2004) found that:

> *'Many pre-school settings across England already encourage parental participation, and some have developed programmes that feature parent education…results suggest programmes that directly promote activities for parents and children to engage in together are likely to be most beneficial for young children… Such provision could also seek to promote the benefits of joint activities, which promote pre-school children's developmental learning at home'*

The work of Frank Field (2010) echoes this advice. One of the main aims of Field's (2010) report was to explore how a child's home environment affects their ability to participate and succeed in their schooling experience. The review's findings indicated that children's life chances were heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of their lives;

> *'it is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is realised in adult life'* (Field, 2010, p.5)

Field (2010) makes frequent reference to the need to encourage parental engagement, stating that the role of the parent has the biggest influence on children's attainment, and that engagement with childcare and school settings should develop and build upon parents' existing skills and strengths. Field (2010) recommends that The Department for Education publish and promote clear advice on what is successful in encouraging parental engagement in children's learning, and that OFSTED should continue to report on schools and childcare settings' engagement with parents, arguing: 'this is a particularly key area, for which settings should consistently be held to account' (p.8). Field also recommended that engagement with parents should be ongoing, moving away from termly 'parents' evenings'.

Though schools have a powerful impact on some children, educational professionals need to turn their attention to the home and family in order to tackle persistent educational inequalities (Ball, 2010). This is because schools struggle to diminish patterns of difference associated with children's backgrounds, in particular on pre-existing gaps in attainment (Harris and Bennett, 2001; Wiliam, 2008). Whilst schools can 'boost' pupils, they 'cannot solve the deep-seated and multi-faceted problems inherent within areas of social exclusion' (Warrington, 2005, p.813). The EPPE project found that;

> *'What parents and carers do makes a real difference to young children's development. There are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children which have a positive effect on their development…reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores'* (2004, p.5)

Similar findings that emphasise the importance of parents have been conducted. The report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills with Harris and Goodall (2007) was a case study examining thirty schools taking part in a project to raise parental engagement and measure pupil achievement. The project supported schools in developing a range of projects aimed at engaging parents in their children's learning. Its key findings were that parental engagement was a powerful lever in raising student achievement in schools: 'where parents and teachers work together to improve learning, the gains in achievement are significant' (ibid, 2007, p. 1). In geographical areas containing high rates of poverty, deprivation and social

exclusion the report found that the schools that had taken part had shown that the engagement of parents was a central influence in their improved positive learning and behavioural outcomes. The report found that schools that successfully engage parents in learning have a strong ethos of 'parents matter' (ibid, p.2).

This focus on the link between parental intervention and children's learning has been demonstrated by Frank Field, Labour MP. Field recommended a new framework for measuring poverty and life chances, which he suggested would help to focus policy and investment on improving the future life chances of children (Field, 2010). The framework includes several parenting factors, including: home learning environment; maternal mental health; positive parenting; mother's educational qualifications; and mother's age at birth of first child. The framework built upon the work of The Millennium Cohort Study, an ESRC funded multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of 19,000 children born in the UK between 2000-2001. This longitudinal birth cohort study collected information on children and their parents, enquiring about parenting, childcare, school choice, behaviour, health, parent employment and education, income and poverty, housing, neighbourhood, and social capital and ethnicity (Hansen and Joshi, 2007). The second survey of the study included a measure of the home learning environment for children aged three years old. The measure includes a set of questions for parents about the frequency that they read to their child, take their child to the library, help their child learn the alphabet, numbers or counting, and whether they teach their child songs, poems and encourage them to draw or paint at home (Field, 2010). The scale records the frequency from 0 (not at all) to 7 (7 times a week/constantly) and found that children's readiness for school and later life outcomes were impacted upon the frequency of these early learning experiences. Not reading to the child daily was found to have a clear and strong association with indicators of poor learning and development scores (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2010). Similarly, the EPPE project (EPPE, 2004) found that children's home learning environment has a significant influence on attainment over the pre-school period and later on. Parent activities such as sharing story books were found to be significant positive influences on attainment and impacted on children's cognitive progress. These examples all demonstrate the increasing location of blame within families, rather than in the structural inequalities that determine some parents' ability to support their children's learning better than others. As Gillies (2013) stated, a discourse of family competence exhibits 'a focus on parenting practices which sees class differences and inequalities increasingly framed as developmental outcomes' (p.90), in doing so it further promotes a Neo-liberal approach which emphasises liberty, responsibility and personal obligation, obscuring lived experiences of inequality.

The increasing 'scholarisation of childhood' in line with the promotion of pre-school necessitates new forms of parental expenditure. The literature on home-school partnerships has found that schools are placing new demands on parents that discriminate against working class families: 'the energies and resources that they require are facilitated or constrained by particular material circumstances' (Ball, 2010, p.158). The now acknowledged link between parental involvement and achievement has led to more structured programmes in schools, including reading and maths schemes which involve parents' participation in the education process. School curriculum intervention programmes are designed to establish a mechanism for communication between parents and teachers which encourages an interactive relationship. These new demands on parents and expectations for their involvement and engagement with educational settings are argued as making the home function like the school, thus ignoring the diversity of children's family lives. Vincent (1996) explains that curriculum intervention programmes represent a broadening of the parental role, from audience to co-educator. David (1993) and Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) argue that the educational responsibilities expected of parents often puts pressure on mothers, adding considerably to their childcare responsibilities.

Katz (2017) discusses the classed implications of policies that promote intensive mothering and 'the tiger mother' in a climate of cuts: 'middle class and wealthier children –have been fetishized while others – the vast majority of children – suffer the consequences of a disinvested public sphere and a radically reduced social wage' (p.1). Similarly, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2013) state that the promotion of intensive mothering further resources the middle class. Hays (1996) described 'intensive mothering', a costly child-rearing practice which is both emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive. The mother portrayed in this ideology is self-sacrificing and devoted to the care of others. This has constituted to the development of a middle class anxiety (Beck, 1992) which has fed into and been fuelled by policy initiatives that prioritise the role of parents (Reay, 2004). Vincent et al. (2010a) found middle class parents involved their children from a young age in structured, commercial enrichment activities, a phenomenon often referred to as hyper stimulation or educational saturation in order to help their children compete and hold advantage over their peers. This draws parallels with the modern label 'tiger mother'. The US magazine TIME realised a cover story called 'The truth about tiger moms' in 2011 that declared that American and Chinese mothers attached economic competitiveness to their children transmitted through their gendered labours (TIME, 2011). Vincent and Ball (2007) note that the state offers versions of good parenting which

inserts itself into the private choices of middle class families: 'the responsibility of 'doing the right thing' for the child appears to require additional expertise to be bought in to augment the work of the middle class family.' (Vincent and Ball, 2007, p.1074). Lareau (2002) makes a distinction between the abilities of parents to support their children's learning, labelling them 'concerned cultivation' and 'natural growth'. This is despite studies showing that working class parents highly value their children's educational experience, and in particular, provide important emotional support (Gillies, 2006; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011).

2.4.3 Class and Ethnicity

In policy drives to raise educational standards, it has been recognised that educational settings can 'tap into' the cultural capital of parents. They are increasingly asked to become active partners in the production of educated children (Brain and Reid, 2003). However, working class and middle class parents respond differently to their children's educational experiences and this can be determined by the level of cultural capital that they possess and if they are marginalised and excluded from home-setting partnerships.

Bourdieu (1986a) believed that academic success and failure was not just due to natural aptitudes, but was also a product of the amount of, and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu, which he stated 'made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success[...]to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions' (ibid, p.243). Reay's (1998) research on parental involvement illustrates how family involvement in children's educational experiences is a powerful example of the importance of cultural capital in preserving educational inequalities. The findings of Reay (2004) on the educational implications of cultural capital showed that middle class mothers found it much easier to share their views with their child's teacher and felt more confident in their own knowledge and assertions. These middle class mothers saw their role as 'compensatory' and were able to use financial resources to compensate poor school teaching or provision, in the form of private tuition. Educational expenditure is carried out by middle class parents through 'a combination of transmissions within educational settings, in the family and those bought in from the market, access to which simply and fundamentally depends upon the amount of economic capital available to the family' (Ball, 2010, p.159). This demonstrates that different forms of capital are clearly implicated in the ability of parents to draw upon a range of strategies to support children's learning. For working class mothers, lack of cultural capital manifested itself in feelings of

incompetence, lack of confidence and a sense of ignorance when it came to educational knowledge, which meant they relied on the school to 'get the job done'(ibid).

Like many sociologists, for example Hayes (2012), David (1993), Vincent (1995), Reay (1998), Gillborn and Mirza (2000) and Mac an Ghaill, (1988), Crozier (2001) focuses particularly on how ethnic minority parents are marginalised, ignored or excluded from relationships between the school and the home. Much of the research that has been carried out on ethnic minority parents (Brar, 1991; Basit, 1997; Holden et al., 1996) shows that they are stereotypically not seen as 'good' parents, as they do not necessarily align with dominant expectations. The experience of black pupils in U.K. schools has been the subject of research for many years. In the last twenty years research has shown black pupils are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers (Gillborn and Gipps, 1996; Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). Low teacher expectation is also a persistent issue (Rollock et al., 2015). This is despite Vincent et al. (2013) stating that black middle class parents prioritise education and are actively involved in their children's learning: 'educational achievement is seen as a key means… as a possible barrier against racism in their children's future' (project summary, p.5). Racism was noted by Gillborn (2005) who states that black children's experience of institutional racism was often not intentional racism but was produced through teachers 'systematically lower expectations' (p.496) for minority groups:

> 'although race inequity may not be a planned and deliberate goal of education policy neither is it accidental. The patterning of racial advantage and inequity is structured in domination and its continuation represents a form of tacit intentionality on the part of white power holders and policy makers' (p.485)

Black parents are represented in the literature as being deeply concerned about the historical legacy of discrimination against their children and were the most likely of ethnic minority parents to challenge school practices (Crozier, 2001). They are keen to foster their children's black identity and their understanding of black history and injustice, with a focus on moral capital, which involves knowledge of privilege and supremacy (Rollock et al., 2015). However, barriers of race endure, and they were also found to be frequently marginalised and ignored when trying to intervene in their child's schooling (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Moreover, Mirza (2005) reported that black parents were viewed as being hostile towards school, and over anxious about their child's success, with unrealistic expectations for their achievements.

There have also been dominant discourses about the underachievement of white children who are working class. It has been described as a 'real and persistent' (Parliament, House of Commons, 2014, p.3) issue, and those children eligible for free school meals are

'consistently the lowest performing group in the country' (ibid), whose underperformance out-weighs any other ethnic group. There have been accusations that these children have been 'unseen' (ibid) and this is perceived to be of concerning because these children are understood to 'represent an unacceptable waste of human potential' (OFSTED, 2013, p.4) which incurs 'huge subsequent costs for all of us' (ibid), thus reflecting Neo-liberal and social investment perspectives that equate children with human capital.

Whilst all parents are considered able to benefit from acquiring parenting skills, the state construct that 'the source of and solution to their and especially their children's disadvantage and marginalisation lies within families, in parenting practice, rather than inequalities outside them' (Edwards and Gillies, 2011, p.143). Those who refuse help are viewed as 'morally compromised', with sanctions in the form of fines, parenting contracts and orders and even imprisonment imposed in a range of legislative acts (ibid). The way that parenting policies pose parenting as a classless and gender neutral activity has been critiqued (Edwards and Gillies, 2011). Jupp (2013) addresses the concept of parenting as a set of skills as deeply problematic, and suggests that parenting is a classless, genderless act: 'the whole concept of 'parenting' as a set of 'skills' around which to develop policy presupposes the possibility of isolating aspects of intimate life, which could be reflected on and 'learnt' or changed' (p.184). Crozier (2001) sees parental involvement policies as flawed in their failure to recognise diversity amongst parent, which she calls an 'indifference to the complexity and diversity of family groupings and contexts' (p.332), she also notes that there has been an adoption of a 'one size fits all approach' (ibid, p.330) to parental involvement, with a 'blanket assumption' (ibid, p.330) that all parents are the same, with similar needs. This demonstrates a tension between supposedly classless good parenting, and the highly classed and racialised demonisation of real parents.

2.4.4 Summary

In summary, examining the literature on the changing role of parents reveals that there are more expectations for parents than ever before. As well as mothers being expected to be worker citizens, they are also expected to take the role of co-educator, working closely with educational professionals. To construct themselves as 'good' mothers, mothers are professionalised and re-cast as experts, whilst some are simultaneously framed as incapable and uneducated. Mothers must engage in a labour intensive, and financially expensive form of childrearing in order to maintain their children's advantage over their peers. Previously, this

pressure has only been observed on mothers of school aged children. Geographers have examined how educational institutions use mechanisms of power to survey and control parents and young people, however, this has not been explored in Early Years settings. Geographers and sociologists have debated the impact of class and race on educational achievement, suggesting the partnerships between Early Years settings and parents have the potential to exclude marginalised groups and subscribe to a uniform ideal of good parenting. Moreover, these partnerships can be based on an unequal distribution of power. Therefore there is a need for research which explores how parents and professionals view and construct their shared partnership.

2.5 Conclusion

This review of the literature demonstrates how geographical interest in family settings and childcare has increased during the later twentieth century. This is in part due to the feminisation of the labour force, as women's participation in paid work has necessitated a substitution for absent maternal care in the form of varied Early Years settings. However, the idea that childcare exists in a landscape of choice for the Neo-liberal, aspirational and individualised subject is presented as deeply flawed. Women are still responsible for many domestic and maternal duties associated in the past with mothers, yet to be constructed as good mothers they must also participate in the workforce. This has been found to be challenging and problematic in different ways for both working and middle class women. Enduring associations between the home as a preferred space for babies and young children because of pervasive discourse around attachments, relationships and healthy emotional development significantly impact on the kinds of spaces that are favoured by mothers. This is presented as a juxtaposition to a simultaneous concern amongst mothers to source care choices that are formal and professionalised with learning ethoses that reflect growing preoccupations with school readiness and early educational achievement. As such, family settings and childcare are increasingly politicised through investment and promotion by the government, particularly aimed at certain kinds of parents in a classed and normative way. Parents may attend family settings, like Sure Start Centre's even when they do not need childcare. This may be because they have internalised the government's message that these are powerful spaces able to tackle underachievement and disadvantage that is caused by sub-standard parenting. Accordingly, the role of parents has changed, as they are increasingly professionalised and positioned as co-educators with the responsibility to engage in an intensive way with their children's learning. As such, family learning and behaviour change are examples of subtle surveying power mobilised in educational settings to police parents.

Reflecting on current absences within the geographical literature, this review has suggested there are a number of gaps that require urgent attention. Firstly, there has been an omission in thinking about the way that Early Years settings disseminate their specific learning ethoses. This is despite their ethoses being considerably more varied and diverse than amongst mainstream state maintained primary schools. The diversity of Early Years settings exists despite increasing regulatory power in the form of prescriptive Early Years' curriculums and inspections that monitor and assess practice and provision. How such diverse settings negotiate their practice has until now been ignored, as spaces of early education have not traditionally been seen as educational settings. As such, the way professionals communicate their setting's ethos, and the impact this might have on parents' decision making process is worthy of exploration, and informs the first two research questions for this thesis: 'How do different Early Years professionals articulate the ethos of their settings?', and 'Why do parents use Early Years Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?'. Secondly, the promotion of pre-school education has previously only been seen as a way of promoting mother-workers; however, the state demonstrates that early education can also be used as a part of its strategy for reducing all manner of ills, from poverty, crime, educational underachievement and future worklessness by specifically targeting the family, and in particular, mothers. This has informed the third and fourth research questions which exploreS the extent to which Early Years settings seek to engage, control and re-educate parents and if this is achieved in an empowering, or discriminatory way: 'To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years setting?' and 'What expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?'.

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methods employed in the thesis. This thesis has adopted a qualitative methodology, with interview data collected through discussions with forty-seven parents and professionals attending four different family and childcare settings in a small town in the U.K. Interviews with parents explored choice of, usage and experience of different settings for families. Interviews with professionals examined the ethos of their setting, and the subsequent relationships and partnerships formed with families.

The first section of this chapter discusses the epistemological standpoint of the researcher and how she situates herself as a feminist geographer and the impact this had on the research design. Section two discusses the rationale for using a qualitative methodology and the practicalities of the design and carrying out of interviews, and the problematic use of questionnaires with parents in what was originally a mixed method approach to data collection. The third section discusses the approach to data analysis, and the final sections focus on the ethical considerations that went into the design of the data collection tools and a reflection of the researcher's positionality.

3.2 Epistemological standpoint

Feminist geography has produced critical evaluations of previously male-dominated geography (WGSG, 1997) and early feminist work within geography challenged the discipline for its omission of women as subjects of research (Valentine, 2007). It is important for researchers to understand and recognise this implicit masculine bias and to observe how feminist geographers first began to explore and work with gender as a concept, with for example Hanson (1984) arguing that gender is as important as any other social or economic factor. A major achievement for feminist research has been the attention to the invisible labour that occurs in the home, for example the domestic labour of parents (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2011). Due to the significant attention to gender within human geography it is commonplace for researchers to locate themselves socially and politically within their

research, and consider themselves as: 'producing partial, embodied, situated knowledges rather than fixed, universal truths' (England, 2006, p.294), thus ensuring women's lives become a central focus.

Feminist theorists define feminist epistemology as being about women's experiences and their knowledge (Alcoff and Potter, 2013), therefore, feminist epistemology scrutinises the way gender influences what we understand to be knowledge. Feminist epistemologies challenge traditionally considered valid forms of knowledge, and stress the non-neutrality of researchers and the power relations involved in the process of research (Rose, 1993, Katz, 1994). England (2006) explains:

> *'At the heart of feminist geographies are analyses of the complexities of power, privilege, oppression and representation, with gender foregrounded as the primary social relation… Feminist research challenges and redefines disciplinary assumptions and methods, and develops new understandings of what counts as knowledge'* (England, 2006, p.286).

Feminism has shown that the world is not orderly and rational and, therefore, is also not always easily quantifiable. Feminism demands that researchers view their research as personal and social, acknowledging that their methodological choices are not abstract processes of seeking knowledge; but rather influenced by who we are (WGSG, 1997). For researchers like myself situated within a feminist perspective, epistemological and methodological approaches should share a commitment to acknowledging and drawing on power and knowledge relationships and bringing about positive changes (Bowell, 2011). England (2006) discusses how feminist researchers have chosen their methods by how well suited they are to feminist analysis and so tended to favour qualitative methods, such as interactive interviews.

There has been a tendency in human geography to state that the formalisation of qualitative methods has arisen only recently, representing a 'post-quantitative' cultural turn within the discipline. However, that is not necessarily the case with Whittlesey stating in 1927 that questioning is necessary to supplement observation (Whittlesey, 1927). Davis (1954) described how geographers learnt how people live through questioning them, rather than through field observations alone. Nevertheless, in the last twenty years there has been a resurgence in attention to the importance of using qualitative techniques and on the need for researchers to be explicit in demonstrating their methodological awareness. DeLyser (2008) described how this had been in response to this temporary eclipse of qualitative geography during what he termed 'the mid-twentieth-century's quantitative revolution' (p.235). However, feminist geographers have also recognised the importance of quantitative methods with McLafferty (1995) arguing in favour of a mixed method approach, describing how: 'coupling

the power of the general with the insight and nuance of the particular, such research illuminates people's lives and the larger contexts in which they are embedded' (p.440). As a feminist geographer, I strive to use approaches in my research that are both collaborative, and non-exploitive and where there are as equal as possible power relations between myself and my participants (England, 2006). In-depth interviews are commonly chosen when researchers share this intention because they are seen as facilitating an 'empathetic research encounter' (Dwyer and Limb, 2001, p.4). As such, I intended to answer the research questions outlined earlier in chapter one with in-depth semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Using questionnaires and interviews in qualitative research

In order to answer the research questions outlined earlier in chapter one, qualitative methods in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed in this thesis. However, a mixed method approach using interviews with parents and professionals, and parental questionnaires, was the original research design for this thesis. The use of questionnaires was intended to ground the research by providing information about parents' use of the settings they attended.

Geographers are increasingly more explicit in their use of a mixed-method approach which weaves together data from multiple sources and assists in rigorous analysis (Clifford et al., 2010). Justifications for using a mixed method approach range from validation and the potential to highlight discrepancies in the data or the researcher's interpretations, to the effective complimenting of using some methods together (Elwood, 2010). In this thesis, a mixed method approach was adopted with the intention of consolidating and deepening knowledge in order to corroborate findings (Cresswell, 2003). As was found in this thesis, Laurie (1992) discusses how multiple methods can be both difficult and enlightening for the researcher. The use of parental questionnaires within the thesis has been problematic; however, the design and implementation of questionnaires have provided several interesting reflections, and will be discussed below.

3.3.1 Designing and reflecting on the use of questionnaires.

Questionnaires are an example of a quantitative research tool, in that the data obtained can be turned into numbers and codes and analysed statistically (WGSG, 1997). The questionnaires were intended to collect data from a large number of parents across four settings. Firstly, the questionnaire intended to find out why parents attended the setting and

what they liked about it. Secondly, to explore what kind of learning experiences their children had at home, and finally, what support they understood to be available to them and how this might be improved.

Questionnaires are defined as a 'carefully structured and ordered set of questions designed to obtain the needed information without either ambiguity or bias…every respondent answers the same questions, asked in the same sequence' (Johnston, 2000, p.668). Several studies about parents' choices and views on childcare have included questionnaires, including DfE (2013) which used surveys to find out about parental demand for and experiences of access to childcare. Questionnaires have the potential for being the basis of research data that represents a particular sample of people. It is relatively straightforward for the researcher to process answers, as codes can be assigned to each tick box option: 'the practices of counting up produces numeric measurements of what people think and how they behave, alongside information about their gender, age, occupation…this information can be cross tabulated and used to make quantifiable inferences about the wider sample' (Cloke et al., 2004, p.130). Closed questions enhance the comparability of answers; however, since I was prioritising the collecting of rich data over comparability, an 'other' box that the participant can write in was provided where appropriate. As it is not necessary to identify yourself by name on a questionnaire, for participants who were interested in sharing their views but not committing to interview, there may have been the sense of being 'anonymised' by only providing basic information through a tick box system. Giving out questionnaires was also a way of forming initial contact with parents, introducing myself and the research topic.

Quantitative research has however, been critiqued by feminist geographers as 'disembodied' (WGSG, 1997, p.92), as researchers are seen to be too focused on searching for an objective truth and extracting information from their participants. It has been argued that it is only through in-depth qualitative research, like interviews, that researchers are able to show true sensitivity and accurately record the differences in language, behaviour and actions of different groups of women. For this reason, Gallagher (2013a) stated that employing interviews in her research with childcare workers enabled her to reflect on the feminist politics of her research. However, Jayarante (1993) advocated the merits of combining different methods, particularly within feminist research. Cloke et al. (2004) discuss the use of questionnaires and interviews together;

> '[questionnaires] are usually part of a wider quantitatively driven strategy of social survey where representative samples of people can be questioned in order to produce numeric measures of behaviour, attitude, attribute and so on[...]interviewing is usually a qualitative exercise aimed at teasing out the deeper well-springs of meaning with which attributes, attitudes and behaviour are endowed' (p.127)

In this study, questionnaires were to be self-completed; I was not present so the respondent needed to read, understand and answer the questions independently. Because of this, questionnaires should be extensively planned and carefully considered to ensure that they are accessible and easy to answer. Bryman (2012) suggests that questions should be closed with a simple design avoiding confusing filter questions where the respondent can inadvertently omit questions. Additionally, shorter questionnaires help to avoid respondent fatigue. The questionnaire was briefly explained in the participant information sheet (see appendix item one), the questionnaire itself (see appendix item two) was piloted with six parents unconnected to the research in order to ensure that it was not too lengthy as the quality of the research can otherwise suffer (Parfitt, 2005). Piloting was also necessary to ensure that the wording of the questionnaire was suitable for a non-specialist audience, with appropriate language and tone to ensure the respondent does not feel out of their depth. This is aided by researchers having had prior contact with their survey group (Parfitt, 2005). Early in the research, a questionnaire was piloted with a respondent who was holding her sleeping child. As she was physically unable to fill the document out herself but was keen to participate, I assisted. Communicating the questionnaire verbally was lengthy and the participant lost interest. Although careful consideration went into making the questionnaire as succinct as possible, the use of Likert scales meant it did not lend itself well to being read aloud. Clearly, this showed that the questionnaire was most accessible when self-completed and that respondent fatigue could impede the reliability of the answers given. As most parents usually had little free time before leaving their child in each setting, and at pick up time were understandably focused on greeting their children, it was important that the remaining questionnaires were completed independently by the respondents.

Bryman (2012) warns that questionnaires often take time to be returned to the researcher, frequently requiring follow up letters, this was representative of the experience using questionnaires in this research. Though they worked well as an interview recruitment tool, response level in general was low, with only 27 questionnaires completed. This was despite employing a variety of distribution techniques. Distribution techniques included giving out questionnaires to parents during a dialogue about the thesis, via professionals during parent-child handovers, distributing in children's bags or leaving in children's drawers, and being displayed in waiting areas. An interesting observation was that the questionnaires that had been completed were often annotated, with additional handwritten information or extra handwritten boxes drawn on. Valentine (2005) warned of the closed nature of questions used in questionnaires;

> *'[the] tendency of questionnaire surveys to ask a rigid set of simple questions which*
> *'force' or push the respondents' answers into particular categories which they may not*

have thought of unprompted or may not want to use, is just one of the reasons why
researchers often choose to use interviews either as a supplement or as an alternative'
(Valentine, 2005, p.110)

Parents clearly had difficulty in representing their choices, beliefs and experiences of parenting in a prescribed way. This reaction was unexpected, and was illustrative of the emotional experiences involved in parenting. This makes evident how difficult it is to design questionnaires on emotive subjects and suggested that interviews would be a more appropriate tool.

These difficulties meant that the questionnaires were not completed in a standardised way, this coupled with the small sample size meant it would be difficult, and inappropriate to analyse them quantitatively. Therefore, it was decided that the main method of data collection for this thesis would be interviews. Valentine (2001) states that even in the most thoroughly planned research design being flexible and responsive to changes, opportunities and unforeseen circumstances is important. She urges researchers to record changes and decision making that are made to the research design in order to ensure the process is transparent. I did this through keeping a diary where I reflected on problems I encountered with the questionnaires as they occurred.

3.3.2 Semi structured interviews

Interviews were a successful data collection tool in this project. A rapport with participants was successfully built, which provided the generation of rich, detailed data. Although each interview was different, with some acting as more cathartic and therapeutic experiences than others, the interviews were a non-passive, empowering and sympathetic research encounter which was aided by my positionality as an expectant mother and an early years professional. The experience relied on my inter-personal skills and my ability to form trusting relationships (Kitchin and Tate, 2000). In this way, for this project and the unique contexts the research was conducted in, interviews were as Fontana and Frey (2000) state 'one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings' (p.62), and in that way more suitable than the use of questionnaires. Interviews with parents were employed in this thesis to explore in-depth their experiences of choosing and using family and childcare settings and the impact, if any, this had on their home learning environment. The data collection method for professionals were in-depth interviews which explored their perceptions of parents' use of family and childcare settings, and their reflections on the promotion of parental partnerships in their specific setting.

Most qualitative studies are based on asking respondents questions or making observations, although they may seem to be a natural choice (Silverman, 2011) they are not to be approached without due rigour (Bryman, 2008). Kitchin and Tate (2013) describe interviews as 'complex social interactions' (p.215) during which the researcher tries to learn about a person's experiences and thoughts, as well as illuminating behaviours (Hoggart et al., 2002) and opinions and emotions (Longhurst, 2003). As such, interviews allow for the generating of rich, detailed and multi-layered data that illuminate a deep picture (Burgess, 1988; Silverman, 1993). Qualitative techniques are not concerned with statistical representativeness and scientific rigour (Valentine, 2001), instead, they aim to promote the detailed understanding of socio-spatial experiences; they are intensive and based on in-depth studies as opposed to large data sets: 'qualitative methods offer interpretations of causal processes that have wide conceptual relevance' (WGSG, 1997, p.92).

Interviews can be entirely unstructured, using just an idea and prompts meaning that the interviewee is allowed freedom in the direction of the interview. However, as I had already identified themes to explore, it was preferable to choose semi-structured interviews where a list of topics and questions were prepared beforehand (see appendix items three and four). In these circumstances the interviewee is still given freedom to reply as questions can be re-arranged, skipped or omitted entirely from the end sequence of questions, dependent on their response: 'If the researcher is beginning the investigation with a fairly clear focus, rather than a very general notion of wanting to do research on a topic, it is likely that the interviews will be semi-structured ones, so that the more specific issues can be addressed' (Bryman, 2008, p.439). Valentine (2005) warned that interviews should remain fluid according to the interests and experiences of the interviewees. Similarly, Bryman (2008) warns that it is important not to allow the formulation of a guide that is so specific that it allows 'alternative avenues of enquiry that might arise during the collection of fieldwork data are closed off. Such premature closure of your research focus would be inconsistent with the process of qualitative research.' (p. 442). Interview spontaneity should be preserved by following the conversational flow: 'if they start talking about your last theme first, follow their train of thought' (Valentine, 2005, p.120), striking a balance between letting the interview flow and remaining firm on the original focus is described as a 'feat of mental gymnastics' (ibid, p.120). Successful interviewing is aided by researchers who are well briefed on the topic in order to be able to have a flexible schedule of questions: 'this will help you to remember all the different angles you want to explore with your informants' (ibid, p.119). Questions and topics should help to answer the research questions but not be too specific, and avoid leading the interviewee into an answer. In order to contextualise interviewee's answers, a 'cover sheet' was used which records basic information such as the participants' name, age, gender, employment etc. Valentine (2005)

advises that researchers try to avoid conducting taped conversations in busy or social spaces, and wherever possible, to seek quiet, private spaces where disturbance and distraction can be avoided. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes: 'talking to people on their own 'territory', i.e. in their own home, can facilitate a more relaxed conversation. It also offers you the possibility to learn more about the person from seeing them in their own environment' (Valentine, 2005, p.118).

Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. Taping interviews has many advantages, in particular allowing the capturing of an 'accurate and detailed record of the conversation (including capturing all the nuances of sarcasm, humour[...]' (Valentine, 2005, p.123). Being prepared for when interviews take unusual turns or interviewees display unexpected behaviours has been important. Clearly it is impossible to predict or fully prepare for the reaction of human participants, I aimed to be open and relaxed and to react and reflect on sensitive or upsetting experiences calmly; "a preparedness to experiment when things do not go quite according to plan can pay dividends" (Bryman, 2008, p.449). Aitken (2001), commenting on personal identity and positionality states that whilst it is not necessary to entirely abandon personal politics if they can be concealed and reflected on later: 'I felt his comment was unfair and racist. While I did not comment at the time, the attitude…confirmed to me a less desirable characteristic' (p.82). I kept a research diary where I recorded notes about the interview and their context. This included some demographic information about the participant and where the interview had taken place, but also any surprisingly or uncomfortable moments. This provided an ethnographic element to the research: 'skilled ethnographers often gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations' (Spradley, 2016, p.58). Occasionally when particularly interesting themes arose, this was noted down and fed back into subsequent interviews: '[recording notes] can remind you of things that seemed important at the time of interviewing which you may have forgotten once you start analysing material' (Valentine, 2005, p.126)

Unlike in quantitative research, the approach to interview is not to maximise the yield of reliable and valid statements that can be used to measure key concepts, rather, there is an emphasis on general formulation of initial research ideas and of then allowing the interviewee's own perspectives to appear. There are, however, epistemological questions levied at interviews regarding their validity and reliability; a common critique of interviews is that they are seen to be not representative. Valentine (2005) critiques the notion of interviewer bias, arguing that the purpose of interviews is to understand how individual people experience their lives: 'the fluid and individual nature of conversational-style interviews means that they can never be replicated, only corroborated by similar studies' (p.111). It can be argued that within the social sciences there is 'no such thing as objectivity' (ibid). Haraway (1988) argued that

true objectivity is impossible to achieve, describing it as a 'god-trick' (p.582), she demands that whilst we aim to provide 'faithful accounts of the real world' (p.579), we do not lose sight of making it explicit how our perspective and positioning within the world influences our interpretations; she terms this a 'situated knowledge' (p.582). Rose (1999) describes how reflecting on in-depth interviews helped her to understand the significance of her own position within her research;

> *'I understood their knowledge as situated…all knowledge is produced in specific circumstances and those circumstances shape it in some way…I knew I shouldn't and couldn't pretend to be an all-seeing and all-knowing researcher; I knew instead…that I should situate myself and my interpretations of those interviews by reflexively examining my positionality'*.(p.305)

Valentine (2005) argues and that all methods are intrinsically influenced by the aims and interpretations of the researcher and that this is part of researchers treating their participants as people rather than objects to be 'exploited' or 'mined' (p.112) for information. Interviews are a 'social encounter' (Kitchen and Tate, 2013, p.215), essentially collaborative' (Cloke et al., 2004, p.150) and a 'dialogic process jointly shaped by the researcher and the researched' (WGSG, 1997, p.92). As such, subjectivity is both crucial and unavoidable: 'the strengths of using interviews lie in the very acknowledgement of inter-subjectivity' (Cloke et al., 2004, p.150). Feminist researchers warn to not view interviewees as subordinates who interviewers simply use to extract information: 'the interviewee is not a research "subject", but a reasoning, conscious human being to be engaged with' (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994, p.121). So, whilst we must be aware that we cannot ever fully recognise or represent our own positionality (Rose, 1997a), it is necessary to engage with the values and subjectivities of the researcher as these are significant factors in the co-construction of knowledge in research encounters. Additionally, it is also important to recognise that there are limits to knowing subjectivity. The extent to which we as researchers are able to represent other people's lives is a difficult epistemological question: 'all such representations will be in some senses fictional in that they go beyond actual utterances of the research encounter' (Cloke et al. 2004, p.130). Although there are limitations in overcoming the criticisms levied on interview methodologies, being aware of them is important for adding rigour to data collection.

Data was collected in a small town in provincial England, with a history of deindustrialisation. Its population is around 14,000, with a strong majority of white British inhabitants. This case study provided a specific example of life beyond the urban or rural, and illuminates the lives of families who are neither middle or working class, rather they are 'just about managing':

> *'These families tend to own their own homes, they work hard in both the private and public sectors, and they have a very strong commitment to family life…[they] are not privately educated; they do not live in large homes in leafy suburbs; they do not drive new so-called "Chelsea Tractors"; and they do not take expensive annual skiing holidays. While they are not poor, they do not have significant disposable incomes'*
> (Frayne, 2015, p.5)

Given the relative absence of an employment market in finance and other higher professional sectors, and limited levels of unemployment, the town provides an interesting case-study of groups in 'the middle' who have been sidelined in previous research about childcare and parenting. As such, interesting dimensions are revealed that have previously been overlooked in Geography. This is important given that 6 million working families consider themselves to be 'just about managing' (Finch, 2016).

The town was home to six different types of family and childcare settings all of which were approached for participation in the research. It was decided that child-minders would not be explored in this research, since a significant focus for the thesis was on processes of power in institutional settings. Reflections on this are provided in chapter eight. Two settings in the town declined participation, initial contact was conducted formally through email, followed by a phone call, and then letter. In one of these two settings, I was invited into the setting and was able to share the documents used in data collection, for example participant information sheets (see appendix item one), and discuss the project with the manager. Unfortunately, they later declined to participate. Despite this, it was still felt that the four settings which agreed to participate were diverse in ethos and approach to care and early learning and in what they offer to parents and children, and are described below.

- Vertlea Sure Start Centre: a Sure Start Centre offering various classes for parents and young children to attend together at set times several times a week

- The Tree House Nursery: a private 'for profit' nursery (birth to four) open 7am-6pm five days a week

- The Mud-Pit Pre-school: a 'not for profit' committee-run Pre-School with a Forest School ethos (six months to four) offering term time care for children 8am-6pm five days a week

- Norbush Pre-school: a Pre-School located in a primary school (three plus) offering sessions during term time 9:15-3.30 five days a week.

Both parents and professionals were approached and invited to participate in the research through interviews and questionnaires. A table is displayed below to show the final numbers of participants interviewed.

Table 3.1 Participants Interviewed

Participants interviewed

	Vertlea Sure start Centre			Tree House Nursery			Mud-Pit Pre-school			Norbush Pre-school		
	Male	Female	Couple	Male	Female	Couple	Male	Female	Couple	Male	Female	Couple
Parent	0	7	0	1	12	0	0	4	1	1	5	1
Professional	0	1	0	0	7	0	1	4	0	0	2	0

The numbers of participants interviewed reflects the contexts and dynamics of each setting. In the Sure Start Centre only one member of staff out of the two based at the Centre opted to participate. An imbalance in the gender of the professional participants reflects that only one male practitioner was employed across the four settings. There were only small numbers of fathers interviewed as they were typically not available during the sessions attended within the settings, and did not fill in the questionnaires which acted as a recruitment tool for interview. However, it was decided that if during an interview a father was present and wanted to participate that the mother and father could be interviewed as a couple, this occurred twice.

The process of designing the research questions used in the questionnaire and interview schedule was a rigorous five step process, which is explained below in a table. In order to ensure that each question was purposeful in its contribution to answering the research question, it was necessary to go back to the purpose of the research, that is to make an original contribution to the geographical literature on young children and educational spaces, by addressing a lack of research in;

- The shaping of educational environments for children under five as a result of current political economic change

- The choice process for the care of children under five

- Parental involvement in children's education prior to school age

- The increasing concern about the over formalisation of care and education settings for children under five.

A table is displayed below showing the five step process in designing the data collection tools.

Table 3.2 Process for designing questionnaire and interview schedule

Process for designing questionnaire and interview schedule	
Step	**Action**
1	Consideration of each research question
2	Mapping on research themes explored in the literature review onto each research question

Research questions			
How do different Early Years professionals articulate the ethos of their setting?	Why do parents use Early Years Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?	To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years setting?	What expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?
⬇	⬇	⬇	⬇
Related themes: attitudes to early education, experience/ qualification of childcare workers, local need, early intervention, safeguarding	**Related themes:** local choice, availability, class, neighbourhood influence, social capital, maternal employment, maternity leave policies, attitudes to early education	**Related themes:** professionalisation of parenting, surveillance, role of state in creating citizen workers, policy documents and legislation on early learning, early learning curriculums	**Related themes:** professionalisation of parenting, surveillance, availability of resources, gendered labour, class, capital, local need, early learning curriculums

3	Designing questions that would help to illuminate the key themes explored in the literature review
4	Organising the questions into several sections that followed a logical sequence
5	Reflecting on each interview question and linking back to research question

The questionnaire (see appendix item two) took approximately 10 minutes to complete, and could be completed in the settings or taken home and returned. It was divided into three parts, firstly about settings attended by the participant and their child, secondly, about the participant's child at home, and thirdly about the participant themselves. The questionnaires aimed to discover;

- Why the parent came to the setting and why they like it, or don't like it

- What kind of things they do at home with their child

- Whether they feel like support is available for them at their setting, and what kind of support they prefer to receive

- Demographic information and background information for example; how often they attend the setting, their age, gender, ethnicity, first language, number of children, employment status, social class and if their child is effected by a disability.

Each question could be answered either with a tick option, or via a Likert scale which rated how much the participant agreed with a statement, as discussed earlier, there was a space provided underneath each question for the participant to add additional comments. Questionnaires were handed out in person to parents, and though return level was still low, this was found to be the most successful in yielding responses. Additionally, questionnaires were left in communal areas or given out directly using different methods, such as stapled to newsletters. At the bottom of each questionnaire was a 'willingness to participate' indication box with information about taking part in an interview at the bottom of each questionnaire. The questionnaires were therefore used as part of the interview recruitment process for parents.

Interviews with parents and professionals took between 45 minutes and 1 hour to complete. The themes in the interview schedule for parents (see appendix item three) fell into six short sections that were explored;

1. Choosing the setting

2. Using the setting

3. Support from setting

4. Involvement in setting

5. Child's development

6. Parenting

In the interview schedule for professionals (see appendix item four) there were six short sections which sought the professional's views on;

1. Local area

2. Parents care choices

3. Parenting

4. Involving parents and sharing information

5. Home learning

6. Parental partnerships

As the interviews took place over several months and there was an initial period where recruitment was slow, I had time to consider the initial themes that were emerging from the first interviews, both by reading through the transcriptions carried out after the interviews, and by examining the field diary that was used for initial reflections after each interview. There were a number of themes that emerged from this reflection that fed back into the research schedule, either by prompting me to rephrase or rewrite questions that had not been sufficiently clear, or to insert new questions and prompts. From parents these areas included school readiness, attachment and relationships. From professionals this was a perceived decline in the ability of children to be 'independent', e.g. in self-dressing. One area that on reflection still needed to be made more explicit was parents' feelings about the cost of childcare; however, it was interesting to consider the reasons behind why this did not emerge spontaneously during interviews.

3.3.4 Interviewing participants

It was decided that although 'neutral grounds' such as the local library and a café would be offered as interview spaces for parents, for convenience most parents would prefer to be interviewed in their homes, for example around their children's rest times. Aitken (2001) who also interviewed parents in their homes points out that observing and interviewing families within their homes is helpful in that it helps the researcher to see the participant demonstrate how the home space is used within caregiving and parenting. As such, full ethical approval and a DBS clearance was sought. The majority of parents interviewed were mothers. Gender neutral language was used on flyers, participant information sheets (see appendix item one) and follow up emails; however, most of the parents who were available during initial contact (e.g. at drop off and pick up times) were mothers. Nevertheless, four fathers were interviewed and during interviews where both mothers and fathers were present, it was made clear the father was welcome to participate even if all prior contact had been with the mother. This meant that their voices are occasionally included in parts of the interviews, and two interviews became coupled interviews.

Valentine (1999) discussed how in the past researchers within geography have been less reflexive about interviewer/respondent relationships within the context of families and households in comparison with the attention focused on interviewing elites and interviewing in different cultural contexts. It has been common within geography for research on the family to be conducted through interviews with women rather than men, this could be considered

negligent considering there is often a disparity between partner's accounts on a range of topics: 'men are given a voice, which in turn may expose the negotiated and contested nature of household relationships' (ibid, p.67). Valentine (1999) argues that through this we can develop more complex understandings about gender relations within the home context, as she points out 'most household reality is a shared reality' (p.68). Aitken (2001) discusses the 'political and ethical messiness' (p.73) of interviewing couples on subjects which may be intrusive or intense but that they are worthwhile in that they are often the most interesting and provocative. The coupled interviews were some of the most interesting in terms of observing first-hand how parenting is negotiated, though it was important to remember that individuals can blend their views in order to minimise conflict. Conflict is an important issue, as Aitken (2001) warned, when we observe households and families we need to be especially sensitive to power relations: 'people who choose to share a domestic space consciously and unconsciously negotiate activities and events. There is tension, compromise and equanimity in cohabiting space that partners usually articulate with difficulty' (p.74). The majority of interviews however, were single interviews with mothers. An advantage of this is that the participants have more freedom to express their individual views, especially on subjects that may be difficult to talk about in front of their partner without offending them. Aitken (2001) used phrases such as 'I wouldn't want [partner] to know' or 'between me and you' as examples he had observed individuals use when opening up in lone interviews; on occasion in my research mothers did indicate that they were speaking frankly because of the absence of the father. Valentine (1999) warned that individual interviews can arouse anxiety amongst couples for this reason: 'each cannot manage the impression of themselves being reproduced by the other…they worry they will be judged as bad' (p.71). It was interesting then that both coupled interviews gave accounts which emphasised the shared nature of domestic and childcare responsibilities and the fathers appeared to be concerned about the construction of themselves as 'good fathers'.

Initial contact was made with professionals and parents by volunteering at the settings. Securing interviews with professionals was relatively straightforward in that I had already formed a relationship with key professionals (e.g. managers and leaders) in the settings through the negotiation of access to the setting through both phone calls and email, this meant that key professionals and staff teams already had an understanding of the research area and how they and their colleagues might contribute. As discussed earlier, it was important that I made it clear that I was not simply there to mine information from the participants. This was demonstrated by a willingness to volunteer, to get to know the professionals and observe their practice and when invited to be involved with different events, e.g. a preschool Christmas celebration to participate. Scheduling interviews with the professionals was mostly
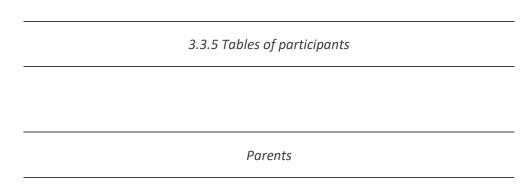
unproblematic, many professionals commented that they were pleased that their voice would be included in the thesis, and others reflected on their own higher education experiences and their desire to 'give something back' to another researcher involved in a research area that they too were passionate about. Logistical issues did occasionally arise that needed attention e.g. around finding a quiet period in the day to carry out interviews, or finding interview spaces that were quiet and private (Valentine, 2005) as not all the settings had a meeting or staff room. Several participants opted to be interviewed in their own time after work, and one in my home.

Volunteering in the nursery and pre-schools meant attending for a morning or afternoon session in order to greet parents as they arrived and left the settings. The professionals in the settings often acted as gatekeepers by introducing me and allowing an initial exchange whereby my role within the setting and the purpose of the research could be introduced. This allowed the opportunity for engaging the parent in participating in the research and the sharing of data collection materials such as questionnaires and participant information sheets (see appendix item one and two). Although it seems to be a familiar problem for researcher and gatekeeper relationships to be restrictive and strained and for the researcher to experience significant filtering in regards to who is deemed appropriate to approach (Cloke et al., 2004) this was not the case in this research. The gatekeepers across the settings were engaged and interested in the research area and actually facilitated initial contact with parents that may have been difficult to approach alone, e.g. parents with English as an additional language and a younger mum who did not routinely enter the communal drop off and pick up area of the pre-school. However, the researcher had to ensure that this willingness to help did not overstep the boundaries into coercion considering the power imbalance between for example, a teacher and a parent.

Vertlea Sure Start Centre primarily provides support for families in the form of developmental classes for babies and toddlers, as well as a base for health professionals such as Health Visitors and breastfeeding professionals to meet and run various different sessions such as breastfeeding cafes. In the Sure Start Centre, I was able to attend several groups and classes, including a new mum group, a stay and play session and a baby massage class. The sessions were specifically designed to facilitate relaxed and informal conversations between the parents in small groups and this allowed for the researcher to be discussed in a natural flow of conversation as the parents discussed their babies and experiences of motherhood. Many of the parents went to different classes within the Centre; for example a breastfeeding café. This was useful in terms of snowballing the initial sample size as participants could recommend other parents they knew used the Centre for alternative classes and who I would not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet. Snowball sampling is still a widely utilised

technique for reaching participants in qualitative research: 'sometimes researchers have to work with the interviews they can get…snowballing can be used whereby a small initial group of informants can be asked to provide interview contacts with friends and acquaintances within a particular social group…permitting a chain of interviewees to emerge' (Cloke et al., 2004, p.156). This happened quite naturally, most parents appeared to find the interview process enjoyable and at the end of the interview would suggest friends whom I could contact. However, it is important to consider that participants will always be more likely to recommend those they consider to be like-minded. This was the case in one example where a parent using the Sure Start Centre recommended a parent attending different classes at the Centre who she knew through a baby wearing club they both attended. Though the participants had many different experiences and views to share, they did communicate some common approaches to significant elements of parenting, in particular around attachment and responsiveness.

Key scholars (Crozier and Davies, 2007; Reay, 2005; Page and Elfer, 2013) researching in the area of parenting and education have used similar methods in their research, particularly in their use of recruiting participants to in-depth interviews that they had got to know through volunteering and observation. Like Page (2013a) whose research focused on childcare choices, I used both a snowball sample recruitment technique and reached out to potential participants that were known prior to the research as a result of previous employment in the sector, in addition to the other methods for approaching participants, discussed above. Similar to Jupp's (2013) research on Sure Start Centres I attempted to include some diversity in the participant sample: 'Interviewees were approached at random, although a broad-brush attempt was made to approach a diversity of users in terms of age, ethnicity and gender' (p.177). Page (2013a) chose to use interviews with mothers in order to 'to see as far as methodologically possible through their eyes, to hear their voices and ultimately to be able to tell their stories' (p.853). Page allowed the women in her to interview to take the lead, and took the role as 'good listener': 'My responses were mainly encouraging – 'yes', 'I see', 'I understand' and such like. I interrupted only to seek clarification or to encourage them to go further into the depth of their story' (p.857), similarly, I designed an interview schedule that would facilitate conversational flow and allowed for diversions from the intended topics that were to be explored.

Parents

The following tables illustrate the key demographic information that parents shared. Parents self-selected their class position through the five-class NS-SEC self-coded method (SOC, 2000). The 'whiteness' of the sample group reflects the demographic makeup of the local area. It is interesting to observe that the sample floats between the two ends of the scale in regards to 'class', neither dominating 'modern professionals' or 'semi-routine manual and service' occupations. This, again, reflects the area and is an example of what Teresa May coined 'the just about managing', that is, 'these are individuals and families that are not rich, but also not the poorest in society' (Citizens advice, 2016, p.2). Citizens Advice (2016) collated data showed that 50% of those defined as 'just managing' had children living at home, and we know that 45% of parents' disposable income is spent on childcare (The Childcare Survey, 2017). This added an interesting dimension to the research because previous literature has tended to focus on families defined as rich or poor, rather than those situated somewhere in the middle. There has been some acknowledgement to the plight of this group, for example with the 2017 introduction of 30 hours free entitlement funding for children of working parents.

Table 3.3 Vertlea Sure Start Centre parents

Vertlea Sure Start Centre							
Participant name	Gender	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Number of children	Educational qualification	Class
Amie	Female	37	Married	White British	2	A-Levels	Senior manager/ administrator
Cat	Female	34	Married	White British	1	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
Demi	Female	36	Married	White British	3	Degree	In higher education
Joanne	Female	36	Married	White British	2	Degree	Modern professional
Kacie	Female	35	Married	White British	2	PGCE	Modern professional
Laura	Female	29	Married	White British	1	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
Tanya	Female	26	In a relationship	White British	1	A-Levels	Semi-routine manual and service

Table 3.4 Tree House Nursery parents

| | | | | Tree House Nursery | | | |
Participant name	Gender	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Number of children	Educational qualification	Class
Callie	Female	31	Separated, in a relationship	White British	2	A-Levels	Clerical and intermediate
Eve	Female	35	Married	Mixed Asian	2	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
James	Male	44	Separated, in a relationship	White British	1	G.C.S.E	Modern professional
Kelly	Female	48	Married	White British	2	O-Level	Senior manager/ administrator
Katya	Female	33	Married	White British	1	PG diploma	Senior manager/ administrator
Karly	Female	40	Married	White British	2	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
Lola	Female	27	Separated, in a relationship	White British	1	A-levels	Clerical and intermediate
Rachel	Female	40	Married	White British	1	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
Sammy	Female	38	Married	White British	2	PGCE	Modern professional
Stevie	Female	34	Married	White British	2	Masters	Modern professional
Sacha	Female	27	Married	White British	1	A-Levels	Clerical and intermediate
Maria	Female	40	Married	White British	1	PhD	Modern professional
Summer	Female	33	Married	White British	1	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator

Table 3.5 Norbush Pre-school parents

| | | | | Norbush Pre-school | | | |
Participant name	Gender	Age	Marital status	Ethnicity	Number of children	Educational qualification	Class
Emily	Female	35	Married	White British	2	A-Level	Senior manager/ administrator
Joe	Male	38	Married	White British	2	Degree	Modern professional
Saffia	Female	32	Married	African	3	Degree	Modern professional
Lyra	Female	32	In a relationship	White British	2	Cache Diploma	Semi-routine manual and service
Lisa	Female	31	Married	White British	3	NVQ	Senior manager/ administrator
Nat	Female	40	Married	White British	2	Degree	Modern professional
Rikki	Male	43	Married	White British	2	Degree	Modern professional
Ruby	Female	31	Married	White British	1	A-Levels	Senior manager/ administrator

Table 3.6 The Mud-Pit Pre-school parents

				The Mud-Pit Pre-School			
Participant name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Marital status**	**Ethnicity**	**Number of children**	**Educational qualification**	**Class**
Hayley	Female	32	Married	White British	2	Degree	Senior manager/ administrator
Jill	Female	39	Married	White British	2	Masters	Modern professional
June	Female	34	Married	White British	1	NVQ	Semi-routine manual and service
Nadine	Female	38	Married	White British	1	G.C.S.E.	Semi-routine manual and service
Tara-Lee	Female	30	Married	Mixed black	2	Masters	Semi-routine manual and service

Professionals

The following tables illustrate the key information about the professionals in each setting, please note that the box entitled *'professional role'* uses the words of the participants, thus reflecting how each setting describes and labels their professionals.

3.7 Vertlea Sure Start Centre professionals

		Vertlea Sure Start Centre		
Participant name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Professional role**	**Educational qualification**
Catherine	Female	55	Manager	Cache diploma

3.8 Tree House Nursery professionals

		Tree House Nursery		
Participant name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Professional role**	**Educational qualification**
Anna	Female	27	Deputy manager	Early Years degree
Carol	Female	37	Manager	Cache diploma
Ella	Female	30	Baby room leader	Cache diploma
Kylie	Female	18	Trainee nursery nurse	Unqualified
Jade	Female	18	Trainee nursery nurse	Unqualified
Tilly	Female	39	Qualified nursery nurse	NVQ level 3

3.9 Norbush Pre-school professionals

		Norbush Pre-school		
Participant name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Professional role**	**Educational qualification**
Nicole	Female	33	Qualified nursery professional	NVQ level 3
Nina	Female	38	Manager	NVQ level 3

3.10 The Mud-Pit Pre-school professionals

The Mud-Pit Pre-school				
Participant name	Gender	Age	Professional role	Educational qualification
Lila	Female	58	Deputy manager	Qualified teacher
Oscar	Male	41	Senior educator	Degree educated
Phoebe	Female	25	Educator	Early Years degree, in higher education (MA)
Rita	Female	47	Manager	Early Years degree
Silver	Female	26	Senior educator	Qualified teacher

3.4 Data analysis

The interview data gathered in this thesis will be thematically analysed. Braun and Clarke (2006) state: 'it is vital that you immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content' (p.12). Thematic analysis 'can offer a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in a qualitative research career' (ibid, p. 81). Thematic analysis allows researchers to increase the reliability with which they understand and interpret observations about people, events, situations and organisations, by both reflecting reality and trying to unpick the surface of 'reality' (ibid). Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information gathered during data collection in order to identify themes. Themes are patterns that may be identified either inductively, from the raw information gathered, or deductively after data collection (Boyatzis, 1998).

Each interview was recorded on an audio recorder, though a few hand written notes were made during the interview, for example to include a new point in a later prompt or to exclude a later question and reflections were made in a field diary following the interview, it was necessary to use record the interviews in order to hear them back later: 'it goes without saying that your interview should always be recorded...the old days of pen and paper are long gone!' (Silverman, 2010, p.199). Bryman (2012) conversely is critical of the use of recording equipment; however, the appearance of the device in that it was small and unobtrusive was helpful, additionally, as most interviews were carried out in a living room or kitchen, the recorder could be placed on a table or shelf so as not to be a central, distracting presence. I joked in each interview about hating hearing my own voice back and about feeling embarrassed transcribing silly jokes, this distracted the interviewees from their own hesitations about having their voice recorded. However, it was made clear in each interview that the

participant had the option to ask for the interview not to be recorded. Field diary reflections after included:

- Obvious initial themes

- Interesting points such as unexpected information shared

- Significant demographic information revealed e.g. family set up, cultural/ethnic heritage, educational background

- How the interview went, how did I respond to the participant? Was the participant at ease? Was the tone relaxed and informal? What might have influenced this, e.g. children present?

- Points for future consideration that could be fed into subsequent interview schedules

Although not a formal process of data analysis, this fieldwork reflection was an example of considering the data carefully during the process of collection as suggested by Silverman (2010). Following the collection of the interview data came the process of transcription. Data is of limited use until it has been transcribed, coded and analysed (Jackson, 2001). Transcription refers to the exact recording of a participant's precise words spoken through the interview encounter (Cloke et al., 2004, p.359). Transcribing interviews is a lengthy process and a 'daunting prospect' (Bennet and Shurmer-Smith, 2002, p.205) and like many researchers I underestimated the time consuming nature of the task, some of the interviews were intense and emotionally draining, an experience Page (2014) shared: 'I was emotionally drained[...].at times could not bear to listen to large extracts of the interviews in one go. I frequently had to 'psyche myself up' (p.859). The interview data was transcribed with the assistance of a computer package which allowed for the recording to be slowed down, sped up, re-wound and fast-forwarded with the use of a foot pedal, leaving the hands free to type fluidly. Whilst I attempted to transcribe the interviews as far as possibly verbatim, like Page (ibid), I decided that it was not always necessary to transcribe every 'faltering, mumbling and confusion of everyday talk' (Plummer, 2001, p. 150). Decisions like this were important because as Silverman (2010) recognises it is possible to 'lose yourself in transcription' (p.200) and to neglect the crucial time needed for analysis. Practical advice was also followed such as 'don't try to reinvent the wheel' (ibid) and to use simple and standard set of transcription symbols. I transcribed interviews directly into Microsoft word, using a very simple set of symbols; square brackets to denote names and places, e.g. [name], [local town], and brackets to describe non-verbal content such as (pause), (laughs).

Interviews were coded into themes and sub-themes and colour coded and categorised. Coding refers to the preliminary stage of analysis where the data is combed through and

certain words or phrases are ascribed a code: 'coding is intended to make the analysis more systematic and to build up an interpretation through a series of stages, avoiding the temptation of jumping to premature conclusions' (Jackson, 2001, p.202). This is important because qualitative researchers can be accused of selecting unrepresentative quotes to support their initial prejudices or 'cherry picking' (ibid), as such, coding can help researchers to demonstrate the validity of the methods and the criteria they have used to illustrate the most meaningful and significant parts of their data. Codes can be described as 'in vivo', that is arising from terms the participants themselves use, for example 'mum guilt' was referred to in this thesis, or codes can be analytical and constructed by the researcher from the data, for example 'surveillance' which was an important theme of the interviews yet not explicitly labelled as such by the participants.

3.5 Ethical considerations

It has become increasingly important and necessary to consider carefully the ethical issues of conducting research: Cloke et al. (2004) argue that this is particularly significant for those involved with generating qualitative research: 'to construct thick descriptions of the lives of individual people inevitably raises more ethical difficulties than the use of other, more quantitative research' (p.164). Full ethical approval for the thesis was given by Loughborough University Ethics Approval (Human Participants) Sub-committee. DBS (disclosure and barring service) clearance was also given which not only protected the participant, but also myself when entering homes or settings where young children would be present. Though it was not anticipated that I would spend any time alone with children, this was necessary and proved to be useful, for example in one incident where at the end of the interview a participant asked if I could hold her baby whilst she hoovered the room next door. Each parent that participated in the research was given a £10 supermarket voucher as a thank you for their time, due to the small monetary value of this, it was not considered to be exploiting or an inducement for participation. Throughout the research process, and when disseminating results, the names of the location of the research, the participants, settings and associated sensitive information has been anonymised beyond simply using pseudonyms. Gallagher (2013a) has emphasised the importance of confidentiality and anonymising data when researching within childcare settings: 'given the highly competitive nature of the sector, there was a concern on the part of the providers that information might be transmitted between services. Thus confidentiality was an important ethical component of the thesis, and one which had to be made clear before providers would agree to an interview' (p.1112). In accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 all data has been stored in a password protected hard drive which has been kept in a

secure locked place. Personal and identifiable information will be destroyed after the thesis's completion but quotes will be saved for future reference.

All participants were given the option to have a chaperone (a friend or family member) during the interview process. Similarly, if a parent appeared to be nervous about speaking to me alone, paired interviews were offered; however, this only happened in a small number of interviews where couples were interviewed together in their homes. All participants were provided with a participant information sheet (see Appendix One) and informed consent form in a simple and clear format in order to be accessible to all. The documents ensured that the participant understood what the thesis was about, what their role would be, how their data would be used, and their rights to withdraw, to request a chaperone or to be interviewed in a pair/group. I also sought the guidance of the professionals as gatekeepers as to whether certain parents should be approached on the grounds of their general wellbeing. Emmel et al.'s (2007) interviews revealed that the gatekeeper can have an important role, especially for socially excluded individuals and groups who have a high dependency on the setting or the services provided. I did, however, recognise that there are limits to the helpfulness of other professionals acting as gatekeepers and that vulnerable people still have voices, which are often the most marginalised and deserving of recognition (Liamputtong, 2007). Nevertheless, gatekeepers' knowledge of the families they work with helped prevent me from becoming an unnecessary intrusion that could detract from protecting vulnerable children and families.

This research aimed to recruit parents from the general populous, and it was therefore possible that during an interview a participant would reveal issues which may deem them to be vulnerable, for example; they may have a history of or may be currently experiencing a mental health problem, be experiencing post-natal depression or domestic violence. Burton (2000) states of research with vulnerable participants that though it is not appropriate to say some aspects of research are more important ethically than others 'it is becoming clear that particular considerations apply to such research' (p.77). The questions and topics outlined in the questionnaire and interview deliberately avoided exploring anything that would be intentionally distressing for the participants. It was impossible considering the emotive nature of parenting to guarantee that parents would have completely neutral reactions to discussing the challenges of parenting and reflecting on their own childhoods and experiences of education. In the event of an emotional response to a discussion point, the investigator supported the participant, but also reminded the participant of their right to withdraw. In all cases the participants wished to continue participating in the study; however, I also offered a break or to rearrange the interview for a later time if that was preferred in order to respect the participant whilst avoiding appearing to stifle an interview which may be cathartic for the participant. In one interview where a participant's son was born with Cerebral Palsy, recalling

his birth and the first year of his life was clearly an emotional process. In this situation in consultation with the participant I made the difficult decision about whether the interview process was therapeutic and empowering or needlessly distressing. In this case the interview continued and the participant later enjoyed talking about her role in his recovery and physical therapy which validated the hard work she had put into his rehabilitation and the achievements he made as a result.

In another interview, the interview process altered as the participant revealed she was experiencing an episode of depression and the time that would have been used for the interview was instead spent discussing some of the topics in the interview schedule but focused more on the issues she was experiencing and giving advice. This advice included explaining how to seek financial support and how she could seek employment with help towards the cost of childcare. Although I acknowledge I am not a trained councillor it was important in this case to step outside the shoes of a researcher and offer the practical support and advice that was available to me. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) state of these situations that the researcher 'should stop being a researcher and engage in action that is not directed to the goal of producing knowledge' (p. 286). Reeves (2009) similarly said 'I found myself having to choose between perusing a story about an intimate issue and protecting participants from the upsetting memories or emotions the incident raised for them' (p.76). It was not enough here to just listen to the participant, as McDowell (1992) states: 'feminist-inspired notions of doing research 'with' or 'for'...seem admirable...however…alone does not release the scholar from exploitive relations, or even the betrayal of her subjects' (p.406). Sharing advice here was important, as Liamputtong (2007) states 'we need to remember that by inviting individuals to take part in the research, the researcher and participants have developed a relationship based on fair exchange' (p.62). It is important that researchers are prepared to provide information or responses if the participant needs this: 'they should be prepared to provide the information the participants need or to direct them to other relevant resources including reading materials or referrals to qualified professionals' (ibid, p.62). Oakley (1981) in her investigation of first time mothers struck up a close rapport with her participants and answered the questions she received as a result of the perceived expertise that the participants had of Oakley's knowledge of caring for small babies. Oakley (1981) described this relationship as reciprocal, and that it was important she could offer them this in recognition of the time the spent sharing their experiences with her. Similarly in Goode's (2000) reflection on her relationships with the drug and alcohol dependent mothers who were the participants of her research, she described small acts like accompanying participants to appointments, or sharing information about useful agencies as an act of courtesy to those with low self-esteem and who needed support: 'reciprocity is a strategy necessary to maintain the

relationship between researcher and participant during the research process…through empathy credibility, rapport, and breaking down power relationships' (p.3).

3.6 Positionality and reflexivity

A key issue concerning empirical research with participants concerns positionality, that is whether who the researcher is affects their behaviour, thus influencing the behaviour of the participant. Rose (1999) discusses how if researchers are situated with a feminist and critical geography and are aiming to acknowledge their partiality then reflexivity needs careful consideration: 'feminist geographers most often recommend a kind of reflexivity that aims, even if only ideally, at a full understanding of the researcher, the researched and the research context' (p.305). The identity of the researcher is a significant area of reflexivity, and considerations of gender, race, ethnicity and class and their ability to impede or improve research access and analysis have been important within feminist geography. Feminist research in particular looks at the significance of situated knowledge in research encounters and emphasises the role of embodiment and experience: 'We peer through our own flesh to see the other, and we present our own flesh to the other while we are engaged in the act of observation—and this embodiment has consequences for our research' (Warren and Hackney 2000, p. 21). As a white British, university educated woman, I did not appear to be disadvantaged, or to represent a minority. Many researchers have written about the challenges of conducting research as 'outsiders', when interviewers find themselves with little common ground between themselves and their participants. However, others, such as Bucerius (2013) have argued that the researcher's participation, commitment and affiliation to the participant body can help them to achieve a level of 'insider status' which can overcome some of the potential difficulties associated with their characteristics. During the data collection I became pregnant and some of the interviews were conducted when I was visibly pregnant. In Reich's (2003) reflection on her pregnancy when collecting data with families involved in child protection, she stated that her pregnancy 'facilitated access' and 'yielded information' (p.352) in unexpected ways, helping to build rapport. Impending parenthood, in this way, gave us both an important source of shared knowledge and credibility amongst the mothers. However, we shared similar concerns that this made us less of an observer and more of a participant 'dispelling the naive fantasy of myself as an objective, invisible researcher' (Reich, 2003, p.356).

Another area of consideration regarding positionality was my past experience and relatively high status within early years education. My enthusiasm for early years education

was difficult to conceal simply by the premise of the research and the focus of the thesis alone. For that reason it was potentially off-putting for some professionals who were being interviewed. This concern became apparent during an interviewee with a professional who was a younger trainee. Though she consented to the interview it was brief, and her answers were guarded. She frequently referred to information she had been taught as opposed to recalling real life experiences or her personal thoughts and feelings, even when prompted to give examples. Silverman (2001) encountered a similar situation: 'I was aware my presence in the field might affect the behaviour of those being observed, especially as the team were aware of my background…there were almost certainly times when members overtly displayed their moral adequacy as a consequence of being observed' (p.31).On this occasion, it was important for me to remember that sometimes those with less power in the workplace may find it difficult to refuse to participate if the setting itself has invited the researcher in, and other colleagues have agreed to participate (Valentine, 2001). This consideration of power relations between senior and junior staff is a specific issue within child care settings which are staffed predominantly with a relatively young and inexperienced worker (Razavi and Staab, 2010). Despite the shared commonality between myself and the participants and the subsequent friendly rapport that was established, it was important to emphasise that I could not share any information from other interviews with staff members (particularly trainee staff), parents or to generalise on findings formulated in other settings: 'you will be asking informants to talk to you either about personal experiences or opinions- often that are usually considered 'private'…if particular excerpts from these conversations are made known...they may have serious personal or professional consequences for those concerned' (Razavu and Staab, 2010, ibid, p.49). This issue did arise several times, and it was important to reflect on whether my eagerness to build friendly rapport with my participants at times allowed them to over step the mark regarding their curiosity on what other professionals and settings had discussed with me.

Wilkinson (2016) discusses how emotions are an important part of research and though they influence interpretation they do not alone impede rigorous analysis. She reflects on the lack of consideration that is often given to the emotions of the researcher, and Gilbert (2001) has observed that attention paid to emotions in qualitative research largely has focused on protecting participants from negative effects and has not done the same for researchers. Harris and Huntington (2001) suggested that "mainstream, arguably malestream, approaches to research theorizing and practice have often ignored or marginalized the importance of emotions in the research process" (p. 129). This is surprising given that the qualitative researcher is the 'instrument' through which data is gathered and analysed (Rager, 2005). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) state that qualitative researchers should: '[be] at one with the

persons under investigation, walking a mile in the other person's shoes, or understanding the person's point of view from an empathic rather than a sympathetic position" (p. 25), and as such powerful emotions are unavoidable. Some researchers suggest that attending properly to emotions is an integral part of the researcher's role within the investigative process: "'entering the meaning-making world of another requires empathy, it is inconceivable how the qualitative researcher would accomplish her goal by distancing herself from emotions" (Sciarra, 1999, p. 44).

Some research topics are likely to induce powerful emotions, though as stated earlier the interviews were not intentionally exploring emotive or distressing topics, the very nature of parenting is emotional. It was rewarding for me to observe that some participants seemed to find the interview clarifying and cathartic, which has also been observed by Rager (2005) who stated her participants had found talking to be a beneficial experience, giving them new perspectives and better understanding. Likewise, others discuss how talking about their experiences has helped participants to clarify their situations and to work towards therapeutic outcomes (Stuhlmiller, 2001). It was inevitable that friendships were formed between myself and the participants, fuelled by the often emotional exchanges during the interviews and by the commonality I had with many of the participants. Though practical steps could be taken; for example, not connecting with participants on social media, some participants were keen to remain in contact. In Hall's (2009) paper on friendship within ethnography she comments: 'friendships borne from the research seem more strenuous than those of a more 'organic' friendship, and whilst I too considered the participants to be friends, I had not fully realised the possible implications of my actions' (p. 268). In some cases the pregnancy became a talking point between the participants and I, and participants offered advice, recommended services and even offered to lend a baby sling to me. It seemed at odds with the rapport built up and the prying nature of the interviews to refuse to talk about myself, especially when pregnancy is a natural topic of conversation between mothers and mothers-to-be of similar ages. It was however important to reflect on these relationships and the bearings they could have on data analysis.

3.7 Limitations

A methodological reflection from exploring Vertlea Sure Start Centre focuses on the single interview with the manager. Though other professionals, such as the outreach worker located at the Centre were approached, an interview was not secured. Given the increasing cuts made to Sure Start Centres (DfE, 2015b), it is considered that other Centres will similarly be headed by a single manager with support from only visiting professionals such as outreach workers and Health Visitors. As evidenced by the interviews with parents using the Centre, there was a consensus of despondency towards the support offered by the manager. Sure Start managers are important vehicles for government policy translated through targeted interventions with families and programmes aimed at parental education, accordingly, there are important policy implications for how effective initiatives can be with reduced investments in staff teams. Reports on the effectiveness of the Sure Start Programme (DfE, 2015b) show that attending Centres can have positive effects on family functioning and the home learning environment, but that Centres experiencing cuts and restructuring have poorer outcomes for families. Given the well documented concern over the middle class take-over of Sure Start Centres (House of Commons, 2009, Barnardo's 2011), which was echoed in this thesis, it is important to reflect whether under strained conditions the Centre was focusing interventions and resources on the neediest families using the Centre who were not interviewed. Nevertheless, this is not the intended rationale for Centres, which whilst striving to de-stigmatise services for the most needy are supposed to assess local needs by looking at the community characteristics in order to balance targeted services alongside inclusiveness (DfE 2015b). As such, the effectiveness of the translation of policy into practice through Sure Start Centres would be worthy of future consideration, especially in regards to different parental class groups, which is an under represented research area.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology used in the thesis. Feminist epistemology has influenced the design of the data collection tools, and I have reflected on how the methodological choices I made were influenced by an awareness of the dynamics of power relationships. I discussed how I tried to achieve collaborative and non-exploitive relationships with my participants that were as far as possible modelled on 'empathetic research encounter(s)' (Dwyer and Limb, 2001, p.4). Questionnaires were used as a recruitment tool for interviews with parents; however, as a standalone data collection tool these did not work well, both in the way the answers were completed and in their low return rate. Some of the possible reasons for this were reflected upon. Forty-seven in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with both parents and professionals across the four settings. The planning and design of the questionnaire and interview schedule was explained using the five step process which was followed in order to link each question to the themes arising within the literature review and back to the thesis's overarching four research questions. The approach to recruiting participants was explained; this included a discussion about using professionals as gatekeepers and the researcher's time spent volunteering within each setting, along with the unexpected snowballing of recruitment that arose when interviewing parents in the Sure Start Centre. A table of participants is included, in order to illustrate key demographic information about both the parent and professional group. The approach to data analysis was discussed, with reference to the recording, transcription and reflection process, followed by the subsequent assignment of themes and sub-themes. Ethical considerations were important within the research, and the vulnerable nature of some of the participants was discussed alongside the steps taken to ensure the research was never exploitive. I have discussed how I responded to emotional responses to the interview topics and how I considered the effects of my own positionality, power and influence on the research process, for example as a result of my own pregnancy, and my previous employment in the sector. The following chapters will present the empirical findings that arose following data collection and analysis.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the first research question: 'How do different Early Years professionals articulate the ethos of their settings?'. It will focus on childcare and family settings and their ethos, in particular how professionals communicate their understanding of the ethos of the setting they work in and how this influences their practice. The chapter is presented in three sections. In the first section, I discuss the role of Sure Start Centres and how their ethos around educating parents in order to reduce poverty and improve social mobility are examples of promoting parental behaviour change and early intervention. In the second section I examine two childcare settings, The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school and the professional's messages around policy agendas which promote school readiness and how this is perceived by them and put into practice. In the final section I discuss the learning ethos at The Mud-Pit Pre-school and the struggle the setting has in aligning their strong beliefs around early education with the formal learning required in the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage.

4.2 Parental behaviour change

The death of Victoria Climbié in 2000 was a turning point for policy surrounding families. The Every Child Matters Green Paper (ECM, 2003), an enquiry into the failings surrounding Victoria's death, pointed at problems with early intervention, professional accountability and joined-up working between services. Following the report there was a renewed focus on professionals involved with children demonstrating better communication, knowledge sharing and a commitment to working together. This commitment to multi-agency and joined-up working in relation to supporting children and their families had previously been adopted as a key focus of Sure Start Centres. As described in detail in Chapter Three, Sure Start Centres are neighbourhood-based spaces for children under five and their families with the overarching aim of tackling deprivation and disadvantage, a 'manifestation of the welfare state at a neighbourhood level' (Jupp, 2013, p.215). Centres provide multi-agency programmes, a one

stop shop of services which aim to positively influence families through education and behaviour change. There has been a key focus on improving parenting and the significance of parenting on children's overall educational outcomes and their ability to later compete in the labour market (Gillies 2011; Wainwright and Marendet, 2012, Lister, 2006). This can be seen as an example of Neo-liberalist agenda, in that they aim to reduce dependency culture through social investment in childhood (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006; Giddens, 1998) whilst simultaneously locating responsibility for social mobility and welfare within individual households (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013).

More than 350 Sure Start Centres have closed in England since 2010. Spending on Centres in the 2015-16 financial year was 47% less than in 2010 (Guardian, 2017). Local authorities have been forced to make decisions about where to target investment by 'reshaping' and 'reconfiguring' Centres to ensure they are cost effective by targeting and tailoring the services offered to local need. Due to the removal of ring-fenced funding for Centres as a result of austerity measures and cuts, Vertlea Sure Start Centre offers fewer services than it did previously since the area is not considered to be extremely deprived. Some of the cutbacks to the Centre have been felt by parents who have observed that there is less available to their families after having second, or third children, in comparison with their first. Catherine, the manager of Vertlea Sure Start Centre talks about needing to demonstrate the impact she is having on the local area in order to retain funding:

> 'Every year through [the county council] everyone is put through a review, with budgets, because it's the government, we are always up for review…we have to do lots of monitoring, everyone that even walks through the children's Centre we try and register them… knowing how many under-fives are in the local area, that all goes towards the statistics for our monitoring' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

In the context of austerity, the Sure Start Centre seeks to target disadvantaged families whose parenting skills are considered to be in need of improvement. Catherine, the manager of the Centre, discusses how parents come to use the Centre. Whilst many of the participants described how they had been told about the Centre by their Health Visitor when pregnant or when they were visited in the post-partum period, Catherine describes how some families are referred to them. A new service offered by Sure Start Centres is a two year pathway which starts in the antenatal period and continues until children are two years old, Catherine describes how it covers birth, breastfeeding, weaning, first aid, and children's learning and brain development. Families who are referred to the Centre are encouraged to attend this, as it is seen as a way of educating parents, influencing behaviour and keeping the families in

close contact with professionals. Sure Start Centres can be seen as an example of a behaviour change policy, a form of soft paternalism which aims to 'shape the contexts in which people make decisions, whilst increasing the range of choices available to them in the determination of their own lives' (Pykett, 2012, p.3).

Initiatives aimed at better equipping parents to engage in their children's learning have been rolled out in a Neo-liberal policy climate, emphasising notions of responsibility and aspiration. Behaviour change implemented through education tries to influence citizen's decision making by helping them to change their lifestyles, break bad habits and to raise motivation in order to help individuals make 'positive' changes to their lives. Whilst the government's role has been to create opportunities for the 're-education' of parents, the responsibility is on the adult to 'aspire to greater things, to develop their own potential, to strive for economic and other benefits for themselves, while contributing to the good of society and the economy' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p.599). Wainwright and Marandet (2013), discussing Foucault (1991) state 'governmentality hinges on the self-regulating individual taking personal responsibility' (p.509-510). Gutting (2005) undertakes a Foucauldian analysis of modern discipline, stating that: 'what is punished is no longer the crime but the criminal…not so much what criminals have done as what environment, hereditary, parental actions has led them to it' (p.80). Approaches like this have been criticised because whilst they might promote the use of support services, there is a 'strong whiff of authoritarianism' (Lister, 2006, p.326) because parents, typically mothers, are seen to be held entirely responsible through their parenting alone for producing responsible future citizens.

A preoccupation in intervening early in the lives of families whose children may be considered to be at risk stems from the Every Child Matters Framework (ECM, 2003), which made clear the importance of early intervention: 'Some children will always require extra help because of the disadvantages they face. The key is to ensure children receive services at the first onset of problems, and to prevent any children slipping through the net' (ECM, 2003, p.8). Catherine values early intervention and thinks that teaching parents some of the basics around routines is effective even before babies are born;

> 'If you can get in there, we sort of like now we're in there before the babies are even born so the parents are getting the correct information, they're getting that support, getting that help' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

Catherine emphasised the importance she ascribes to routines and parents having 'correct' information in order to do well. This is interesting considering there has been much discussion about the detrimental effects of policy which views at-risk families as chaotic (Lambert and Crossley, 2017), as well as the danger that promoting strict routines pose in reducing maternal

self-efficacy and increasing postnatal depression and parenting stress (Harries and Brown, 2017). Catherine discusses how using the Centre and participating in the two year pathway can help safeguard families, especially those whose children have previously had child protection plans:

> 'We're sort of their exit strategy, trying to get them into the Sure Start Centre so they have got that support and they're not on their own so it's not like there you go, your child protection plan has finished, there's got to be something else' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

Despite having made progress with their social workers, Catherine recognises that some families need regular support from the professionals at the Centre to ensure that the wellbeing of their children remains high. She uses the expression 'full up' to describe how some parents are consumed by the different issues they are dealing with:

> 'They are very full up, they've got a lot going on, financial, whatever, debt, all sorts of things going on, domestic violence…They do find it difficult to just have those 15 minutes with their children to play they feel like they can't cope with that…It's like their heads can't take anymore…They can't focus 'cus there is so much going on and sometimes they think they have to sort all that out before they can even think about having that fun with their children' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

The issues that these parents face mean Catherine acknowledges it can be difficult for them to have the emotional capacity to cope with their children. This resonates with the work of Vincent et al. (2010a) who interviewed working class mothers and found that the women had an ambivalent relationship with the professionals in their localities and struggled to meet the expectations from them to act as 'responsible mothers' (p.128), but they expressed a desire for their children to learn and develop despite difficult circumstances they sometimes found themselves in.

Several times Catherine expresses that she has been surprised to discover that some parents do not know how to interact with their babies. She describes encouraging parents to sit on the floor, and of sharing play ideas such as building towers with blocks or playing with playdough together. She describes how group sessions can model positive interactions to parents:

> 'A lot of parents don't even know how to play with their children… just to learn that in a little group session, if you've got a parent that's in the group who is doing that already that's brilliant, it has a knock on effect with the other parents' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

Educating parents on how children learn through play in order to encourage these interactions is important to Catherine. She is aware that parents who find these kinds of interactions difficult often also do not have a lot of money. She describes doing sessions based on play:

> 'Showing parents how to sit on the floor with their children you know, using materials in the home so they don't have to go out and pay quite a lot of money when they have things around the house' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

However, Catherine does not mention if there is any support at the setting available to help the parents to face the issues that are consuming them. As such it is pertinent to question whether these expectations for parents are fair, in light of the struggles they face, to focus so heavily on 'quality' play interactions.

Parents using the Centre are described as being capable, with the setting described as 'a hub' for mums in the 'difficult stage' of having a young baby. However, Catherine is clear that it is not just a place for parents to meet and socialise, but rather to learn. Jupp (2013) interviewing staff at a Sure Start Centre found that her participants too were particular about this: 'the idea of the Centres as places of 'rest' or 'time out' for parents was balanced with concern among practitioners that too much of this would not enable parents to develop their parenting skills' (p.181). Catherine discusses how some parents over rely on the use of technology, and she has to remind parents not to replace reading stories with screen time, even if parents opt to use apps that are labelled as educational. She describes educating parents who 'see reading a book as very old fashioned' and reminding them of the importance of eye contact and talking together, she implies that technology is to blame for this change in parent-child interactions:

> 'The parents go, here's an iPad, they see that as their learning and you know they're having fun they don't understand that you know you have to talk to your child you need to have eye contact with your child' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

Difficulties and frustrations are often encountered by Catherine: 'you do get the odd person who you sort of go in and hit a brick wall with, you know they aren't listening'. Catherine knows that sometimes accomplishing even small changes within a family is an achievement: 'it's not sort of going in like a bull at a gate, it's little steps'. Catherine has developed strategies for working with parents that are difficult to engage with. She talks about the importance of handling their problems sensitively by allowing them the time and space to participate in the sessions and not suffocating them with unwanted attention:

> 'You have to be sensitive, it's not sort of going into the group and making a beeline for someone and singling them out and sitting next to them [laugh] even if they require

that support, it's being sensitive to them when they are in that session but letting them know they can come and talk to you, it's giving them the time at the end of the session to do that' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

Catherine has learnt that some parents hide problems because of past negative experiences interacting with professionals: 'sometimes they'll be overly excitable with their child…a lot of people can cover up'. Reay (2004) found that mothers' personal experiences influence how involved they are with their children's development, in particular in their abilities to communicate with professionals about their children's learning. Catherine stresses how important it is to establish relationships with parents to get to know them in order to be able to direct them to the right sessions at the setting, or refer them to additional external support. She believes that many of their problems are intergenerational, because parents have not had 'good parenting' modelled to them in childhood, 'a lot of the parents they have just never had that themselves, they just don't know'.

Although often thought of as a working class issue, Catherine acknowledges that many of the lower-middle class parents have problems centring on a lack of time and their working commitments, which disrupts their ability to consistently engage and play with their children. Catherine identifies that these parents have more stresses than ever before:

'They've got more pressures, more materialistic, I think it's a fast living pace..now a lot of mums go back to work and they have to juggle family and full time work[...]I do think mums have more of a responsibility even in a working couple it's still the mum' (Catherine, Vertlea Sure Start Centre Manager).

She perceives these mothers to be well-educated and informed, implying that this is because of their class position as lower-middle class parents: 'a lot of parents go into in-depth research about their children and I think it could be their background basically, their heritage, their background'. The increasing scholarisation of childhood, which has corresponded with the promotion of pre-school age learning experiences, means some mothers have explicitly sought out the Centre's sessions. This 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) or 'total mothering' (Bourdieu, 2004) is an example of mothers' cultural capital demonstrated through child-centred, expert-led enrichment activities aiming to saturate children in stimulating educational experiences. The way these parents use the Centre aligns with the intention of Sure Start Centres and suggests that they are producing individualistic and responsible citizens engaging in early learning experiences to ensure the future success of their children. However, 'the middle class takeover' of Sure Start Centres has been well documented, with concern levied at whether this deters the most 'at risk' families. David Cameron (2010) described these parents as 'sharp-elbowed middle classes', and insisted that Sure Start Centres focused on

those who most needed help stating: 'it can't just be a service that everyone can jump into and get advantage out of'. As a result, many Centres are now referral only, with greatly reduced services targeted at the most disadvantaged families (Jupp, 2018; Sutton Trust, 2018).

4.3 School readiness

The theme of school readiness, defined as: 'a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school cognitively, socially and emotionally' (Public Health England 2015, p.4) arose in various ways across the settings. For two settings, this was an integral part of their ethos. A concern for adequately preparing children to succeed at school was present in both The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school, and both settings' ethos and practice was influenced by messages from parents which communicated their concern over their children's readiness to enter primary education. The DfE (2015a) research report on childcare information for parents demonstrates that parents are aware of how their child's pre-school education could help to prepare them for school:

> 'Nurseries in particular were seen [by parents] as a helpful way of getting children school-ready; children were taught how to hold a pencil, how to write their name, and the ability to recognise letters and numbers – all skills that parents thought would help ensure a smooth transition to the reception class at school.' (DfE, 2015a, p.15).

Public Health England (2015) describe school ready signs as ranging from learning behaviours like being able to take turns and listen to instructions to other personal skills like being able to self-dress (Public Health England, 2015). However, it is important to consider how different interpretations of school readiness amongst parents and professionals could influence both home and setting learning.

The Treehouse Nursery is a private nursery that is open five days a week throughout the year from 7am to 6pm. It is part of a company that owns and operates over 20 nurseries. It takes children from six weeks of age, and offers funded early education for two, three and four year olds. The nursery employed 23 members of childcare staff, 14 of whom held a childcare qualification, whilst two members were Early Years graduates. The nursery serves 141 children, and is rated 'good' by OFSTED. It is significantly more expensive than the other settings. There was little evidence of a clear learning ethos around school readiness at The Treehouse Nursery. Surprisingly, despite being part of a wider chain of settings there was no mention of company principles influencing professionals' practice or their perceptions of parents. Instead, there were varying discussions about the philosophies that were important to individual practitioners and how this influenced what they wanted for the children and how

in turn they interacted with parents. In general, professionals perceived parents to be competent and knowledgeable, and there was very little discussion about needing to (re)educate families on principals around children's learning and development. Rather, it was discussed that many parents had actually initiated this topic by communicating to the professionals that they had an interest, and occasionally concerns, about their children's readiness to enter primary education.

Ella, the baby room leader at The Treehouse Nursery stated that parents sometimes felt pressured to get their children ready for school; she expressed concerns about parents understanding of their individual rates of progression. The concerns of parents have influenced some of their practice, for example the introduction of home tasks and newsletters sharing learning goals and upcoming topics. However, manager Carol and deputy manager Anna both had strong personal feelings about school readiness, they shared a concern about rushing children to grow up too quickly. Carol described on several occasions how she felt formal learning should happen in schools: 'I think what the schools are expecting…I think that the schools should be doing these things'. Anna also communicated a concern about how much children are expected to know, but she felt a responsibility to help prepare the children. This was despite Anna's personal feelings about education and care for young children being a reflection of her own childhood which she described as 'outdoorsy, natural'. She described feeling tied between wanting the children to:

> 'Play and experience but then still having to push them so they've got the best start to school'. (Anna, deputy manager, The Treehouse Nursery).

Ella, the baby room leader, talks about the need to work closely with local schools: 'we need good links to help us to prepare the children for when they go'. Ella describes the expectations children should meet, and that 'the school bar is so high now', she mentions the 'culture shock' the children face if they haven't learnt basic skills:

> 'So like with writing… you're sitting still at carpet time, a lot of the reception areas have like carpet time and they need to be able to sit still, listen, concentrate on the teacher and what they are telling them, their social skills' (Ella, qualified nursery professional, The Treehouse Nursery).

Manager, Carol talks about competition between parents, and instances of pride. She mentions that the 'background of the parent and their learning…the jobs the parents have' influenced what they expected from the nursery in terms of the ethos. This mirrors previous research which shows that it is class and capital that help parents to influence their children's education. The literature identifies that: 'these families are generally skilled consumers…possessing and able to activate appropriate resources of economic, social and

cultural capital to help them realise, as far as possible, their preferences' (Vincent et al., 2010b, p.290). As well as possessing social and cultural capital, lower-middle class parents also hold some financial capital. Being the most expensive of the childcare settings in this research, the parents hold a degree of power in that they may feel they can ask for more because of the cost of the service, and as such, it may be harder for professionals to refuse to meet parents' expectations.

Norbush Pre-school is a term time only pre-school attached to a primary school. It runs from 8:45am until 3:05pm, however, most children attend either morning or afternoon sessions. It caters for three and four year olds, offering funded hours, and is rated as outstanding by OFSTED. It is run by two qualified childcare practitioners, the leader has twenty years of experience. The professionals at Norbush Pre-school also discuss school readiness, but in contrast, they illustrate that much of their ethos is around the focusing on school preparation, Although they take a learning through play approach, leader Nina states that the intention of the pre-school is 'helping them to eventually be ready for school'. As Norbush Pre-school is attached to the primary school, the children get to know teachers, and are invited into the community of the school for some assemblies, and share the school dining area. Nina is clear that she thinks the children who start in the pre-school are better prepared for joining the reception class:

> 'They are far more at an advantage when they start school, it's inevitable, they are going to go into a community of children starting learning in a classroom which is so overwhelming if you've had no preschool experience, it's massively important for the child, even if they do part time, couple of days a week it doesn't matter, but the more they do, the better prepared they are' (Nina, leader, Norbush Pre-school).

Nina's belief that the children at Norbush Pre-school are being well prepared for school corresponds with research that shows that early education helps to enhance children's capacity to learn, positively impacting on later primary school education, and even closing gaps between the most and least advantaged children (Burger, 2010). The families attending the setting she describes as diverse: 'we have parents who work, have never worked…we've got single parents, blended families…we have some Chinese families, some Asian families'. Nina describes the parents as 'child centred…doing the best for their children', though a number come to her at three years of age but developmentally measuring only in the 16-26 months bracket. This helps to explain why she is so passionate about the children having a pre-school education, and she reflects proudly on the transition she observes as the children leave the pre-school and enter the adjoining reception class. She describes how other teachers in the school have noticed that the children joining the school from the pre-school

have better personal, social and emotional skills, communication and language and physical skills, but also 'things like getting your coat on, getting in a line, listening and following an instruction, all of that we do from day one, it's embedded'.

Tensions in the literature between school readiness and learning through play are clearly evident at Norbush Pre-school. Although the physical environment of the pre-school was more like a classroom than other settings, Nina, and her colleague Nicole, make it clear that they have concerns about parents' expectations from the setting if it deviates too much from their ethos of learning through play. Nicole, a qualified nursery professional talks about a parent who feels her daughter should be accelerated into the reception class and how they are trying to dissuade her from this by offering work schemes, which they feel is a more developmentally appropriate way to encourage the child's interest by providing some more formal learning exercises like phonics to complete at home:

> 'It's very much as if it's a tick list, okay this is what we need to do, they need to know this at this age so I'll make sure of it…I find it such a shame when you see a three year old sitting knowing all this information[...]I think you're three, go and play. I think its fantastic parents want to teach their children, I just don't think it needs to be as much pressure, they're so, so young' (Nicole, nursery professional, Norbush Pre-school).

Nicole recounts situations where she has enjoyed watching children engaged in early reading or writing behaviours but has redirected them: 'I love to hear them, and to praise them, but then I love to say right lets go do painting now, let's get messy, what can we do outside?'.

Examples from The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school show that policy messages around school readiness cause professionals to internalise a responsibility to ensure children are achieving more and more in order to succeed at school. This was despite many of these professionals holding personal and professional feelings about school readiness that influence their practice and interaction with parents. This tension is understandable given the government focus on 'readiness of school' and the pressure for children to arrive at school already able to participate in the classroom with some basic reading and writing skills. When children do well in early education it is seen to improve their wellbeing, set a foundation for lifelong learning, reduce the effects of poverty and improve social mobility (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012). In 2011 the document 'Supporting Families in the Foundation Years' (DfE, 2011) was published and the government set out their vision of services for families, which included responses to three independent reviews; the report on poverty and life chances entitled The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults (Field, 2011); the reports by Graham Allen, MP on early intervention, Early intervention: the next steps (Allen, 2010) and Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive

Savings (Allen, 2011); and the report by Dame Clare Tickell, The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning (Tickell, 2011). There was a strong message throughout the document of the importance of early intervention. In the consultation document, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2017), in which the curriculum standards of children from birth to five are outlined, there is an emphasis upon the child's right to the kind of support that enables them to 'fulfil' their potential and a recognition that:

> 'Children develop quickly in the Early Years and a child's experiences between birth and age 5 have a major impact on their future life chances…Good parenting, and high quality early and pre-school learning, together provide the foundation children need to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up' (EYFS, 2017, p.5).

The EYFS itself states it outlines a structure to practitioners to ensure that the teaching they implement ensures children's school readiness in order to 'provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life' (EYFS, 2017, p.5).

Nevertheless, professionals maintained this generalised emphasis on school readiness by emphasising the importance of individualising learning experiences to each child. In Bingham and Whitebread's (2012) critical review of perspectives and evidence around school readiness, they find that there is very little evidence that proves that an 'earlier the better' approach is effective. They are discouraged by preoccupations within pre-school settings and primary education to place children in a one-size-fits-all model. Examining international evidence showed that sensitive, personalised practice that takes into account the specific social contexts each child exists in is most successful. Similar findings were reported by the EPPE project (EPPE, 2004) and EPPSE project (EPPSE, 2011) which found that quality settings demonstrate their ability to identify and support children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with specific needs. This was something that was also communicated by the practitioners in this study. Tilly, a qualified nursery nurse at The Treehouse Nursery who had two children with special needs, talked about how important it is to tailor the learning experiences offered at the nursery to individual needs:

> 'Every child is individual, you work to their needs… it depends on the individual child, because some children will absorb everything up and get it brilliant like that [clicks fingers] and some children don't… we have some children leaving us to go to school this year that can read' (Tilly, Nursery professional, The Treehouse Nursery).

Likewise, at Norbush Pre-school, which had a diverse mix of families and a greater proportion of children joining at three below the developmental expectations outlined in the EYFS, the

practitioners demonstrated an awareness of tailoring their practice to individual children. Children from disadvantaged families are less likely than more advantaged children to have had any formal childcare before the age of two (DfE, 2015b):

'They've been coming in at 16-26 months [*indicating their skills are scored below age expectations according to the EYFS expectations for development*] and we're getting them to a secure 30-50 [months] entering 40-60 [months], that's what we aim for but we do it on individual needs, never a blanket they've got to get there…that's what I aim to get them to, then they can cope' (Nina, leader, Norbush Pre-school).

Commitment to individual tailoring of early education is especially important in the class mixed group at Norbush Pre-school. The DfE (2015c) report on early education and development found that parents in disadvantaged families were less likely to engage in home learning activities, they also stated that when children did have a pre-school experience it was positively associated with them having a better home learning environment, language skills and behaviour. Nicole, nursery practitioner acknowledged this:

'I think parents need sometimes children to come here to improve their social interaction so they get opportunities to be creative, to be physical, so many different areas we cover that maybe they can't provide at home, there can be so many different factors in play, there might be a disability at home where they can't sit down and do creative activities, we just give the children the chance to have those experiences' (Nicole, nursery professional, Norbush Pre-school).

Nicole is able to demonstrate that the practice and experiences they provide are tailored when she gives a dramatically different example of a child in the setting who can read: 'They want to push him! They want to get the best! They're already approaching us saying…he can read[...]they ask us, what can we do at home to carry this on?'. She describes finding the balance for each child as 'unreal' and having to set him up a folder of reading books, phonic activities and word games, whilst in contrast Nina states that it is a constant challenge getting children to learn basic skills: 'I've got more in nappies, more that can't put a coat on'. These examples demonstrate the impact expectations for parents have on the nature and purpose of early education has on everyday practice and provision within Early Years settings.

4.4 Children's wellbeing

Out of the three childcare settings observed; The Treehouse Nursery, Norbush Pre-school and The Mud-pit Pre-school, it was the Mud-pit pre-school's professionals who shared the

strongest messages around the ethos of the setting and the influences this has on their practice and the way they interact with parents. Some of the key messages communicated about their ethos were around children's wellbeing discussed through a wariness of formal learning experiences and school readiness, and a concern in providing home-like spaces and loving relationships between children and professionals.

The Mud-Pit Pre-school is a forest school nursery catering for children from six months up to school age. It is a committee run, not for profit setting, priding itself on its flexibility for working parents and affordability. It is rated Outstanding by OFSTED, and employs 15 members of childcare staff, 11 of whom are qualified nursery professionals, whilst two hold qualified teacher status. The pre-school is term time only, but offers a holiday club that parents can access if necessary at the same price as their term time sessions. The setting provides funded early education for two, three and four year olds.

The overriding aim of the setting is to engage parents in order to help deliver their specific ethos around children's wellbeing. Lila, the deputy manager describes the parent body as 'a mix, very diverse'. She shares that:

> 'We've got a lot of children who come from a difficult background…very young single parents…children who are very well looked after…we know some of our children are not well looked after…a lot of the more middle class children have as many emotional needs because they are left for such long periods because their parents are working such long, hard hours' (Lila, deputy manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

This demonstrates that an integral part of professionals' role within the setting is to support parents: 'we do a lot of emotional support work for parents' drawing on manager Rita's experience of counselling and working with children with additional needs. In order to help the children, she says they identify parents and invite them in to meet Rita: 'it's almost a session for themselves as much as their child…we have to support the parent'. This demonstrates that whilst the setting has alternative aims, just like Vertlea Sure Start Centre they have an interventionist agenda in their approach to family life.

The setting adopts the Reggio Emilia approach to learning, an educational philosophy which holds that each child has rights, and is a competent, active learner. Learning experiences are fluid and led by the children's interests; an 'emergent curriculum' (OECD, 2004, p.14). This was demonstrated through the clarity in which the professionals were able to explicitly communicate their specific ethos around children's learning and how this defined the kind of practice they provided for children and the way they perceived and interacted with parents. Oscar, a senior educator at the setting, talks about the value the setting has 'the environment is definitely the third teacher', which he hopes helps to shape parents' beliefs

around the way their children learn: 'we have to undo a lot of parenting…I see a lot of control from children because I think they are rushed'.

The setting makes a strong stance against school readiness, also influenced by Scandinavian beliefs around early childhood education, which are led by highly trained professionals and grounded in play and meaning making, social interaction, exploration and creativity. The ethos they share with Nordic and central European countries is around children's interests where the purpose is to provide children with 'relaxed, playful environments…[where] the learning process is seen as more important than individual core elements' (Peckham, 2016). Lila talks about the importance of following children's interests and how this is different at the setting compared to previous places she has worked in:

> '[Staff] learn to respect the child's interests rather than doing what they think the child should be, having seen that quite a lot in some of the places I've worked in' (Lila, deputy manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

Oscar, a senior educator, is critical of early learning goals: 'there's no need to do any of this any earlier, children should be free to follow their interests and find out what they are interested in'. Silver, a qualified teacher, had left teaching only a year after qualifying, she had become aghast at the lack of respect teachers had for children's interests which she felt went against her professional understanding of the way children learn best:

> 'It was very structured, it didn't go on the children's interests basically, it went on ticking boxes and doing it for OFSTED, I didn't like it, I left…when we were at uni we were always taught to follow the child's interest… I did try to do those things but as a new teacher it was very difficult to convince people that it was the right way to do things… they'd get out the same planning from last year even though it's completely different children with completely different interests' (Silver, Qualified teacher, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

As such, Silver demonstrates that like in Nordic and central European countries, the professionals conceptualise that their pre-school environment should be a place where there is 'support for children in their current developmental tasks and interests' (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, p.28) which corresponds with international evidence which has shown that 'successful pedagogy is based upon the interests, experience and choices of young children' (ibid, p.55). As such, a paradox exists between the setting respecting the varied backgrounds of the children within the setting and building upon and encouraging their interests whilst seemingly rejecting some parents' interest in their children's school readiness and future academic achievement.

Nevertheless, statutory requirements mean the The Mud-Pit Pre-school has been forced to development innovative ways to negotiate school readiness with its own values. Manager Rita is not complimentary about some of the aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2017), and describes how she strives hard to achieve their expectations whilst remaining true to the setting's ethos and meeting statutory requirements: 'it does tie in with the EYFS, we are very clever with how it is linked to the EYFS, OFSTED would just say otherwise, you can't, so you have to do that'. Deputy manager Lila gives many similar examples of how they meet the EYFS's requirement about encouraging literacy without putting children off writing; 'They write emergently, when they want to, because they need to, not because we tell them to, we support them but we are not going to insist'. Grieshaber (2008) suggests that early childhood educators need to pursue some 'theoretical rule bending, breaking, and making' (p.514) in order to challenge policy expectations that are not in line with their settings pedagogy: however, it's important to acknowledge the considerable skill involved with these adaptions: 'to negotiate or challenge requires confidence, knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogy' (Basford and Bath, 2014, p.128). The EYFS has been criticised by many, especially in its preoccupation with school readiness:

> 'There is a real danger that the frequent emphasis upon 'preparation for school' within [the EYFS]… the practice that the EYFS Statutory Framework engenders underestimates the function of early childhood education…In comparison to the pedagogy behind approaches to early childhood curricula such as those in the Nordic countries and the Reggio Emilia programmes… the focus upon 'school readiness' within the EYFS undermines these principles' (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, p.44).

Like manager Rita, Oscar has strong feelings about the curriculum;

> 'If we're continually telling them what they need to do or making them sit down to write their names which is what I assume school wants us to do so they don't have to do it so they can get on with what Michael Gove has shoved into the curriculum, we're not here to meet his needs, we're here to meet the children's needs' (Oscar, senior educator, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

The EYFS has been dubbed the 'national curriculum for babies' (Guardian, 2008) and has been seen as symptomatic of an increasing obsession with childhood development. Critiques were levied around its stifling of creativity, preoccupation with early reading, writing and number awareness and constant assessment (House, 2011). Cole (2005) writing on the concept of 'play malnourishment' in the U.K. stated: 'It is through play that [children] develop skills and abilities…play…should be regarded as one of the fundamental building blocks of life' (p.1). The Primary Review (2008) examined aspects of formal education for very young

children, and stated that the belief that formal early learning is beneficial for children's later attainment 'is not well supported in the research and there are concerns about the appropriateness of provision' (p.19). It went on to say that the U.K's young school start age in comparison with other countries: 'was not taken on the basis of any developmental or educational criteria…The main arguments in favour of setting the school starting age as early as five were related to child protection (from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions in the streets)' (p.6). The Nordic countries start school much later, at age seven, yet: 'results indicate… that young people in the Nordic countries have high levels of literacy on average' (OECD, 2000, p.32).

The Mud-Pit Pre-school seeks to re-educate parents away from their interest in school readiness, spreading instead a message on the importance of play-centred learning. As such, part of their role is about managing and setting expectations. The messages from the professionals at the pre-school was that parents were well meaning, but sometimes needed reminding of the ethos of the setting: 'because of media and school pressure, they think their children are going to start writing and reading, which they do, but not in the way they expect, so we have to do quite a bit of education really in getting parents to understand' (Lila, deputy manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school). Senior educator, Oscar, says that sometimes parents expectations for their children revolve around their shortage of time due to work commitments: 'some children want it [formal learning experiences]..need it, they crave it, they want more, more, more and if the parents are rushed and they can't sit down and do things creatively then those books that you buy in the shops are what will be given to them', Oscar demonstrates his concern about some learning experiences targeted at very young children such as dot to dot literacy books. Oscar understands that parents are well meaning 'I think parents try their hardest, I think modern life is hard'. Likewise, manager Rita shares a similar story 'I've been buying dot to dot books, ah! Don't!...they are so stressed about their children going into school'. She discusses the work the setting have to do to communicate the ways children can still meet literacy expectations through emergent and creative experiences.

This child-centred approach aligns with the Mud-Pit Pre-school's emphasis on children's wellbeing. Manager, Rita, talks about investing profits back into the setting and in particular focusing this on training for the staff. She talks about some mindfulness training she has recently had and how she is excited to pass this onto her staff team:

> 'I went on the course and I got the literature, and I thought I'm gonna do this…I thought some of the staff really need this' (Rita, manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

There was a strong message from Rita about the importance of wellbeing for children in the interviews with professionals at the setting: 'if their wellbeing is high and they are settled and

comfortable then they are going to be happier and function at a higher level'. Nutbrown (2012) in her review of early education and childcare qualifications was careful to clarify that practitioner's show a keen awareness that to ensure children's wellbeing play should be a fundamental part of practice. The setting has been influenced by Professor Ferre Leavers, who is regarded as one of the most significant sources of innovation in early education in recent years: 'within [Ferre Leavers experiential curriculum] there is a strong emphasis upon…well-being, which has changed the educators' focus upon programme content to children's individual needs and interests' (Bingham and Whitebread, 2012, p.107). His stance on wellbeing and involvement echoes what Rita is trying to achieve: .

> 'I went to see Ferre Laevers who is an amazing man..I was so shocked by…I was mesmerised by him …everything is about mind, and mental…it just relates back to if your wellbeing is good, you can do anything'. (Rita, manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

There was a clear link identified in the setting between children's and their parents' wellbeing. Parents' wellbeing was thus communicated as an important part of their ethos. Rita talks about how being in tune with and formally monitoring children's wellbeing has helped the setting with their relationships with parents: 'Often they don't say anything to us and children are suffering or something is happening, we know, we know something is not right'. Likewise, deputy manager Lila states it is obvious: 'If the parents' wellbeing is down low, we can see that as soon as the child walks in'. Lila states that the setting is a haven for children, and for some may be the only place where they experience security and consistency. Phoebe, who works with the oldest age group at the pre-school talks about monitoring wellbeing closely: 'we track wellbeing and involvement, we can't necessarily change their home environment but we can change…it's about making pre-school a safe space'. It was clear that Rita's vision for the setting and the intensive training she had implemented around this subject had influenced professionals. Oscar is unwavering in this: 'we stick to our guns, we deliver [Rita's] vision and [deputy manager Lila's] visions, and that's it.' There is a shared concern amongst the professionals about children's mental health, which Lila describes as a 'massive, massive issue, for parents and for children. It's very sad when we have to consider mental health for very young children' whilst Rita warns of the 'fall out for mental health…I could go round now and show you the children who are going to have mental health issues'. According to Young Minds, 1 in 10 children are suffering from mental disorders, whilst the World Health Organisation predicts that by 2030 more people will be affected by depression than any other health problem (WHO, 2017).

This emphasis on wellbeing, and a concern with some children's home environments, appeared to have influenced the physical space of the pre-school environment. Part of wanting

to provide the children with loving relationships appears to be a desire to replicate an idealised notion of a 'good home' environment. Though children's place is no longer seen to be exclusively the home, the importance of home for very young children is still evident (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b). Rita states: 'We kind of look at them like if they were our children, what would we do with our child at home?'. When she is asked whether she thinks childcare settings should be homely she says: 'They should be, because they are children, and it's not an institution'.   In Gallagher's (2013c) study, professionals acknowledged that parents' highly valued home-like spaces: '[providers] felt strongly that the continued use of a home-like space was a defining aspect of their service which allowed them to meet policy expectations around educational care within accepted spatial norms around childcare' (ibid, p.209). The childcare providers in Gallagher's (2013c) study felt strongly that they wanted to reproduce some of the caring aspects of home and expressed their dislike of modern 'clinical' and 'cold' spaces: ' 'Home' in this case was primarily the aesthetic of home rather than an attempt to recreate the emotional and affective attachments that notions of home typically engender' (ibid, p.210). The mothers in Vincent and Ball (2001) study sought to find home-like spaces, which they felt would help them to 'personalise the transaction, to build relationships with the providers, to emphasise the affective' (ibid, p.643). The mothers spoke positively about finding other 'mother' figures in professionals who were tactile and affectionate with their children, like 'second mums'.

Creating home-like spaces was not an attempt to reproduce traditional adult-child relations in the home, however. Rather, it was about providing a home-like experience for children with physical objects like floor beds and open access snack bars 'so if you want to go and lie down just go and lie down, if you want something to eat you can have something to eat' (Rita, The Mud-Pit pre-school manager), as well as intangible concepts like professional love and respect for children. Lila talks about this:

> 'Love is absolutely crucial, and essential, in a professional way. Respect is an important aspect too, children have to be respected and I think in a lot of settings and schools, there is no respect for the children, they are told what to do, but there is no respect for what they are and who they are and how they function… Unless there is love and those deep attachments it's very difficult to understand what a child needs…how can you provide experiences and environment for them unless you have that?'. (Lila, deputy manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school)

This respect for, and interest in, the child has also extended into developing deeper relationships with parents. Page (2011) writing on the concept of professional love found that the mothers in her study valued the relationships between their children and staff members,

they did not always call these relationships love though: 'the term 'love' is not easily defined and can be difficult to discuss within the context of early childhood care and education. Yet notions of love, and loving children, were essential [in the choice process]' (p.320). Recchia et al.'s (2015) findings were consistent with Page (2011) that caring for young children is 'complex, multifaceted, and challenging' (Recchia et al., 2015, p.119) and that providing quality care involves working together with diverse families. In their research they found that the professionals benefitted from having opportunities to get to know children's families in order to better understand their behaviour by seeing 'through the lens of how the child was accustomed to being cared for' (ibid, p.119). As a result the professionals in the study shared how they found that 'better developed relationships with parents seemed to strengthen the infant–caregiver relationship' (ibid).

Professionals at The Mud-Pit Pre-school shared instances of getting to know the parents and becoming more closely involved in their lives. Phoebe, a graduate educator, talks about how the setting has a closed Facebook group for parents that the professionals use to share photographs and information about the setting:

'We do have a lot of engagement with parents…we use [Facebook] as a way of communicating with the parents…It's nice to engage with those parents who are less responsive because then you get to understand parents a bit too, because the ones you might think are not so interested they could comment on pictures saying how much they appreciate it' (Phoebe, educator, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

Phoebe, as well as Manager Rita, talks about the importance of the Facebook group to parents, who are reassured by seeing photographs of their children playing, and that it has inspired home-setting links such as replications of practice, e.g. mud kitchens. Deputy manager Lila talks about the inevitable bond that professionals and children share, especially those children who she describes as most needing love: 'There are always going to be some children who are more special than others…you have a lot more to invest in, they have more needs'. She says that without deep attachment to the children, it is impossible for the team to understand what a child needs or 'what makes them who they are' in order to plan and provide the right environment and experiences to help them development: 'unless you love them you're not going to find out what makes them blossom'. Likewise, manager Rita talks about the need for professionals to not let opportunities to reciprocate children's affection pass: 'I think children know, they are perceptive…and they make it obvious… if they make that connection it needs to be fostered, we are pivotal people in their life'. Conversations around love and relationships with children make it evident that the professionals have tapped into both the needs of children and their parents to provide warm, loving care. Professionals

commented on the sometimes difficult and chaotic lives of the children in their care and the need to provide consistent, warm attachments. Roberts and Speight (2017) found that a personal approach by staff, and the development of strong relationships between both the children and staff, and parents and staff, was considered to be important. Similarly, Spratt et al. (2006) highlighted the importance some parents placed on settings to encourage children to develop close relationships with staff members, especially for younger children. Manager Rita saw it as their responsibility to counteract some of the shortfalls of parents, she talks about offering love to a child whose mother said: 'I don't like kids much, it's nice when I can pick them up from you and put them to bed, in that case I think the best place for them is here…you can make it better, you can provide all the things here'. Rita is clear that having an open and honest relationship with this parent helped the setting to provide the children with what they were lacking at home.

4.5 Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter the varying ways the settings influence parents was discussed. The ethos of Vertlea Sure Start Centre was explored, which centred on changing, and influencing parental behaviour in an overt and intentional way. Stemming from child protection concerns from the serious case review following the death of Victoria Climbié, the government has taken an increasingly interventionist approach into family life which has included some aspects of the Sure Start programme. Parents are seen as significant in their children's lives, thus targeting them early is envisaged as having the potential to break cycles of disadvantage. The manager spoke positively about the impact of a birth-to-two pathway, which was exemplified as a form of soft paternalism, gently shaping decision making and encouraging parents to be more Neo-liberal and individualistic in their abilities to help themselves and their children.

In the second section, the issue of school readiness was discussed. Under policy initiatives legitimised through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2017) and government messages on the importance of children being prepared for school, the professionals at both The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school had internalised a responsibility to assist children's readiness, which was demonstrable through the ethos of the setting which was geared around helping them to master social skills, independence and early reading and writing behaviours. Despite this, the personal feelings of most of the professionals was that there was an increasingly large demand placed on them from both schools and parents to equip children which they sometimes felt challenged their professional beliefs, for

example on the importance of learning through play. Nevertheless, they described feeling obligated to help the children succeed at school, echoing policy messages around the risk of inequalities between children who have had positive pre-school education and those that have had none.

In the third section the ethos of The Mud-Pit Pre-school was discussed, including the influences of Reggio Emilia, Nordic models of childcare and the Ferre Leavers experiential curriculum which emphasise listening to children's interests and respect. Childcare professionals discussed instances of having to fight to maintain their ethos in spite of mounting pressure from government messages around early learning experiences, and school readiness. They shared innovative ways they found of developing children's emergent skills in a way that was consistent to their beliefs in developmentally appropriate learning whilst also in line with the EYFS. A concern for a decline in children's mental health was keenly communicated. As such, strong messages about focusing on children's wellbeing and creating home-like spaces with loving relationships between children and professionals were shared.

Chapter five: Leaving the home sphere; negotiating work and choosing Early Years Education and Care

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the second research question: 'Why do parents use Early Years' Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?'. The chapter focuses on various different influences on the decision-making process and the many challenges faced in combining paid employment and motherhood.

Over the last forty years, there has been a rise in the percentage of women in employment. In April 2017, 70.2% of women aged 16 to 64 were in employment (ONS, 2017), a rise from 53% in 1971 (ONS, 2013). Feminist and cultural trends stressing equality and self-reliance for women, as well as economic conditions necessitating dual earner households have produced a decline in the male breadwinner/female caregiver model. Women no longer exist only in the private sphere, as employment offers women 'capacitated and equalised futures' (Taylor, 2012, p. 66), with women's participation in the labour force conflated with the notion of being a 'good citizen' (Braun et al., 2008) by U.K. social policies. The neo-liberal citizen is encouraged to take responsibility for their own trajectory (Gallagher, 2013b) and to see employment as a route out of poverty, thus allowing full social and economic participation in society (Power, 2005; Lister, 2006). Employment legislation for women has improved in relation to equal pay, discrimination, employment protection and lone parent support (ONS, 2013).

As more and more women are employed outside of the home, it is necessary for them to secure care for their children upon their return to work. In this research all but one women was in paid work. In the first part of this chapter I will discuss parents' experiences of leaving their home sphere after having a baby to attend the local Sure Start Centre. I will discuss their motivations for using the Centre and the main gains they perceived from attending, specifically focusing on the relationships they formed with other parents and the early learning experiences that were available for their babies. In the second part of the chapter I will present the experiences and dilemmas of mothers negotiating a return to work after maternity leave. I will discuss the challenges of combining motherhood and employment and the difficulties

involved in the childcare choice process. I will focus on the influence of recommendations from social networks, the importance of first impressions from child care professionals, and choosing and seeking their preferred learning ethos.

I will examine parents' use of the local Sure Start Centre as well as three local childcare settings; The Mud-Pit Pre-school, The Treehouse Nursery, and finally, Norbush Pre-school.

5.2 Leaving the home sphere; using the Sure Start Centre

The term sphere, meaning an aspect of life that is distinguished by a unified characteristic, is useful when we think about the different spaces that mothers occupy. As discussed earlier, increasingly women not only occupy the domestic, private sphere of the home where they have traditionally been viewed as mothers and home makers (Duyvendak, 2011), but also the public sphere when engaging in paid employment. For the participants in this research, even before decisions were made regarding the continuation of their employment after having a baby, most used the Sure Start Centre in the local town. For many, this was their first experience of leaving the home sphere with their young baby and attending a setting for children and families. Sure Start Centres are an example of interventionist agendas into the lives of the family (Lind and Keating, 2008; Furedi, 2008; Gillies, 2011) aimed at tackling social exclusion and child poverty.

Sure Start Centres are influenced by local need (Lord et al., 2011), so differ in provision and resources from place to place. Due to significant cuts to funding, Vertlea Sure Start Centre now offers 'health led' sessions such as health checks and breastfeeding support run by Health Visitors, and sessions run by the Centre manager, Catherine, such as baby massage, stay and play and development pathways. In order to keep the Centre operating each day, the remainder of the sessions are parent-led groups for the purpose of socialising.

Advice and reassurance regarding their child's healthy development was one service that drew parents to the Centre. Some mothers attended when their babies were very young for specific support, e.g with breastfeeding. Nutrition is a key target area for Sure Start Centres, and low rates of breastfeeding in some areas are seen as an area of concern given WHO guidelines (NESS, 2006, WHO, 2011):

> 'The Health Visitor told me about it and I went along and sure enough the other ladies were lovely and we just clicked, we could talk about breastfeeding' (Demi, Sure Start Centre user, 36).

Other mums were looking for specific support for parents coping with particular issues, in Tanya's case, a colicky baby who cried a lot:

> 'I was so desperate to find someone going through the same thing I was going through with a screaming child, I was just looking for someone to say to me, you'll get there in the end, I think that was the main reason I went' (Tanya, Sure Start Centre user, 26)

Maria's son was born with Cerebral Palsy and she attended the setting along with various other services to promote her son's physical development, in particular she sought out the baby massage sessions in order to improve the motion in one of his wrists:

> 'We used to go to Sure Start…I used to try to do everything that I could…we used to try to massage the hand and I learnt massage for the body of the baby at the Sure Start and I used to massage him every day' (Maria, Sure Start Centre and Tree House Nursery, 40).

Parents' health needs, specifically their mental health, was also crucially important in shaping Centre use. As part of a commitment to early intervention, Centre manager Catherine was tasked with encouraging parents to attend who had previously experienced mental health problems, which was seen to make them more susceptible to developing post-natal depression. Attending the Sure Start Centre was encouraged by Health Visitors as part of their duty to inform parents about the different services available to families (DH, 2013). Health Visitors were described as emphasising the importance of leaving the house and socialising with other adults:

> 'Because I had post-natal depression [with first child] I saw a Health Visitor before I had [second child] and they suggested what sorts of things would be helpful…so I met people with similar aged babies[...]that was quite helpful…I think that was a preventative thing to get me out of the house really' (Nat, Sure Start Centre user, 40)

Even for those mothers who did not have mental health problems, there was a keen awareness about the importance of ensuring that they continued to protect their mental health in the post-partum period:

> 'It got me out of the house…I don't want to be stuck around the house watching T.V…you think well this is when post-natal depression can kick in' (Sacha, Sure Start Centre user, 27).

Leaving the house was something that was seen as something both difficult: 'you give yourself a pat on the back that you've managed to get there' (Joanne, 36) and worthwhile by both the parents and health and Sure Start professionals. The DfE (2011) evaluation on parenting early

intervention programmes stated that there is strong evidence that parenting programmes can be effective. Reducing post-natal depression is a target for Sure Start Centres; however, there have been concerns levied on the ability the Centres have in truly tackling the issue: 'the need to address underlying issues such as the effects of...mental health…these present more complex and intractable problems than the provision of toys or reading materials' (Clarke, 2006, p.707).

5.2.2 Making friends, meeting other parents.

As well as attending the setting for specific support e.g. with breastfeeding or a colicky baby, and to protect their maternal mental health, for many of the participants interviewed, maternity leave was the first experience the parents had of not being involved in daily employment and they described feeling cooped up, lonely, bored and of missing adult company when they spent too much time at home with their children. Braun et al. (2008) found that it was acutely stressful for mothers to be stuck at home with little space and financial pressures, which are often synonymous with maternity leave during which time women's financial situation is often more precarious (Misra et al., 2007). For the parents in this study, attending the Sure Start Centre provided the parents with an escape:

> 'I suppose in terms of....not mental health, social health! [laughs], if I didn't have that group…I wouldn't have had another way to meet local mums' (Demi, Sure Start Centre user)

Socialising and making friends with other parents was described as significant for the wellbeing of nearly all the parents' interviewed. McDowell et al. (2006) spoke about how the mothers in their study found motherhood isolating and that they lost their sense of identity. This was shared by the parents in this research, and these feelings ignited a need to get out and meet other parents:

> 'I probably craved social interaction, it seemed quite isolating at the beginning…I believe I want to go back to work…I felt I'd lost my identity, suddenly I was just a mum not a professional, I missed my job' (Joanne, Sure Start Centre user, 36).

A few parents talked about moving to the area and not knowing many people. They looked for 'like-minded' people at the Centre, with friendship really important to Eve too:

> 'For me getting to know people who were like me and were like-minded and we could become friends that was really, really helpful. I have friends now who I speak to nearly every day' (Eve, Sure Start Centre user, 38).

Jupp (2013) found that for parents who regularly used a Sure Start Centre it had become a 'place of friendship' (p.216), and part of a wider 'caringscape' (ibid) in which they cared for their children. In her research, she describes parents talking about the Centre 'warmly', 'positively' describing how they 'enjoyed' (p.224) attending for both themselves, and their children. Jupp notes that when parents attend alone they 'do not seem to stay around for long[...].or did not return' (p.224). Parents formed friendships with those who they identified were similar, classifying each other in specific, and at times exclusionary ways: 'Class, lifestyle and locality interact to produce complex resolutions in which class position and financial assets are perhaps of overwhelming importance' (McDowell et al., 2005, p.231).

As well as friendship, some parents used the relationships built with other parents as a source of reassurance that their babies were developing well by comparing them to similar aged children:

'This time [with child 3] because of the age gap I couldn't remember what age they are meant to do each thing, ages and stages, the milestones…I also see other babies…and observe what they do and think oh yes about 9 months is when they start crawling!' (Demi, Sure Start Centre user, 36).

Indeed, Kacie mentions that some parents specifically seek out the classes for this reason:

'People see it as somewhere they can go for a chat and compare your baby, is yours doing that? And like with the mums … actually they're all going through the same thing, a similar stage' (Kacie, Sure Start Centre user, 35).

However, as well as the opportunity to form friendships and the shared solidarity experienced at the Centre, there were instances of jealousy:

'I went to one and [daughter] rolled over, and I got quizzed by one of the mums saying how did you make her roll over, and I said I didn't make her roll over, she just rolled over, there was a lot of envy' (Stevie, Sure Start Centre user, 34).

Catherine, manager of the Sure Start Centre, acknowledges this too, and discusses the sometimes competitive nature of parents and the reassurance she needs to provide about the individual nature of early development: 'because parents do sit there and say oh, why's their child doing this, my child is not doing that so it's explaining that children are different'. Vincent et al. (2010a) focused on how middle class parents in particular attend classes with their children to help them compete and hold advantage over their peers, a perceived threat from other children means some parents internalise a responsibility to invest as much as possible in their children's early education (Ball, 2010).

A group of parents attended classes at the Sure Start Centre, which provided some parenting education alongside stimulating experiences for babies, with the specific intention of providing their babies with an early learning experience. These parents acknowledged that the Sure Start Centre provided experiences for their babies which were beneficial for their development. This ranged from an opportunity for their babies to socialise with other children, interaction with different sensory equipment and resources, to the purpose of the class itself, e.g. music or massage. Some parents expressed that they felt that the sessions offered something that they alone could not, for example creative or sensory activities. Vincent et al.'s (2010b) research found that a common theme amongst mothers who valued settings offering classes like the Sure Start Centre was that they worried that their home environments were boring and not stimulating enough. Enthusiasm towards settings for young children and 'experts' corresponds with policy messages around child development (Braun et al., 2008) and the importance of early learning experiences. The professionalising of parenting has led to the evolving of parenting into a 'technical exercise— something that you can either get right or wrong" (Gillies, 2010, p. 44).

Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) discuss how parents now seek, or are directed towards, services that will help them become better parents: 'the fact that parenting is no longer taken for granted and is instead regarded as a skill which you can teach and learn…is the basis of a new parenting culture in England' (p. 96). Parents become inculcated by policy messages surrounding the family and in turn come to value 'expert' advice. Many parents expressed that they had picked up new information that helped them with their babies at home:

> 'I have picked up some bits, some important things, development things so for instance I didn't realise that having the T.V. or radio on in the background is not good, so I've always restricted that' (Amie, Sure Start Centre user, 37).

Some parents were explicit about how the classes had changed the things they do at home with their children. Cat talks about how it is hard in the early days of having a new baby to know what kind of play activities are suitable and beneficial for their development. She incorporated some of the sensory play she had taken part in at the Centre into the kind of experiences she offers her son at home:

'I think it's helped me adapt play in those early days, they put cooked coloured spaghetti in ziplock bags and that gave me the idea to do that at home, you still want to stimulate them at that age but it's hard to know what to do' (Cat, Sure Start Centre user, 34).

Attending stimulating classes can be seen as the parents in this research participating in the increasing 'scholarisation of childhood', where the link between parental involvement and achievement is emphasised (Vincent 1996).

Some parents had observed the rolling back of public services through the reduction in what was offered at the Centre over the duration of having two children. However, a number of parents possessed forms of capital which enabled them to find alternative methods of accessing the services they wanted to attend. Tara-Lee relied on the Centre with her first child but hasn't used it as extensively with her second child:

'There was a lot more on at the Sure Start Centre when [child 1] was born so we did quite a few classes there… but we were not eligible to go to them now because I'm not in need or they've just stopped because they've cut their funding' (Tara-Lee, Sure Start Centre user, 30).

Some lower-middle class parents were determined to use the Centre and access classes that were referral only, 'I asked if I could do a baby massage class…I rang back twice[...]she said she'd chase it up' (Tanya), although they did not meet the criteria they used their social capital to ensure themselves a place:

'…because [child 3] was my third, I wasn't invited to any groups but I said to my Health Visitor I want him to be with babies his own age' (Demi, Sure Start Centre user, 36).

Demi persuaded her Health Visitor to let her attend classes because her previous involvement at another Centre's breastfeeding cafe, enabled her to recognise that the Centre wanted to demonstrate its commitment to supporting breastfeeding mothers. Laura and Amie were also keen to attend invite only classes, they felt there was a difference between themselves and the targeted parents who they perceived the Centre were failing to recruit. Amie's description of these parents demonstrates the othering she performs between herself and the targeted parents:

'I think it was meant to help people in need…the courses were always ran to help particular people, but they kind of opened it up if they weren't full…I think they didn't want to interact and bring their kids to things, they can't be bothered, can they' (Amie, Sure Start Centre user, 37).

McDowell et al. (2006) discuss how middle class mothers are able to use their social capital and networks to influence professionals. Likewise, Vincent et al. (2010b) discuss how middle class families can use their social and cultural capital to help them realise their preferences for their young children, which in the case of Demi and Laura meant accessing sessions which were not designed for their demographic.

In an interesting juxtaposition, parents did have a good understanding of the purpose of Sure Start Centres and were sometimes anxious about how they would be perceived by others if they were seen attending the Centre. Some parents perceived there was a social stigma around Sure Start Centres. Amie describes feeling worried when she received a letter to invite her to a session:

> 'Oh my God, why have I got a letter to go to this development course[...]the Centre is for people who are struggling or don't know how to look after their children. There's a bit of a stigma I think' (Amie, Sure Start Centre user, 37).

Jupp (2012) described how middle class parents using Sure Start Centres were concerned with being viewed as 'the object of the Centre's concerns' (p.224). This is interesting considering they were simultaneously eager to attend and for their children to benefit from the services available. Some of the parents even described themselves as doing 'the middle class thing of accessing the best bits and not bothering with the rest...' (ibid). Parents such as Laura saw themselves as good mothers and viewed their participation at the Centre as symbolic of their commitment to engage with their children's early learning experiences:

> 'I think that's part of the shame of it, the people who need it the most don't access it, don't use it…maybe they just don't want the help, or they don't see issue. For me, [daughter] is my everything, I want to make sure she's okay in all areas, social, educational, emotional, every area of her life, but not everyone feels like that' (Laura, Sure Start Centre user, 29).

Middle class parents can unknowingly engage in exclusive and exclusionary practices to ensure their children stay ahead (Reay 2004). Cat, as a lower-middle class mother, recognises this. She discusses a group of her friends at the Centre hearing about a session that they had not been invited to but thought sounded interesting:

> 'It was a class to help parents learn to sing, talk, play with their babies…a couple of people were like oh really? You have to do that, shock in their voice… Some of the mums said oh it sounds fun, but it was made clear it was referral only. I suppose if you're a parent who doesn't know how to play with their child you don't want a hands on mum sat next to you rubbing that in' (Cat, Sure Start Centre user, 34)

Despite the wariness parents felt about being perceived as a Sure Start target demographic, some expressed surprise in finding that elements of parenting education involved in the classes they had attended had been helpful:

'I think possibly I had the wrong impression of Sure Start Centres…Thinking, there would be a lot of young mums or unemployed people, people I wouldn't have a lot in common with, people I possibly wouldn't normally talk to' (Kacie , Sure Start Centre user, 35).

None of the participants in the research could be defined as deprived, and instead were part of the 'just about managing', as lower-middle class. Ball (2010) and Vincent et al. (2010a) describe how middle class parents internalise a responsibility to invest in their children's education, involving them from a young age in structured enrichment activities, such as baby classes. It has been well documented how middle parents have been accused of taking over Sure Start Centres, 'hijacking' (Guardian, 2011) them and discouraging those in 'real' need from accessing the support they need.

5.3 Negotiating the return to work

Most of the parents interviewed used the Sure Start Centre primarily when they were on maternity leave. After this the Centre appeared to be used more sporadically around work commitments. Whilst on maternity leave parents had important decisions to make regarding how they were going to negotiate work and motherhood.

It is clear for all the participants it was difficult to combine paid employment and motherhood. Vincent and Ball (2001) describe decisions made around childcare and work as being made in 'theatres of emotion' (p.643). Page (2011) talks about the intense feelings of guilt and anxiety parents experience when negotiating their return to work. Some parents talked poignantly about their experiences of needing to return to work:

'When I drove away from him I did have that horrible, oh I wish I could just stay at home with him. A wrench. I was worried about missing his first steps, first words' (Emily, Norbush Pre-school user, 35)

However, it is not just the emotional toll of combining paid employment and motherhood that mothers endured. On a practical level, combining work and employment is challenging: described by McDowell et al. (2006) as a 'key issue in their lives' (p.2179). These working arrangements are made harder by the adult worker model which is problematic considering gender divisions of labour remain unequal, with women taking on the majority of

childcare responsibilities and domestic chores whilst also participating in paid work outside the home. This was keenly felt by the parents, even those who were positive about paid employment:

> 'I think being at work is pretty hard, life was definitely easier when we had me at home…the worrying of trying to keep on top of stuff at home but trying to make sure you've spent enough time with him and given enough to your job' (Katya, Tree House Nursery user, 33).

Although some women passionately described the efforts they had made to have an equal division of labour with their partners, many described the struggles they had balancing so many responsibilities. Oscar, who works at The Mud-Pit Pre-school has observed this

> 'You can pick up when mums are stressed and they've got a lot on[...] there's still that section who don't want anything to do with it at all, childcare is all on the mum, cooking is all on the mum, housework is all on the mum' (Oscar, senior educator, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

The guilt which was experienced when mothers were unable to devote enough time to each aspect of their lives was a common theme amongst women who combined work and motherhood. When Joanne asked about the most difficult aspect of being a mum she describes:

> 'It's the challenge of balancing work and children and money…it's juggling careers, keeping the house clean and tidy…Maybe it's trying to do too much, all the demands' (Joanne, Sure Start Centre user, 36).

Parents returned to work for a variety of different reasons which were not necessarily clearly defined. Some mothers chose to work because paid employment was an important part of their identity and they found their careers to be emotionally fulfilling. McDowell et al. (2006) found that work was described positively by the mothers in her study; work had become a part of the mother's identity, which they did not want to lose. Karly states: 'I'm choosing to go back to work…I don't feel my identity is solely a mum' (40, The Treehouse Nursery user). Similarly, Maria recognises how important work is to her; especially as the first year of her son's life was consumed with physiotherapy and rehabilitation due to his Cerebral Palsy diagnosis:

> 'I love what I do at work and I think that can make an enormous difference on the wellbeing of a person…I also needed to go back to work because it was too much for me' (Maria, Tree House Nursery, 40).

Braun et al. (2008)'s study found that women were positive about having some freedom from their children, and that work, like in this study, was described as offering parents diversity and an 'independent adult identity' (p.539). Sammy talks about enjoying the stimulation of work: 'I like to learn, I missed the motivation as well, I enjoyed going back to work' (38, The Treehouse Nursery user). June is also positive about work and the impact working has on her happiness:

'I could never be a stay at home parent I think it would drive me insane… I love [daughter] to bits but I love my job' (June, The Mud-Pit pre-school, 34).

Some parents were reluctant to give up careers that they had spent time building: 'I wanted to go back to work[...]I've worked really hard to be where I am' (Katya), and even if they preferred not to work when their children were young, did so in order to keep their jobs in competitive markets where they felt easily replaceable:

'I've just spent six years doing it (extra qualifications) I'm not going to waste it. It's cost me so much in what I've given up personally' (Eve, The Tree House Nursery, 38).

Early Years Professionals had different professional views of working mothers. Carol, manager of The Treehouse Nursery describes some mums as 'very maternal', but that others do not want to spend all day at home with their children, because they feel fulfilled by their careers:

'They don't want to lose that and they want the adult company…there are a lot of people who do say oh I'll be glad to get back to some normal conversations… going back to work is bringing that adult social life back to them and their own identity' (Carol, manager, Tree House Nursery).

Likewise, Rita, manager of The Mud-pit Pre-school states that looking after children all day is not every woman's preference:

'I know one parent, really, she has babies but she'll say I don't like kids much, and I prefer to work, …they are quite work-orientated and career minded, it's something that they never think I'm not going to do' (Rita, manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

Although the professionals interviewed in the study were overwhelmingly positive about the care and learning experiences their setting offered, many felt strongly that children were suffering because of mother's employment, especially if it meant they were in the setting for long hours. Lila, deputy member at The Mud-Pit Pre-school had been an Early Years teacher for many years before working with the local authority as an advisor on early education, she felt strongly that children should spend more time with their parents, and like other

professionals she touches on the materialities and consumerism of modern life that drives mothers to work to maintain a desired lifestyle:

> 'It's all part of the society that we're in…Very often parents who work very hard and don't have the time to spend with their children, they try and buy them with presents and resources, and it doesn't work… what they are asking for they are asking for love and time…' (Lila, deputy manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school)

For some parents, their return to work was motivated simply by their need to earn money: 'it was purely for financial reasons' (Eve), Lisa says that she 'hung out as long as I could' before she needed financially to return to work. It was these mothers that found the return to work most difficult. Braun et al.'s (2008) study demonstrated how mothers found it particularly difficult to return to work when they did not value their work and could not see any personal development or fulfilment outside of their experiences of motherhood. Joe, whose son attended Norbush Pre-school, described how difficult it was for his wife to combine work and motherhood. He explained that although work was important to his wife, so was being able to be around for the beginning and end of the sessions for their son:

> 'She wanted to get back to work… she did feel like she didn't want to be one of those mothers who just dropped the kids of at breakfast club and picked them up from an after school club so we spent a long time figuring out' (Joe, Norbush Pre-school user, 38).

Joe talked about the challenges of his wife finding employment that would work around drop offs and pick up times and how she eventually decided that she needed the flexibility of setting her own hours through starting her own business. Financially, this meant sacrifices for their family: 'her happiness and the children's happiness come first. They get to see their mum before and after school, at the right times, they get much more interaction'. Other parents face a similar dilemma. The Mud-Pit Pre-school like The Norbush Pre-school operates on shorter hours which means working parents sometimes have to compromise, unfortunately for Jill this means she is not able to have much of a relationship with the staff as she does not see them 'I don't do the drop off, or pick up…[husband] does both of them, my work is less flexible and I have to get my hours in'. McDowell et al. (2006) and Braun et al. (2008) found that the lack of flexibility in some employment interfered with women's roles as mothers, and that these mothers found work particularly difficult. In both Joe's and Jill's account it is evident that more value is placed on mothers being present and engaged in their children's settings than their fathers. This is demonstrated through descriptions of their struggles to find employment that allow them to be consistently present at the beginning and end of sessions, which appears to be seen as the ideal arrangement.

Some parents did not necessarily need to work for financial reasons because they were adequately supported by another household wage but chose to in order to deliver a positive message about labour market engagement:

'It's important that they understand the value of working for their money not just scrounging off the government' (Callie, Tree House Nursery user, 31).

Other parents chose to work because they believed that their standard of living would drop significantly in a one earner household:

'We could live on my husband's wage but we'd live on value food, frozen food, tinned food' (Tanya, Sure Start Centre user, 26).

June recognises that the nice things they have, such as holidays and home improvements cost money and talks to her daughter about the importance of work:

'We like our house, we like our conservatory but it costs money and mummy and daddy have to work to earn that money, I think that's quite important thing for her to learn' (June, The Treehouse Nursery user, 34).

Vincent et al. (2010a) describes how for many mothers, work equates to offering children a better life, and is a way of the mothers 'acting responsibly' (p.134) by modelling the social value of paid work.

5.3.1 Choice: the influence of networks and recommendations

In today's Neo-liberal climate, parents are consumers and take responsibility for choosing and using care with the freedom to exercise choice through the market. However, most childcare is private and expensive (Green and Lawson, 2011; Lawson, 2007; McDowell et al., 2005). Childcare providers offer services to meet societal needs, but for most parents sourcing and combining care from the private, voluntary, maintained and informal spheres has produced 'patchy and limited provision with soaring care costs for parents' (Gallagher 2013b, p.164). The parents involved in this research often combined care in the local area, as well as relying on grandparents for familial care. The rise in female employment means families now require non-maternal care in order for mothers to re-enter the labour force. Combining motherhood and paid work is rarely straightforward for families. McDowell (2008) states: 'one of the most important questions raised by women's labour market participation is who cares for children' (p.155), and this was communicated keenly by the participants in this research. The childcare

choice process is often described using the metaphor 'the landscape of choice' to illustrate the varied and multi-layered contexts in which decisions are made (Ball and Vincent, 1998).

As discussed earlier, for many parents leaving their children and returning to work is an emotional experience, and making the 'right' decision regarding care choices was obviously important. It is unsurprising then that so many participants talked about the importance they ascribed to both the recommendations and approval of friends and family members. For initial recommendations, across the three settings parents sought the advice from those close to them. Jill's sister was an important contact for her:

> 'I literally had chosen [The Treehouse Nursery] purely on the recommendation of my sister, because she's very thorough with her research and I just thought if it's good enough for her it's good enough for my children' (Jill, Tree House Nursery user, 39).

Others who perhaps did not have family or close friends with similar aged children looked to what neighbours and acquaintances in their immediate community had chosen for their family; when asked what influenced her choice June said: 'Well [neighbours children] went'. Katya used a friend of a friend's recommendation: 'she said they've always said it's a really good nursery'. Middle class mothers in particular, according to McDowell et al. (2006), are more likely to use their personal contacts and influence in the choice process, whereas working class mothers are disadvantaged when it comes to building up networks and social circles of other mothers from which to rely on recommendations.

For some parents, the support of family when visiting a setting was as important as initial recommendations. Karly took her mum to view all the childcare settings in the local area, using the time walking between them to reflect on what they saw. She says she is not a mumsy person, and describes how her mum's opinions offered her something different from her own reflections:

> 'I think that's very useful, my mum is a very mumsy person so she would have been looking at how clean it was, were the people interacting with [son]…I don't have that sense, and I think that's really useful' (Karly, Tree House Nursery user, 40).

Lola, who describes her mother as her best friend, particularly valued her mum's opinion as she would be involved in the drop off and pickups of her daughter at The Treehouse Nursery:

> 'My mum's opinion was really important…my mum needed to feel comfortable with it as well, and me and my mum are close she is my best friend, we do everything together' (Lola, Tree House Nursery, 27).

Due to the relatively small area involved in the study, some participants knew staff members who worked at the different childcare settings, and they communicated that this provided them with reassurance that their children would be well looked after. Lola went to school with a senior member of staff at The Treehouse Nursery, whom she described as being hard working: 'it kinda made me think as well this must be a good place…I knew she had always wanted to go into childcare'. Jill was friends with a member of staff who told her about The Mud Pit Pre-school and her experience working there, she liked that her friend promised to call her from work when she was worried about her daughter settling in: 'It was lovely, I wasn't expecting a phone call every week to say she's fine, but just to reassure me in the initial stages… that was nice'.

Although most of the parents visited together, a number of mothers describe being left to make childcare arrangements. Some communicated this as a sense of trust between the couple: '[husband] was quite happy for me to make the decision on my own because he knew if I was happy it would be right' (Kelly). Most parents however described viewing the settings together and of a collaborative decision, even if the mothers had done the initial research. Duncan (2005) describes the choice process around work and childcare as 'socially and culturally created', explaining that this is because parenting is not practised in isolation, and therefore it is inevitable that choices are influenced by those that surround each individual parent, such as friends, family members and the local community.

As well as the recommendations from friends and family, parents often did their own research, specifically online and looking at each setting's OFSTED rating. Katya described visiting a setting in a different area and feeling anxious about the way behaviour was managed, which meant she decided to refer to their OFSTED report:

> 'I then looked at the OFSTED report and it was really interesting because there was a big piece around discipline and control and that kind of thing, I genuinely just got that feeling… so that was that one gone, straight away' (Katya, Tree House Nursery, 33)

When Katya saw that behaviour had been identified as a weak area within the report she was able to rule it out as a potential setting for her son. Other parents were attracted to outstanding OFSTED reports which are the highest rating a setting can receive. Emily highly valued the outstanding OFSTED rating at Norbush Pre-school: 'it was brilliant and had just had an outstanding OFSTED, which was fantastic!'. Likewise, Maria used The Treehouse Nursery's outstanding report as the basis for her initial visit to the setting:

> 'I saw the banner that they have about outstanding and I went and read the OFSTED report and why it was outstanding then I went to visit' (Maria, Tree House Nursery, 40).

It was surprising, given the value ascribed to the OFSTED ratings of schools that more parents did not comment on the OFSTED rating of the setting they had chosen when discussing their choice making process. It is possible this is because they were not aware that Early Years settings are as closely monitored and regulated as schools.

5.3.2 Impressions of childcare practitioners

The perceptions of, and initial relationships formed with staff members were important to parents, particularly in establishing trust and coping with the difficult first separations. It was the parents using The Treehouse Nursery who most explicitly detailed their impressions of professionals. This is interesting considering that parents using this setting tended to start their children younger than the parents using other settings, and used the setting for more hours. Parents describe the manager, Carol as 'warm', 'natural', 'friendly', 'kind' and 'humorous'. Stevie describes how important it is that Carol appeared to be genuine and that her show round was not pitched like a sale:

> '[Carol] was very down to earth and told me how it was, I didn't feel like she was trying to sell anything to me, when I asked questions I got what I felt was an honest answer' (Stevie, Tree House Nursery user, 34).

Rachel, also felt it was important that Carol showed she knew the individual children and cared about them: 'you could tell she wasn't just a manager she really cared about the children'.

A sense of transparency and trust between the parents and professionals was obviously important. Some parents spoke about turning up unannounced at settings to look around in order to get a true sense of what they were like. Karly had a friend who worked in a child care setting in another town who said to her she should visit unannounced: 'that was a really helpful tip as my instant thought was to book an appointment but she said 'you're never going to see what its really like unless you do that', so that's exactly what I did'. The Treehouse Nursery was undergoing renovation when Nat and Rikki enquired about their daughter starting. They describe how the manager reassured them that what they were seeing was an accurate representation of the experiences their daughter would have:

> 'We rang, she said when can you come? I said now? And she said sure! We're up in the air but come now![...].it was a mess but the fact you didn't have to book and could just walk around warts and all, they never tried to hide anything' (Nat, Tree House Nursery user, 40)

Similarly, all of the professionals interviewed highlighted the importance of trust between parents and themselves in the initial development of a relationship. Ella, who works at The Treehouse Nursery says: 'They need that trust, I think that it's the most terrifying thing going through, leaving your child with someone you don't know'. Katya describes how anxious she was to leave her son with Ella, because she had struggled to ever leave him before. She insisted on a number of trial sessions before she would commit to signing up. She talked about how important it was that she trusted Ella, and that Ella was honest with her:

> 'They were really honest, you know on the first afternoon I left him, I rang them when I got home and they were like yeh, he is really upset… that made me trust them because if I ring them and they say he's fine I know he is fine and that they're not lying to me. So I really trusted her' (Katya, Tree House Nursery user, 33).

As well as a sense of trust developed over time during visits and trial sessions, the very first impression that parents received from professionals were also important. Most parents valued professionals who were friendly and approachable, but others commented on other impressions ranging from the ages of professionals to their qualifications and how well-spoken they were. Kelly spoke about visiting another setting in a different town where she was unimpressed with the professionals who worked there: 'they didn't seem as educated… that concerned me that put me off, how can they be teaching children [if they] can't even speak properly themselves?'. Katya felt the first impressions of professionals was really important in determining her choice. She comments on the importance of a clean physical appearance of staff and of how they should speak:

> 'If somebody had come up to me and was rude or looked a bit greasy, grubby, actually a bit mouthy, a bit gobby, a bit rough, I'd have been like no, you're not looking after my child …you're trusting these people with the most precious thing in your life so it's quite a big deal that they come across well' (Katya, Tree House Nursery user, 33).

It was significant that parents communicated that their expectations for childcare workers were that they should appear highly educated, well-spoken and professional in appearance. Feminist geographers have argued that the outsourcing of care labour has produced new gender inequalities in society, and childcare professionals are some of the lowest paid women in society (Gallagher 2013b). The manager and deputy manager at The Mud-Pit Pre-school, which is a committee run not-for-profit setting, discuss the salaries in the Early Years sector. Manager Rita comments on how undervalued the sector is and how it can give the impression to staff that their job role is not important. She mentions the work she has to put into recruiting good quality staff:

'Pay is disgusting because you go train and do your foundation degree and you do your degrees and everything else and you're expecting pay for that aren't you? …I put systems in, I'm very creative with the money that we have, we never buy anything new, ever, I would say 99p out of every pound goes into staff wages, that's how tight it is' (Rita, manager, The Mud-Pit Pre-school).

Some parents were explicit about their desire to find a setting with a highly qualified staff team. June talks about how Rita only employs highly qualified staff, and had moved her daughter from another nursery over concerns with their staff team:

'She [Rita] has quite high standards…there are so many ex-primary school teachers whereas at [previous nursery] it could just be anybody, no qualification or getting their qualification' (June, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 34).

Deputy manager Lila agrees that a constant challenge is recruiting the right staff because high quality and graduate child care professionals tend to leave the profession and retrain as teachers. Lila says that sometimes this means that they have staff members who are 'just a body…it sounds awful to say because you need your numbers'. In contrast, although childcare settings are increasingly regulated, private settings like The Treehouse Nursery show a reluctance to employ highly trained graduates because it further drives up costs. The manager, Carol showed a sense of antipathy towards graduates:

'I feel that apprenticeships and people learning on the job…because you are an academic and you pass your qualifications with distinctions all the way through doesn't make you a good worker' (Carol, manager, Tree House Nursery).

This implies that some settings are more hesitant in professionalising their workforce because they attach importance to experience rather than educational qualifications, and value being able to shape apprentices and students who 'learn on the job'.

5.3.3 Considering learning ethos'

One of the significant aspects of the choice process for parents was the learning ethos of the setting they were considering for their child. Although some parents, like Hannah articulated clearly that they chose their child's setting based on their specific ethos: '*I just liked the concept, I like that it's an outdoors environment*', others did not always articulate ethos using this exact terminology. Instead, they describe an 'experience', 'vibe' or 'atmosphere' they perceived when learning about the care and educational experiences offered by the settings. There were two contrasting messages from parents regarding what kind of learning

experiences they wanted for their children and how this effected their choice of settings. Some parents spoke clearly about a need for their chosen setting to prepare their child for school. Other parents chose settings which had a strong ethos of free play and creativity which protected their ideas of childhood as a time which should be free from pressure and assessment.

There has been criticism of the EYFS and the increasing pressure some childcare settings put on children by providing them with 'schoolified' environments that focus on formal learning, early reading, writing and number awareness, stifling free play and creativity (House, 2011, Gallagher 2013c). However, policy messages around childhood development send clear messages to childcare professionals and parents about the importance of being school ready (Field, 2010, OFSTED, 2014). Parents in general across all settings came across as anxious about school readiness, and professionals commented on this too when asked what they thought parents worried most about. Parents who had chosen The Treehouse Nursery and the Norbush Pre-school, both of which could be described as traditional settings with structured adult-guided activities, adult-led social activities such as circle time, and free play, were most concerned about their child's adequate preparation for school and this had influenced their choice.

The parents using The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school were seeking settings whose ethos centred around helping children to develop school readiness such as early reading and writing skills. Norbush Pre-school was joined to a primary school and most parents using it intended for their children to progress through and join the reception class. The physical environment was not dissimilar to a primary class room, with tables of activities and chairs, an art area and a circle time carpeted area with cushions and accessible books. Saffia moved to the area and needed to find a school for her older child, when she enquired at the school they informed her that they had a preschool attached and advised she signed up her younger child. School readiness was keenly communicated by her as important to the extent that they would like their daughter to start school early:

> 'When we first decided on the school they said look, we have a pre-school, it would be a good idea to use it to get them used to school, we thought that was a good idea to help settle [daughter]…we are thinking she is ready to go to school…we did some research and called the council…I'm not saying she's a genius or trying to be pushy…we just need to develop it or she'll get bored' (Saffia, Norbush Pre-school user, 32).

Saffia was pleased that the pre-school agreed to work with her in preparing her daughter for school by allowing her visits to the reception class and giving her work to do together at home.

Similarly, Joe talks about his son showing signs of early reading readiness which they were keen to encourage. He was impressed when he looked around the pre-school by their ethos which he felt was demonstrated by the physical appearance of the setting and the interaction with the professionals:

'It seemed a similar environment to the [reception class] lots of resources, quiet and controlled…since we made [teacher] aware of his reading and that we wanted him to do more she's been unbelievably encouraging… they've taken our lead …I see it as a place of education as well as a place to look after children' (Joe, Norbush Pre-school user, 38).

The Treehouse Nursery was less like a typical primary class room and had lots of self-selection areas, one table with an adult-led activity and a circle time area and book corner. The setting decided to make a reading scheme and a fun weekly homework task to help with school preparation after working in consultation with local primary schools and speaking with parents who communicated that they wanted the setting to provide more formal learning experiences for them to do together. Stevie's daughter is an early reader:

'I always thought [daughter] has to be ready for school and in my mind being able to read, being able to form letters…that's just what I thought she should be able to do' (Stevie, Tree House Nursery user, 34).

Stevie was really grateful that the setting established a system of loaning out books and reading with her during her sessions so that she could achieve her goal of helping her daughter to read independently by the time she started school.

Regardless of the individual learning ethos of each setting, it was a surprising finding that across all the settings staff members were not positive about a parental preoccupation with school readiness or the pressure parents sometimes placed on their children. Some parents using the settings recognised themselves that there was a fixation amongst other parents around school readiness and tried to resist. Summer talks about her daughter not being included in The Tree House Nurseries reading scheme:

'Some of the children at nursery were learning to read… I don't necessarily think she's ready and I would absolutely hate to push her into it too early and her to be put off reading because it's an important thing we do together. But, obviously it seemed odd to me that some of the children were…There was one child learning to because her mum was keen-I can believe that!' (Summer, Tree House Nursery user, 33).

Unsurprisingly, The Mud-Pit pre-school, a forest school which is almost entirely made up of self-selection experiences, with most children spending the majority of their sessions outside,

were clear that they communicated their forest school ethos to potential parents and demonstrated that they were against pressures placed on children to be ready for school. Though members of staff at The Mud-Pit Pre-school say it is not the ethos alone that influences the choices of parents, Manager, Rita, says: 'there is a pocket of parents that know a little bit about what forest school is and want that experience for their child', she describes how parents find them through word of mouth recommendations and their own research. Other staff members, describe how some parents come from further away because they are drawn to their unique ethos: 'There are the parents who really understand what we have to offer and how valuable that is' (Phoebe) whilst Oscar, a senior educator, describes some parents as skilled consumers, ' a lot [of parents] have done a lot research'.

Jill, as a parent utilising two settings, comments on the physical environment within The Mud Pit Pre-school. She describes it as being 'new age-y' 'messy' 'scruffy' of observing what she describes as 'old fashioned' play opportunities like mud kitchens: 'I thought it was great that there was poetry and things hanging down from the ceiling, whilst it was chaotic it looked very creative'. Jill describes herself as being a creative person, who could appreciate from also having her children at The Treehouse Nursery that The Mud Pit Pre-school was offering something different in terms of the experiences on offer:

> 'The outdoor experience, was very creative, and being a creative person I value that, I just loved the idea of it, went along, had a look and knew it was something very different[...], I thought brilliant… it was the experience that I wanted her to have, more of an immersive, messy play experience' (Jill, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 39).

For this reason, Jill chose to combine care, even though doing so was sometimes a struggle with their opening hours: 'I'm sold, I'm going to try and make it happen in terms of hours because it's not quite ideal'. This was because she felt strongly about the creative experiences The Mud-Pit Pre-school offered. Tara-Lee's daughter, like Jill attended both The Treehouse Nursery and The Mud-Pit Pre-school. She observes differences in the learning environment between the settings and comments on the value The Mud-Pit Pre-school ascribe to children's independence and listening to their voices through collaboration and joint decision making between adults and children:

> 'I really like their ethos…trying to get children to interact with nature and learn through play …and I wanted her to develop her imagination more which I thought [The Mud-pit Pre-school] would help and also she had become very shy and I thought it would help to bring her confidence on as they give the decision making over to the children so I thought that would help' (Tara-Lee, The Mud-Pit Pre-school user, 30).

Tara-Lee valued what The Mud-Pit Pre-school offered because she felt there ethos was helpful for her daughter who was lacking in confidence. Other parents, like Nadine, looked to The Mud-Pit pre-school because it specifically fitted her daughter's preference to learn and play outside because they value and encourage children to spend most of their sessions outside:

> 'I think it was the outdoor [space]…they like them to be outside a lot….She's always outside, she loves the outside. She'll go out in pyjamas before she has breakfast…Well that's what I looked for…I sort of read what they provided, and that one seemed for us to fit' (Nadine, The Mud-Pit Pre-school user, 38).

Several parents commented on the unique experiences they feel the children have that they would not get at other settings, or within their own homes:

> 'The pictures we see of her in the tool shed with a hacksaw cutting wood, you'd never see that at a mainstream nursery, they are that bit different' (June, The Mud-Pit Pre-school user, 34).

Jill used to be an art teacher, and feels upset she does not offer more creative experiences to her children at home:

> 'I used to be an art teacher for goodness sake, I should be doing more creative stuff with them[...]I really find it hard to manage that situation at home' (Jill, The Mud-Pit Pre-school user, 39).

However, she is reassured that her daughter is 'messy, paint all over her' when she comes home from The Mud-Pit Pre-school. This demonstrates that to some parents the corporeal messiness of childhood they see as ideal can be experienced through the experiential and creative ethos in The Mud-Pit Pre-school.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter reflected on parents' motivations for attending Vertlea Sure Start Centre, including a need for specific support for their babies, e.g. with breastfeeding, and to protect their maternal mental health by leaving their homes, socialising and making friends and networks of other parents. Some parents acknowledged it was a free way of providing their babies with stimulating early learning experiences. When maternity leave was over, the parents had moving dilemmas about negotiating their return to work. For most women, their return was not as simple as being motivated purely by financial need. Mothers had internalised a need to return to employment to be productive worker citizens and to deliver positive messages about employment to their children. Some women felt positive about their labour market engagement and that it provided them with a separate identity from 'mother'. Others, encountered challenges with inflexible employment.

 Most women spoke negatively about the challenges of juggling paid work, childcare and their domestic responsibilities. When parents decided to return to employment, they were left with difficult decisions around negotiating care for their children in their absence, decisions that were made in a 'landscape of choice' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and 'theatres of emotions' (Vincent and Ball, 2001). Choice was shown to be influenced by recommendations from friends and social networks, as well as the parents' own research, for example information about the setting presented in its OFSTED report. The first impressions of child care practitioners was significant: parents sought professionals who were genuine, trustworthy and not giving them a 'hard sell'. In addition they wanted professionals to appear well qualified and professional. The learning ethos of each setting was a factor in the choice making process, as some parents had a clear idea of what they were looking for. Parents using Norbush Pre-school and The Tree House Nursery were concerned with their children being school ready and how the setting was preparing them for this, whilst the parents using The Mud-Pit Pre-school spoke more about the creative and play-based experiences that they wanted for their children, which was an integral part of the setting's forest school ethos.

Chapter six: parents as partners and co-educators.

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the relationship between the settings and parents will be discussed in order to answer research question three: 'To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years' setting?'. This will be considered by reflecting on how involving parents in their young children's learning is negotiated and prioritised by each setting through different techniques. The responses and reactions of parents, along with the barriers they face will also be explored to answer research question four: 'What expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?'.

6.2 Engaging parents

As discussed in chapters four and five, engaging parents in children's learning is a significant aim for Early Years settings for a number of reasons. Close relationships with families is seen as a form of early intervention, whereby open and honest information exchanges between parents and professionals facilitates the safeguarding of children, particularly those who are seen as vulnerable or at risk. The Every Child Matters (ECM) framework, an important policy initiative aiming to improve the lives of young children, strongly acknowledges the role of parents and notes that previously there has been a failure to understand the significant improvements that can be made for children when their parents are engaged in their learning and development. These messages are reflected in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the curriculum for under-fives, which states that children develop best in 'enabling environments' (EYFS, 2012, p.2) and when there is a 'strong partnership between practitioners and parents and carers' (ibid). The EYFS strongly influences the practice of professionals as the framework is mandatory. In the EYFS guidance material, several different recommendations are made, including the ascribing of a key person to each individual child to facilitate professional-parent communication, and the sharing of a written report for each child between 24-36 months, which parents have the chance to comment on and share concerns.

As well as being a form of early intervention in the lives of families, engaging parents in their children's learning is acknowledged as being significant in raising achievement. Research on the power of school involvement from Ball (2010) suggests that engaging parents is a way for educational professionals to tackle persistent educational inequalities, and a powerful force to support achievement (Goodall, 2013). Longitudinal studies such as the EPPE (2004) project (The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education) used its findings to illustrate that the quality of the home learning environment was deeply significant to children's intellectual and social development. The report lists some of the things parents do that are significant:

> '…Reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores. These activities could also be viewed as 'protective' factors in reducing the incidence of SEN' (EPPE, 2004, p.3).

As evident in this list, discussion has focused on the activities that parents do at home to support their children, not just their involvement within educational settings (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2008). Accordingly, in this project engaging parents and the co-educator relationship refers to family involvement both in the setting, and in the home and wider environment.

Professionals communicated their reasons for engaging parents in different ways. Catherine, the manager of Vertlea Sure Start Centre talks about the transition the young babies at her setting make when they start to attend a childcare setting. She discusses how creating 'little learning journals' during sessions at the Centre where parents are encouraged to record 'milestones at home...these wow things.'. She states that this helps the professionals who will be involved with the children in the future: 'they can see their past development', which she believes is beneficial. Catherine acknowledges that it is not just about how the parent supports their child's learning within the Centre: 'it's giving them that encouragement, encouraging the parent to do things at home not just in the Centre' echoing Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) who state that successful engagement is made up of parenting and learning at home, not just communication and involvement in educational settings.

Engaging well with parents and facilitating open and honest communication also helps Catherine to better signpost parents, especially those who may be at risk, to the most helpful sessions or external services available: 'it's establishing relationships[...]there might be other places they can go that can refer them onto that might be more suitable'. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS, 2006) report stated that an integral aim of Sure Start Centre's is to provide: 'services that are flexible, respectful, transparent, inclusive, involving and responsive to the needs of parents, the aim was to engage with and to empower parents' (p.5). Field (2010) makes reference to hard to reach parents stating that Sure Start Centres should have a renewed focus on 'reaching out effectively and improving the outcomes of the most disadvantaged children' (p.7). Consultations with poverty experts, delivery organisations, charities, lobby groups, and parents and children revealed that: 'Many respondents believed that services must do much more to effectively engage parents who have traditionally been harder to reach' (ibid, p.88).

The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-School had similar reasons for engaging with parents. Nicole, who works at Norbush Pre-school stated:

'I'll do everything I can to encourage [the children's] development and their learning…once they leave here I have to hope we are all on the same page and that's why we talk to them [the parents] …We do it because it's right, yes it's under the EYFS, that's what's expected when you work in a professional setting but I think if you're

good at your job and you know your children it should come natural' (Nicole, Norbush Pre-school, qualified Early Years professional, 33).

Nicole shows that for her listening to the voices of parents is important and actually influences the setting's practice. Engaging with parents means they are 'on the same page' in terms of the expectations she has for the children's development and behaviour management. She engages parents in different home/setting tasks such as a weekend pre-school mascot, which she describes as a 'positive home school link' in order to see 'what they have access to...their attitude towards things like this, how proactive they are in getting involved'. Norbush Pre-school manager Nina engages with parents because she feels that is what they want and need. She acknowledges the powerful influence parents have on their children:

'I think it's important to do that, the child spends the majority of their life with their parents, all their morals, all their values, their upbringing, if we can support and help families to do the right thing that's the best thing for the child' (Nina, Norbush Pre-school manager, qualified Early Years professional, 40).

Like Nina, at The Treehouse Nursery, manager Carol states that she feels a sense of duty in supporting parents: 'If they ask for my help, or I can see that they are struggling with something…I will help them, that's part of my responsibility as a manager, is to be that link'. Through forming close relationships with parents, Carol is able to be 'that link' between the family's home lives and their children's experiences within the nursery. Anna, deputy manager at The Treehouse Nursery states that engaging parents comes from an intrinsic desire she holds both individually, and as part of the staff team at the setting, to best support the children, which she acknowledges would be difficult to achieve without good relationships with their families:

'We want to be able to support the children as much as possible and the majority of that is supporting parents, it is a requirement of OFSTED but that's not the reason, we would still help and offer as much support as we possibly can' (Anna, deputy manager, The Treehouse Nursery).

As well as working with parents to develop a shared purpose, Ella the baby room leader at The Treehouse Nursery, states that engaging well with parents is important because it helps the babies in her care to settle, and she feels satisfied when parents feel secure in leaving their babies in the early days of separation:

'If they come to you with a question or they want advice …that helps with the bond and your relationship with parents, and I think you giving them advice helps them further to feel more relaxed…I think if you've got a good relationship they are going to know

you've got a good relationship with their child and they are going to feel more at ease with leaving them' (Ella, baby room leader, Tree House Nursery).

Tilly, a qualified nursery nurse at The Treehouse Nursery, like Ella is firm in her belief that forming partnerships with parents is not because of statutory guidance or company policies: 'I do it for the children'. She cites her own experience of being a mother as part of this, describing her 'values', 'views' and 'instincts' as a mum as overriding expectations from the nursery manager, the EYFS and OFSTED in doing what she thinks is best for families. Tilly empathises with the parents and tries to build up close relationships with them. Like Ella she feels that this helps parents to feel secure leaving their children:

> 'I don't think you ever fully understand how those parents feel until you're a mum…I think sometimes do they think you're being a bit patronising…but when you're a mum and you say don't worry I know how you feel, it changes everything when you become a mum' (Tilly, Tree House Nursery, qualified nursery nurse, 39).

It is interesting that Tilly's experiences of being a mother informs her practice to the extent that she perceives it makes her more sensitive to the parent-child separation. Cameron et al. (2002) argue that dominant understandings of how nursery staff should behave are based on normative expectations that they should act as substitute mothers, since attachment pedagogy dictates that 'non-maternal care needs to be modelled on a dyadic mother–child relationship' (Cameron et al., 2002, p.575).

It is the Mud Pit Pre-school who are most clear in their approach to engaging parents, citing it as a major focus of what the setting is trying to achieve. As discussed in chapter four, the setting's ethos centres around promoting the mental health and wellbeing of the children in their care, which the professionals reference frequently as a cause for concern. The professionals, like deputy manager Lila, state that it is impossible for them to fulfil their objectives without taking into account the wellbeing of parents, which can only be achieved through close partnerships. Lila is clear that in order to support the children, many of whom come to them from difficult home circumstances, parents and practitioners must have open, honest exchanges about the challenges they are facing at home. Lila also discusses how the setting is able to make up for what they consider to be deficits in the home, such as a lack of outside space: 'we can give them the experiences parents can't easily give…If a parent is in a rented flat with no outdoor space, we offer that kind of thing they can't offer their children'. However, to do so she says the practitioners must be aware of what kind of issues each individual family face by working in partnership. Oscar, a senior educator at The Mud-Pit Pre-school, talks about the need to work in partnership with parents so that they can influence families: 'strategies that are put in place with children are talked over with the parents because they need

mirroring at home or there's no point'. Oscar stresses the importance of a continuity based on home reflecting the setting. This appears at odds with earlier narratives from the manager and deputy manager around respecting the diversity of each child's home life.

For parents, the reasons behind a willingness to engage in their children's Early Years setting mirror some of the points raised by the professionals. Firstly, it was very clear that there was a concern amongst many parents, regardless of the setting they used, about their children's readiness to start school. These parents engaged with settings and communicated with them regularly both in order to share progress and discuss how to help support their learning at home, and as a way of ensuring that the setting was being attentive enough in helping their child achieve their perceived potential. This demonstrates that important policy documentation such as the EYFS (2017) and reports looking at early education and life chances (Allen, 2010; 2011, Field, 2011) have had an indirect effect on parents, as they communicate a keen awareness of the importance of the early learning experiences of their children. Saffia for example was keen for her child to start school earlier and was encouraging the professionals at Norbush Pre-school to help her make a case to the head teacher:

> 'So far I'm happy with everything, I do hope they are going to assess her and see if she's ready to go to school, I'll give them time, but I do hope they just do that' (Saffia, Norbush Pre-school, 32).

Saffia had worked closely with the pre-school sharing her daughter's progress and completing home tasks to help demonstrate her potential.

Secondly, some parents had specific concerns about their children's development. Gillies (2005) discussed how middle class parents 'underline the responsibility' (p.843) to professionals about their children's uniqueness in order to ensure the reaching of their potential: 'middle class interviewees were invested in constructing their children as 'unique' and distinct from others. This was commonly articulated in relation to education, with middle class parents emphasizing the intellectual competence of their children' (ibid). Likewise, Vincent and Ball (2007) found that middle class parents showed an enthusiasm for enriching activities for their children in order to 'reproduce their children within the middle classes' (p.1062). Maria, whose son was born with Cerebyl Palsy but had made excellent progress was delighted to find her son showed interest in play involving numbers and quantity and wanted the professionals at The Treehouse Nursery to nurture this:

> 'For me that was extremely important that she picked him as key to try and teach and to try to help to read a little bit and stimulate…it is important in the sense that he has all the opportunities to develop all of his skills and overcome the brain injury' (Maria, Tree House Nursery, 40).

For parents like Maria, engaging with professionals was a way of protecting their children against the disadvantages they might otherwise face. Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2007) argue that parents of disabled children are 'more than allies' (p.202) to their disabled children, because of the discriminatory practices and attitudes they face. They develop 'special competencies' (p.204) which emerge through a process of 'negotiating, advocating and mediating on behalf of their children…acting as 'vigilantes' as they battle educational and medical establishments on behalf of their children' (p.204).

Thirdly there was a group of parents who engaged because they felt a moral responsibility to show that they were interested and involved, rather than any real sense that it would improve their children's development. Sometimes these parents expressed exasperation at what was expected of them, but never the less complied. Summer reflected on struggling to attend some open days for parents:

'I never really think this is worth taking a day's annual leave for…and maybe they are and maybe [daughter's] really missing out…but they never really advertise they just say bring your mummy to nursery, but why[...]what are you going to do? Is it a good use of time?' (Summer, The Treehouse Nursery, 33).

Summer struggled to attend these sessions because of work commitments, when she did she felt like it was not a good use of time, but she still made an effort to attend. Sacha struggled to make time to do some of the homework tasks set by The Treehouse Nursery, but felt a pressure to do them to prove that she wanted to 'encourage' and 'teach' her son:

'I think sometimes they expect a bit too much of you… a lovely idea but sometimes it's not practical[...]he says 'where's mine, why haven't I made one?' but I had to say 'we haven't had time to make one sweetheart'…I see their whole encouragement and I know some parents might not do that with their children[...]but we do stuff with [son]' (Sacha, The Treehouse Nursery, 33).

Sacha and Summer both show that they have internalised a sense of responsibility to demonstrate that they are 'good mothers', under what has been described by Gillies (2007) as the 'creeping professionalisation of family life' (p.7). They both feel discriminated by their inabilities to rearrange their work responsibilities in order to be more present: 'middle class practices of shoring up and passing on their privilege are held to be the embodiment of 'good parenting', working-class parents' resourceful actions in the context of material deprivation are identified as the cause of their disadvantage' (Gillies, 2007, p.849). This professionalisation has increased parents responsibility by forcing them to act as educators alongside their teachers in order to produce 'compliant, educated citizen-workers' (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016, p.378). There has been a strong state-generated discourse about 'not good enough' and 'bad'

mothers (Vincent et al., 2010a); it is posed that 'the source of and solution to their and especially their children's disadvantage and marginalisation lies within families, in parenting practice' (Edwards and Gillies, 2011, p.143). In the case of Sacha and Summer, they struggled to find time to complete home-setting tasks. Harris and Goodall (2007) described this as a form of 'middle class neglect' (p.55) whereby parents paid employment negatively impacts on their ability to be as engaged as they would like to be in their children's education.

6.3 Communication and information sharing

In the previous section the motivations for educational settings to engage parents was discussed, firstly because of policy guidance and legislation which promotes safeguarding and family involvement as a form of early intervention, and secondly in order to raise achievement. Professionals communicated that they engage with parents for a number of reasons, ranging from: providing them with a better ability to signpost families to multiagency services, improved educational partnership resulting in shared goals for children's development, a sense of duty and their own experiences as mothers to improving the wellbeing of children. Parents' engagement with their children's educational setting was the result of a desire to secure the advantage of their children by ensuring their school readiness; however, there was also a number of parents who engaged out of moral obligation in order to be perceived as 'good' parents, despite the challenges or barriers they faced in participation.

In this section each setting will be examined, and the practical ways that professionals share information and work to engage and involve parents will be discussed, whilst the challenges to participation will be reflected on using the voices of the parents.

6.3.1 Vertlea Sure Start Centre: home visits, formal classes and parent-led sessions.

As discussed earlier, one of the key aims of Sure Start Local Programmes is to engage and empower parents. Vertlea Sure Start Centre offers a range of different services for parents, some of which are specifically focused on engagement, for example, a development pathway that begins in the antenatal period, and health co-ordinated services, such as baby weight checks and breastfeeding support that target parents early in their journeys of parenthood. Manager Catherine discusses her duty to register each parent that attends the setting so there are records of families in the area. She also comments on early recruitment techniques such as the responsibility that Health Visitors take in signposting parents to the Centre when visiting

expectant mothers. Parents commented on this too, yet, many were critical about the reliability of this information and implied it was a box ticking exercise:

> 'I was given a photocopied piece of paper, half faded…it was about two years old, [the health visitor] said, I don't know even know if half these classes still run..., but there's a number on there if you want to give them a ring. [...]at that stage I'd lost all faith in Health Visitors really' (Tanya, Vertlea Sure Start Centre, 26).

In general, comments like Tanya's were common amongst the parents using the Centre. Changing government priorities, funding cuts and staff shortages resulted in organisational problems with sharing information about services and sessions were reported to be muddled and poorly communicated by the professionals. However, manager Catherine was widely blamed. Although manager Catherine does talk about ways of engaging parents, such as through home visits, she also comments that many parents are referred to the setting through social care plans, meaning they have not necessarily attended of their own accord, which corresponds with policy messages that focus on parental governmentality (Dahlstedt, 2009) and parenting education (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). Home visits appeared to be targeted at those who were perceived as reluctant to engage. Catherine describes these visits as a way of 'establishing relationships' and for sharing information, she acknowledges that for some parents 'just getting them to turn up at the group' is unhelpful, and that she aims to make sure they are comfortable whilst ensuring that the services that have been recommended are the most appropriate and that additional support at home is not needed. Catherine emphasises that it is only through knowing parents that she is able to engage them.

Much of the engagement between the Centre and parents came from specific classes and written information that was available. Various different classes ran and many had corresponding resources, such as leaflets that contained written information and direction to apps or websites, whilst the developmental pathway provided associated items such as a toothbrush and toothpaste during a dental hygiene session and a first aid kit during a paediatric first aid session. Parents were overwhelmingly positive about the impact these classes had on them, even if they felt that the sessions were not targeted to their demographic. It was hard for them to specifically identify the things they had done differently as a result of attending the Centre; however, they were influenced by messages around interactions with their babies such as baby massage, which several parents commented they had since incorporated at home. Similarly, as one of the first places parents visited with their young babies, engaging in the setting had encouraged them to use other baby classes. Attending social gatherings with other parents was described as really important for their wellbeing and mental health. Specific messages of classes were also useful for parents, for example, Amie was surprised at how

useful the sessions were and decided to follow a baby led weaning approach to solid food introduction with her second child following a session provided by the Centre: 'I've used the information from the Centre with the talk, so it was them really that provided me with that information, I then looked into it myself obviously'. In this way the Centre had been successful in engaging a parent in the health promotion messages communicated in a weaning session. Likewise, sessions based around engaging parents in play opportunities using every day household items had influenced Cat: 'They save boxes and tin foil at the Centre so we saved some tinfoil tins and made it into a drum, it gave me that idea'. Catherine's beliefs around engaging parents demonstrate that she values parent-child interactions, of sitting down to play, which she mentions does not come easily to every parent: 'A lot of parents don't even know how to play with their children'.

A criticism from the parents, however, as highlighted in chapter five was the amount of sessions that were parent-led. Parent-led sessions are prevalent in Sure Start Centres serving to both engage parents in their local communities and as an affordable way to run classes and keep Centres open in light of funding cuts: 'public participation and community involvement is seen as a way of building accountability and legitimacy, empowering individuals and communities, and ensuring that public policies better reflect the needs of local people' (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005, p.528). Parent-led classes are an example of what Jones et al. (2011) describes as a technique of government-sponsored behaviour change referred to as soft or libertarian paternalism:

> 'certain kinds of policies promoted under the rubric of soft paternalism tend – at least in certain guises – to view citizens in infantilizing terms…seek to engage citizens in more reflexive and sustained considerations of their own behaviour. Some even encourage citizens to become co-producers of libertarian policies in conjunction with the state' (Jones et al., 2011, p.498).

Classes are led by parents who are deemed to be good citizens who go on to regulate not only their own behaviour but also others. Several of the parents interviewed were involved in running these classes. Their reasons for doing so were to keep up contact with groups of friends made through professional led classes that otherwise would have finished, or because they felt passionate about a particular topic. For example, Demi ran helped to run a breastfeeding class having previously trained as a breastfeeding mentor. There are arguments that parent-led classes are an example of Foucault's concept of 'pastoral power' whereby parents are recruited to help govern themselves (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005). English (2004) stated the hallmarks of pastoral power are individuals who exercise a redemptive role in their lives

through 'micro practices and technologies of power' by subjecting themselves and others to disciplinary power.

Some parents objected to the amount of parent-led classes and were critical about what they perceived to be a lack of interest in engaging with parents from the manager Catherine and an outreach worker who ran some of the classes; Cat claims that the staff at the Centre 'like it when it's quiet'. Amie, like several other parents, said that they had never received any personalised information about their child's development from the professionals at the setting because they had not spent much time observing them: 'there's not really been anyone who had a big enough connection, known them personally'. Jupp (2012) discussed the challenge for Sure Start employees to 'challenge people…rather than simply letting them have a rest from parenting' (p.222), which she described as sometimes creating an 'ambiguity of the staff's roles' (ibid). Parents appeared to want help from professionals whilst feeling uncomfortable about 'the moral surveillance' (ibid) atmosphere. This goes some way to explaining why Catherine did not always meet the expectations of parents. As Jupp (ibid) explains 'there was a kind of hesitancy and awkwardness around many of the interventions[...].they clearly felt more comfortable describing their roles as friendly…this goes against some of the more sweeping social policy narratives and the governmentalisation of parents' (ibid).

Demi, who attended the setting with her third child described 'the ladies who sit behind the desk' as not very friendly 'she smiles when I go in, but that's it'. Likewise, Joanne felt that the lack of involvement from Catherine in some of the sessions was disappointing:

> 'The lady who runs it was useless…she just didn't seem to care. But luckily, we just needed a warm room and somewhere to be. She was terrible[...]not bothered, let you in and then go sit in her office, she wouldn't do anything, you think breastfeeding café, you'll get a drink, she'd just let you in and disappear' (Joanne, Vertlea Sure Start Centre, 36)

Tanya also felt that there was a lack of enthusiasm for some of the activities. She shares that when creating the learning journeys, they were encouraged to take photos however they were never printed: 'she couldn't download the photos… so we couldn't really complete the learning journey. Luckily I had some of my own photos to print but a lot of the other mums didn't'. This was despite manager Catherine emphasising the value of the learning journeys 'parents are involved in doing observations, taking photographs of what the next steps are for their children'. As well as a lack of organisation, Demi shared two different experiences that she felt were off-putting to parents:

> 'The buzzer doesn't work so you have to wait or knock on the door and hope someone sees you and lets you in, that's a bit awkward I think that could put off some mums…

I could have gone home but I peered through the window and said 'can someone let me in?'. To peer through a window takes confidence, they let me in and said 'the breastfeeding group is through there', that was the extent to our interaction [laughs], I mentioned it and they said 'yes [the doorbell] doesn't work' (Demi, Vertlea Sure Start Centre, 36).

She also recounted a situation where a no hot drink rule had been bought in after thermos flasks were not cleaned properly after one of the sessions, she says 'I know a lot of mums really like a hot cup of tea especially in company which you don't get at home, so that was important for them'. She described 'the ladies' as 'up in arms' about the situation. Similarly, the Centre had provided rugs for small babies who were not yet crawling to be placed on during the sessions, but they were subsequently taken away without proper explanation: 'I don't know what that was about, if someone had been sick on them and they hadn't been cleaned, maybe it was just a knee jerk reaction. I think that's very impersonal'. This is interesting considering Jupp (2012) comments about the juxtaposition of striving to invoke a sense of 'homeliness' in semi-institutional spaces like Sure Start Centres alongside a clear agenda to regulate parents' behaviour through an avoidance of overly 'familial' relationships between users, for example, the removal of hot drinks to a session that was enjoyed as a coffee morning. Although the parents tended to blame Catherine for the limitations of the setting, the wider context of increasingly constrained resources is an important, and to the parents' invisible, backdrop.

Catherine described engaging parents as the most difficult part of her job, because it is 'frustrating' as she is 'only there to help them'. She recounts difficulties in home visits when parents don't answer or 'they just won't talk'. She acknowledges that she can't force them to engage but that it is 'worrying' if they aren't contactable, forcing her to use other methods of communicating. She describes the challenges of when on the outside a parent appears willing to engage but their fear of authority leads them to disguise the reality of the challenges they face for fear of the sanctions that may be placed on them. This shows that parents are aware that Sure Start Centres operate as an arm of the state, and thus fear judgment. The majority of parents are described by Catherine as willing to engage, and she stated she finds it most helpful to tailor her approach to different parents, which was a common message from the professionals interviewed across the settings. She has found that engagement based on information sharing, a 'little bit of guidance' is a more effective strategy. However, she was not perceived this way by the parents, who stated that they found her approach made her appear disengaged and detached.

At The Treehouse Nursery, information was shared with parents in a variety of different ways in order to promote engagement. Parents spoke positively about the use of a diary system, Summer for example described the system as 'brilliant, it really helped us to feel connected to what she was doing'. The diaries provided daily information about each child, for example, what they had eaten, how long they had slept for and what they enjoyed doing that day. Some members of staff, like trainee Kylie, shared that they went beyond this and updated parents with their children's development through the diary system:

> 'If a child has completed their next step I will normally put it in their diary, oh I've completed my next step today, just to let them know they have done something, achieved something, then when we do handovers we do say oh she's done this today, we've never seen her do this before' (Kylie, Trainee Early Years practitioner, Tree House Nursery, 18).

Some professionals, however, were not positive about the diary system which was time consuming to complete, such as trainee Jade who was frustrated that some parents did not appear to read the diary: 'some parents just put the diary in the bag and just[...]go'. However, the diary system stopped when children entered into the pre-school age group of the nursery as staff ratios lowered and numbers of children increased with the introduction of children attending for the three year old funding. Parents were passionately against the decrease in information that was shared between them and their children's key workers, despite understanding that providing the diaries was no longer achievable. James describes having had a good partnership with the professionals early on which had rapidly diminished: 'some of them, it's like almost like oh has [son] been here today? It was a bit of a disconnect'. Several of the parents communicated a concern that because of shift changes and lunch breaks that end of session handovers were not always a reliable exchange of information, whilst others wished that the information was less based on meal times and instead personalised, for example, what their child had done that day or who they had played with.

It was interesting that the keyworker relationship, outlined as a recommended practice in the EYFS (2017) guidance is only discussed by professionals working with the youngest children. This is reflected in parents' accounts who imply that relationships with the key person diminished as their child progressed through the nursery. This is interesting, as it suggests the setting is preparing parents for the change in dynamics between parent and professional in

the primary class room. Ella, who worked with babies talked about the importance of the system:

> 'When the children come they get assigned a keyworker and as a keyworker your role is you look after the main care aspects for those children, so the keyworker will change the child's nappy, they will give them the bottle, they will try and feed them… they will have lots of one-on-one time, to build relationships, we will fill in the daily diaries and we will try and speak to the child's parents…the keyworker system is very important' (Ella, baby room leader, The Treehouse Nursery).

Katya's young son had found the separation from her particularly distressing and she discussed how assigning her son with a new key person he had formed a close bond with helped this transition:

> 'He's taken to her so…I'd quite like her to be there in the morning when I drop him off, it's making it easier for both of us… I do think the keyworker role is important' (Katya, The Treehouse Nursery, 33).

Conversely, there were incidences of parents of older children feeling that there was no special relationship between their child and their keyperson because of the staff to child ratios. There were also concerns raised around staff who worked part time and staff turnover:

> 'They have had a keyworker that they've liked, there have been incidences when that person's left and we've not known and it's literally one day they're there the next day they're gone and nobody's said anything and I don't think that's very good' (Eve, The Treehouse Nursery, 35).

The Treehouse Nursery also provided parents with parents' evenings, an informal version of what is more commonly associated with school parents' evenings. These events ran twice a year; however, deputy manager Anna said it was common for parents to have 'parents evening-type meetings between the main ones' because of their open door policy for parents to share concerns or request additional information about their child's progress. Ella, the baby room leader, described how parents need these evenings, and specifically comments on them being useful for parental partnership, as many parents request additional information about how to better support their children's learning at home:

> 'It's nice for us to get with the parents, sit down and speak about the development, so that the parents know exactly where their children are and help them with doing things at home and a lot of the parents do ask questions like, 'is there anything we can do at home to help?'' (Ella, baby room leader, Tree House Nursery).

The parents' evenings served as an opportunity to reassure parents that their children were developing well, which professionals across all four settings communicated was a common shared concern amongst parents, especially in regard to school readiness. For children who were doing well, these meetings tended to be short. For example, Katya describes her meeting as *'not massively long'* although she did use the opportunity to talk about weaning which she was concerned about at the time. For other parents, where a serious concern about a child's development was shared, engagement between the family and the setting was particularly important. Sacha's son was failing to develop his verbal communication and his parent's evening was attended by the deputy manager Anna who was a graduate and acted as the settings SENCO:

> 'They said to me sit down and we'll go through it all and got the tissues out and I was like 'I'm alright, I won't cry!' that was upsetting when I heard about his speech, when you go away and think about it you think it's nothing really, but it is something, it can be fixed over time though, but at the end the tears came' (Sacha, The Treehouse Nursery, 27).

In this case, Anna and Sacha's son's keyworker had to communicate effectively in order to engage Sacha in their proposed plan of action which included a referral to a speech and language therapist and observation from an Autism outreach team. It was interesting that there appeared to be a dichotomy between parents seeing professionals as specialists who were able to provide them with reassurance or specialist support, whilst at the same time maintaining that they were the experts of their children's learning. For example, Kelly felt that her daughter could already achieve the proposed next steps, which her daughter's key worker was unaware of: 'I think sometimes they're a little bit surprised at what she's done in the past and the stage she's done it'. Gillies (2005) discussing theories of individualisation states that parents convey 'a strong belief in their children as exceptional selves deserving of every opportunity to maximize their potential, this was tied to a burning sense of personal responsibility as parents to facilitate this development and make the right decisions'.

Additional engagement between The Treehouse Nursery and parents was based on parental involvement in the nursery through invitations into the setting, which Anna listed:

> 'We do things like mummy day, daddy day, grandparent days, when we have different topics we ask parents if there's anything that they can contribute to it, whether it's their job or a hobby or something they can make with the children or anything like that, trying to get them involved as much as possible' (Anna, Deputy manager, Tree House Nursery).

Manager Carol talks about how important these events are for parents who she describes as often lacking in time for deep communication with their children's key workers:

'I feel that for parents to see the girls in their natural environment and not for five minutes in the morning and five minutes at night…that must be invaluable to parents…at the Christmas sing along you can see that they've learnt, that you've taught them the red, red robin' (Carol, manager, qualified Early Years practitioner, Tree House Nursery, 37).

Although as illustrated earlier not all parents were positive about these sorts of events many were. Kelly for example, who had an 18 year gap between her daughters talked about not having the time to attend similar events when her eldest daughter was a child:

'I went to mummies day, that was brilliant, that was lovely, I loved that, I love getting involved and again I remember when I was younger I never had the time to do it, or I didn't think I had the time to do it, it's really important to me now to go' (Kelly, Tree House Nursery, 48).

Other parents had been invited to the setting to share information about their profession. Maria, a biologist was eager to engage with the setting to offer this:

'I came and spoke about science with the kids and I took in some plants in vitro and a microscope and made them plant some seeds in plates and I think they enjoyed that, sometimes I still come back and someone says to me oh you came and you talk about science with us, it was very touching…it's important to show [son] that although we are very busy that whatever he's involved with is important to me…although we are very busy at work he is in the first position, he is our priority' (Maria, Tree House Nursery, 40).

As well as seeing this as an opportunity to engage young children in science, Maria also held that it was an example of demonstrating her commitment to her son's learning experiences and of prioritising his education over her career. Maria highlights that women's entry into the workforce has brought about concerns over work-family balance. Page (2013b) discussed the reframing of the conceptualisation of the 'good mother' 'from being someone who gives up her other roles for the sake of raising her children and is solely available to her family, into the good working mother. In this reframing, the role of a working mother is still considered to be a 'full time' role and is not diminished because she goes to work' (p.533). Although Buzzanell et al. (2005) state that though mother's identity constructions may be 'tentative and fragile…undergoing revision over time' (p.279) that some women are able to form identities which 'enable them to pursue meaningful and challenging work, create a home life that is satisfying to them,

and construct arguments that may help to deflect negative attributions toward working mothers' (p.279).

Other parents were keen to work in partnership with the setting through voluntary homework tasks which were presented on cardboard leaves hung on a bare tree for children and their parents to 'pick' freely if they wanted to. Additionally, the setting had recently introduced some topic-related home activities that children were supposed to complete with their parents. Although some parents were critical about the time expense these activities involved, others were positive. For example, James felt that it had been a shared experience and had encouraged him and his son to work together:

> 'Obviously he couldn't do it all…can you do this, can you do that, and he'd tell me the sort of thing he'd want and I'd say right we'll do this what do you think and he'd say yes or no, what colour or whatever…we made a ladybird house and he helped me saw the wood and hit the nails…when he's motivated that stuff, that's brilliant' (James, Tree House Nursery, 44)

James also shared of a similar Christmas-based activity where they had gone to a local craft store for supplies and he had told his son the story of the three kings which he 'was fascinated by'. As such, the project involved James in the topics that were being explored in nursery, and helped him to take a role in further engaging his son in the learning experiences offered at his nursery through activities at home. Similarly, Summer's mother had taken her daughter to the National Space Centre when they had been learning about space; however, she was critical that some projects were not adequately communicated with parents and appeared to 'pass by in the blink of an eye' before she was able to do anything at home, describing it as 'an opportunity that could be developed' within the nursery. The original purpose of the homework tasks was on occasion distorted. Nursery manager Carol joked that some of the tasks had become a demonstration of parents' skills and commitment: 'the things they were coming in were…it turned into a bit of competition, and actually the children weren't doing much of the modelling [laughs]'. Vincent and Ball (2007) reference this competitiveness between parents in a discussion on families and home activities stating that the transmission of cultural capital is 'expended to ensure adequacy and advantage, to ensure the best for that child. It is an effort of endless responsibility, fuelled by the market, provoked by the state and driven by social competition' (p.1074).

Some parents had a particular interest in stretching their children, fuelled by concerns about school readiness. For these parents the things they do with their children to support their learning is done in spite of, rather than because of the messages they have received from the nursery. Stevie, whose daughter was already confidently reading, asked the nursery

for extra support to help develop her; she wanted to see a copy of the EYFS in order to see what the next stage of development she should be accessing were and the professionals provided her with this. By reading through it she was able to see that some of her expectations for her daughter were unrealistic, which mirrored concerns amongst the professions about a low value for learning through play:

> 'What I've later realised is actually what I've been trying to get her to do is more school age, so things like writing, reading... I was trying to get her to do what was maybe a higher level, I don't know, so the stuff was useful to read ' (Stevie, Tree House Nursery, 34).

This concern amongst the professionals about how to negotiate the state promotion of a school-ready child alongside their own beliefs about early learning and childhood was shown to be difficult. As such, there was a strong focus on parents and children having fun together through the use of home-setting tasks and homework, and of using every day experiences for discussion, and of following children's interests. However, a group of parents had put pressure on the nursery to introduce reading schemes, which they then provided. This caused friction between parents as only the children of parents who had requested these one-to-one reading sessions were provided with them, hinting at the difficulties in how appropriate professionals felt they were. Summer was disappointed her child would not get this one-to-one attention:

> 'What about the other children? …Maybe they're ready for it…or maybe their parents felt it was time' (Summer, Tree House Nursery, 33).

Elfer (2012) who talked about the demanding emotional work of nursery staff stated that professionals spoke about 'minimising possible feelings of exclusion, guilt or envy in parents by careful control of information given to them about their child' (p.130). As such, a considerable challenge for the professionals was finding the right balance between engaging and alienating parents.

Some parents went to great efforts to engage with the setting; however, Carol also described a group of parents whom she felt disrespected by, who were reluctant to engage because they were unable to acknowledge the professionalism and competencies of her staff team. She found this particularly upsetting as she demonstrated throughout the interview her commitment to treating all families equally:

> 'I treat every parent exactly the same …there are probably some people they do treat us like the hired help, and that's all we are, parents that think they are above everything else…treat us like we are the hired help, we are an important part of their lives and

their children's lives, and they should perhaps have a little bit more respect' (Carol, manager, qualified Early Years practitioner, Tree House Nursery, 37).

Cameron et al. (2002), in their examination of the childcare work force conditions stated that 'Poor rates of pay affect how the work is valued' (p.578) and that 'low pay encouraged society to attach low value to the work…parents' attitude was "you do this because you love it, so why should we pay you for it?"' (p.578). Karly acknowledges this in her criticism of trainee staff who she was frustrated with for their level of expertise and what she considered to be a lack of professionalism:

> 'It's not a very well paid job is it, for that, you're not going to get people that are highly skilled, that sounds really awful to say, but the level of intelligence and confidence and maturity that sometimes you might get with someone who has had a different educational experience' (Karly, The Treehouse Nursery, 40).

Deputy manager Anna said some parents were particularly hard to engage with because of a 'sense of guilt' and a reluctance to accept the important role the nursery had in the lives of their children. This translated to parents making Anna feel that the team 'can't really do wrong for right'. Despite the increasing number of young children whose mothers are in paid employment, the idea of young children in nursery settings is still seen as contradictory to normative expectations of where children should be cared for (Cameron et al., 2002). As such, there is still the perception that nursery care should be a substitute to mothering: 'that young children should be in the exclusive care of their mothers has had a major influence on ideas about what care is appropriate for them' (ibid, p.575). Early Years practitioners are highly aware of this, as Elfer (2015) states 'Where attachments do form, there may be anxiety about the possibility of parents' resentment'. For Anna, and other professionals interviewed, this anxiety sometimes translated into an eagerness to present a professionalised image of their role, downplaying the undervalued care aspects and emphasising their role as educators in line with policy emphasis on the close relationship that should be sought between care and education (Cameron et al., 2002).

In Norbush Pre-School, communication between parents and professionals was most like the traditional conceptions of involvement as opposed to deep engagement, taking the form of newsletters, reports and informal discussion. As Harris and Goodall (2008) state: 'there is a major difference between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning…it is only the engagement of parents in learning in the home that is most likely to result in a positive difference to learning outcomes'. As there are only two members of staff employed in the setting, there is no key worker system. Parents are referred firstly to manager Nina, though her colleague Nicole takes an equal role in informal discussions with parents.

Professionals clearly communicated the importance of partnerships and the sharing of information, even discussing their open-door policy, but from observations made within the setting there was an obvious boundary to the pre-school for parents. Boundaries for parents were most clearly demonstrated by the drop off and collection process where children were handed over at the door. Though some parents did enter into the pre-school, the staff positioned their bodies in the door to demonstrate the way that parents were supposed to behave. This mirrored the same system employed throughout the school and had not been adapted for the pre-school. This was explained as a safeguarding procedure by manager Nina who did not like parents to come in and 'grab' their child without being seen, preferring to 'pass the children through'. This corresponds with discourses of risk where children in the western world are seen as vulnerable (Furedi, 2008): 'Like childhood itself, the categorization 'at risk' is constructed and experienced very differently in different places' (Pain, 2004, p.2). Schools have been criticised as being overly concerned with health and safety: 'There have been countless stories of legislation and guidelines encroaching on our children's lives…It normalises a 'worst-case scenario' way of thinking about everything.' (Guardian, 2009). Nina believes that by being *'on the door'* she is a visible presence to parents, as they do not use a diary system, exchanges are predominantly in the form of verbal exchanges: 'I find it much more valuable to speak to parents face to face so every day we are on the door, we're available…they can seek us out'. Some parents were brave enough to permeate this boundary, stepping into the pre-school to chat. However, of the parents interviewed, it was mostly those confident in securing extra support for their child to ensure their potential was nurtured, a trait of middle class parents (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Crozier and Davies (2007) describe 'the erections of professional barriers' (p.310) as 'highly exclusionary and undemocratic: more so in fact for those less powerful parents' (ibid).

Reay (2004) stated that higher class positions favour the ability of parents to share their views with their child's teacher, these parents are more confident in their own knowledge and assertions, demonstrating that cultural capital is clearly implicated in the ability of parents to draw upon a range of strategies to support children's learning. Joe, for example talked about talking to Nina about his son's early reading skills: he was confident during this exchange and assured that he could further seek out Nina for support and advice:

'Since we made Nina aware of his reading and that we wanted him to do more she's been unbelievably encouraging…my concern is how he'll progress…we will be asking about that, to make sure his reading and writing is challenged and that he doesn't get left behind with everybody else…I'll speak to [teacher] first' (Joe, Norbush Pre-School, 38).

Joe knew that he and his wife were not educational professionals, and held that Nina and her colleague Nicole were the experts: 'as far as I'm concerned they are the professionals', he demonstrates throughout the interview his ability to tap into the expertise of the staff because he sees the pre-school 'as a place of education as well as a place to look after children'. This does not necessarily tie in with earlier messages about the disregard and low value for nursery staff. However, it is important to acknowledge that the pre-school is part of a primary school and that the staff are not addressed by their first names. Parents refer to them as teachers, despite them not having qualified teacher status, which is a qualification with a long standing reputation that has commanded more respect than Early Years qualifications (Cooke and Lawton, 2008).

The information shared with parents is primarily an exchange of information about their child's progress, or basic information in the form of newsletters. The pre-school does not use a diary system; however, each child has a small book in their bag which can be used for written notes. However, none of the parents were concerned with a lack of information: 'there isn't lots of information...but I'm not dissatisfied...I've been able to talk quite openly with Nina' stated Lyra. Nina states: 'we have to be careful to not give information out that parents can't understand' and reflects carefully on the information that she provides in the reports that she sends home which comprises of observations, examples of 'work' and trackers, which evidence the children's learning against the EYFS expectations. Barriers to engagement within the pre-school are meeting the needs of what Nicole, the Early Years professional working alongside Nina, calls the 'diverse' parent mix. Despite these challenges, Nina says that the parents have in common that they are 'generally very child centred, want great things for their children'. For Nina and Nicole the challenge has been to present information in a tailored way to different

parents. As some parents have difficulties reading and writing, information is primarily trans-ferred verbally: 'we try to make it light hearted' (Nicole). Sharing information like this is ex-plained as helping to facilitate deeper conversations:

> 'If a child has done something particularly fantastic or has learnt something really fab-ulous we'll seek the parent out and say come, talk to me, I really want to talk to you or show you this…We don't have a parents evening though in preschool…They know we have an open door policy, nine times out of ten they'll come and speak to Nina'. (Nicole, Norbush Pre-school, qualified Early Years practitioner, 33).

Nina is clear about the importance of parents feeling connected. She talks about using phone calls or email for some parents too, based on their different situations:

> 'Some parent won't ask you they don't want to look silly, but then they worry…we have emails, every parent has my email address to contact me whenever they want, we have a phone, we have parents who only have time for an email' (Nina, Manager, Norbush Pre-school, 38).

Nina appears preoccupied with concerns about parents being put off by over enthusiasm to engage: 'I don't want to bamboozle parents', for example, in her insistence not to have parents evenings, worried that 'they feel obliged to attend' despite saying that parents often request to meet her after receiving their children's reports. Similarly, echoing some of the dilemmas of working mums earlier, she recounts not being around for her daughter's school events. She states: 'I was one of those parents, working and thinking oh God my child doesn't have me there, again'. This shows that, as Cameron et al. (2002) maintained, her experiences of moth-erhood influenced her practice, as demonstrated by her decision to not have 'invite your mum/dad' days. Nina believes that by maintaining informal and predominantly verbal ex-changes with parents, she is helping to break down barriers. She shares a concern that par-ents who have had a bad experience of education and authority do not feel that their negative experiences are being repeated through their children:

> 'I've had a dad who had come up against all sorts of authorities…he was quite defen-sive but we worked through it with him and by the end he was on board. I would never judge anyone… it has to be open, that's how you get a good rapport, the more they disclose the better insight you have into the child's lives and how you can support them' (Nina, Manager, Norbush Pre-school, 38).

Harris and Goodall's (2007) stark warning about the impact that parents own experi-ences of education and authoritative powers shows the difficult work educational professionals have to do to overcome these barriers:

'The consequences for parental engagement of negative experience of schooling result in a general reticence and reluctance to engage in supporting the school's efforts to engage them in learning. Such reluctance or reticence on the part of parents is a powerful signal to their children that education is not valued or indeed valuable' (Harris and Goodall, 2007, p.53).

There have been other contrasting instances where parents have been difficult to engage with, Nina shares concerns over parents doing too much with their children: 'they know all their letters and numbers…but their PSE and social skills are completely… [sighs]' and needing to reinforce the need for play and social interaction. On the opposite end of the spectrum Nina has to remind parents about doing more in 'health and hygiene' to ensure children are potty trained by the time they start school. She also talks about a 'decline in children's independence' and of having children who find it difficult to dress themselves, hang up their coats and bags or take their shoes on and off. For this reason Nina and Nicole maintain that parents should concentrate more on children's physical skills and social understanding, e.g. how to stand in a queue. Sometimes the professionals have to share some of their concerns around this with parents, with both Nina and Nicole discussing using a 'praise sandwich' (Nicole) and that engaging with parents is unsuccessful if they are too negative:

'If they come back defensive, the next time you need to go with a positive, and say 'oh my gosh she's done this brilliant thing today, she's been a pleasure', then they are like 'oh, okay!' You don't want to be negative all the time! (Nina, Manager, Norbush Pre-school, 38).

The main purpose of engagement between the pre-school and parents is to create a partnership that helps them to be 'on the same page', rather than to influence what the parents do at home:

'I have to hope we are on the same page and that's why we talk to them about specific incidents, we want to create pattern and routine so we ask them, how would you deal with this?[...].their voice still comes through' (Nicole, Norbush Pre-school, qualified Early Years practitioner, 33).

This is because they hold that some parts of parenting *'should be private'* and that part of effective engagement is based on respectful boundaries:

'It's completely up to them…we do promote it for the child, we say oh this would be brilliant…but we don't force them, we can't…I just think it's each parent's individual way that they parent, what they want from each individual setting, some parents don't want to be involved or given things to do, you can't back anyone into a corner and

expect them to[...].' (Nicole, Norbush Pre-school, qualified Early Years practitioner, 33).

A strategy of monitoring the needs and experiences of parents was through a survey where parents could offer feedback which demonstrated a commitment to adapting and striving for improving practice, as it helped Nina and Nicole to individualise their support to different parents. Other than information sharing through newsletters, e-mails and informal verbal exchanges, the only other specific strategies that were employed to engage parents were invitations to view children's learning journeys. This was talked about positively by parents who felt that it was valuable opportunity to review their children's learning and development. Nina explains how this specifically supports children's learning at home:

> 'We have a column saying what your child can do now, then a column that says next steps that we are working towards, so that they know where there child's learning is, so they know exactly how to support their child's learning at home' (Nina, Manager, Norbush Pre-school, 38).

Ruby discusses reviewing her daughters learning journey and incorporating the things she had learnt into every day exchanges when sharing books together:

> 'It shows you photos, things she's been up to, what the topic is that they've been learning…because they did a topic on bugs so we went through her book to see what bugs we could find' (Ruby, Norbush Pre-school, 31).

The learning journeys also provided parents with a baseline of 'normal' development against which they could hold their child. For some this was reassuring and helped parents to know if they were doing enough or needed to supplement their child's learning through further support at home:

> 'Learning journeys, I found that very interesting…you know as a parent that they're probably doing okay but until you stack them up against other children or where they should be you don't really know' (Emily, Norbush Pre-School, 35).

Some parents were particularly keen to engage. Saffia, for example, who was born in France to Algerian immigrant parents, talked about her strong desire for her daughter to achieve educational success which in part was a result of messages from her mother growing up:

> 'In Algerian culture it's very important that a woman cooks and cleans from a young age, but she would never let us in the kitchen she would say go and study…she comes

from a really poor background, education was important' (Saffia, Norbush Pre-school, 32).

She recounts how her parents arrived in France not being able to speak French and so were unable to help her or her siblings with their homework 'they would sit down and make us do our homework but they weren't able to do it with us, but school was always really, really important'. Saffia was also concerned by British schools where she understood there to be more variation and differences in terms of results:

> 'Education in France is really good, it's not like in England where you get to choose where you go and things like that, you go where you live but it's the same for everyone...there are some private schools but even if you go through all state schools, they are still really good' (Saffia, Norbush Pre-school, 32).

Since English was the predominant language in Saffia's house, and her husband's mother was a primary school teacher, she was confident in her ability to support her children's home learning. Like Joe, she shares a concern that her daughter's potential could be wasted if it is not properly encouraged: 'I think she is bright, I'm not saying she's a genius, they all think she's bright, we just need to develop it or she'll get bored'. Saffia worked extensively with her daughter at home both with tasks set by the pre-school and her mother-in-law. Ethnic minority parents, especially those with difficulties speaking the dominant language, such as Saffia's parents, are often marginalised, ignored and excluded from relationships with educational settings, and have considerable challenges in being interventionist in their children's education (Crozier and Davies, 2007). As a second generation immigrant who holds concerns about a legacy of discrimination and persecution within her family and culture, Saffia holds strong values around early education. This poses challenges in finding a common ground with the pre-school professionals. As Crozier (2001) states, participation can be viewed as a potential threat when parents hold different visions and values, experiencing pressure to assimilate into the norms expected by the education system.

6.3.4 The Mud-Pit Pre-School: Using Facebook, mentoring parents in need.

As discussed in chapter five, the Mud-Pit Pre-School had the most obviously distinct ethos, divergent from a focus on school readiness. Instead, as a forest school, they place importance on outdoor play, child-led experiences and infant mental health and wellbeing. Although some parents had specifically sought the setting because of their specific ethos, a concern with school readiness in state policies filtered through many of the parents meant that the professionals worked hard to (re)educate some families on their ethos of learning.

Professionals talked about their disappointment that young children of primary school age were given homework that they felt ate into their free time, and for this reason did not encourage any kind of formal home-setting tasks, instead preferring to inspire parents through role modelling. Silver talks about helping parents to follow children's interests:

> 'Just an understanding not to put pressure on children and that they will do it at their own pace, and to do things around children's interests and to see everything as a learning opportunity… letting them explore outside, a lot of parents are afraid of risk taking and climbing trees and about germs and getting dirty' (Silver, senior educator and qualified teacher, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 26)

This meant that for this setting, one of the main purposes was communicating their specific philosophy around early education through role modelling, intensive one-on-one work with parents and sharing information. Like The Treehouse Nursery, The Mud-Pit Pre-School used a key person system for their children, Oscar discussed the flexible system for assigning key workers, stating that 'some children are very confident and you can change keyworkers quite regularly to fit in with someone going on maternity or people being ill' but that other children 'need continuity because of the relationship that's been built up'. Keyworkers are also assigned based on children's unique dispositions: 'maybe you've got quite a creative child it would be difficult to put them with a non-creative keyworker because it might stifle it'. For Oscar it is clear that the key person system is an important tool for communication with parents and engaging parents in their children's learning: 'they need to know who to come to, they need to have one face where they know they can go up and have a conversation with'.

A variety of different methods were used to share information with parents, and there was a clear demonstration of the considered approach to covering different approaches, especially around engaging with younger parents. Traditional methods such as newsletters were used, as well as parents' evenings, though these were informal. The key method of sharing information with parents though was through the use of a closed, private Facebook page where different professionals in the setting shared pictures with captions about what their key children were doing. The photographs often showed the children outside, and the different learning experiences that could be had in nature, Oscar describes the environment as 'the third teacher'. The professionals shared a concern that parents did not fully understand the value of learning through play, Lila stated: 'our ethos is so different from most places, we can't have someone sitting at a table to do an activity, we don't do activities, we do experiences'. The page was also used by the manager Rita to share other information with parents such as

articles, studies and quotes that reinforced their ethos. Engaging parents in a way that specifically fosters positive changes in their home learning environment is considered to be particularly valuable (Goodall, 2017).

Manager Rita stated that *'a day is a long time'* and she had realised that many young parents used Facebook frequently throughout the day and she saw this was a good way to communicate. This was particularly useful to ease initial separations: 'some of them are so young that they need to..this is why we use the Facebook group because we do constant updates and pictures of the day'. Deputy manager Lila discusses manager Rita's skill in communicating with parents and tailoring her approaches:

> 'she keeps parents really posted through Facebook, she has a really good way of keeping parents informed, we have some really young parents and they are very responsive, it's a really good way of connecting' (Lila, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, deputy manager, 58).

Other professionals shared experiences of parents being influenced by the photos they saw, for example in making mud kitchens in their gardens or in parks and woodland in the surrounding area:

> 'They've created mud kitchens in their gardens because their children are happy, and they've seen it on Facebook[...]So that's really good because it's spreading out into home' (Rita, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, manager, 48).

Similarly, Oscar talks about the *'springing out'* of the ideas shared in the group and how they have been adapted and incorporated into home environments:

> 'there's a lot of mums and dads who like what we do here in an outdoor forest school way and you see that through their Facebook posts that that continues out, they go out for walks and they repeat things we've done here' (Oscar, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, senior educator , 41).

Parents too used examples of how their eyes were opened to the kind of experiences their children could have. June was surprised at how capable her daughter was using wood work tools and it had influenced the amount of independence she gave her:

> 'she's getting the life experiences and she gets taught things[...]I don't know how they do it but it's in a different way, she comes home and asks things and I'm like where has that come from' (June, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 34).

Lila shares that a parent had seen a photo of the children enjoying exploring offsite in a local stream and had decided to take her children there too:

'Rita sent some photos of the children enjoying themselves and on the way back we saw one of our mums with her two children, from a very deprived background and she'd responded to it, and she'd sent a message to [the Facebook page] saying where is that? And she was on her way there with her children, taking them there' (Lila, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, deputy manager, 58).

The use of the Facebook group is as an example of libertarian paternalism: 'a relatively weak, soft, and nonintrusive type of paternalism because choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008 p.5). Jones et al. (2011) discussed behaviour change through 'leadership, support and advice and norm setting' (p.488), which 'reflects a shift in approach from advice on high to support from next door' (ibid). The setting has targeted their approach to its parent group which is predominantly made up of young parents: 'particular social norms for governing behavioural change are also promoted through the targeting of segmented audiences for policy. This involves a recognition of the behavioural characteristics or identifications of different social groups, reflecting at its most basic a distinction between…'sophisticated' and, by implication, 'unsophisticated' people' (ibid). However, for some parents the Facebook group had the opposite effect, and parents actually shared that they did less creative activities with their children because they were confident that they were having these experiences at the pre-school. For example Jill admitted to finding it stressful to do creative activities with two young children. She talked about her daughter coming home covered in paint and seeing photographs of her using a clay wheel:

'I've got glitter and glue in my cupboard but [it's the] clean up after, it's all of that that you haven't got the time to do! It's kind of like making it happen, whereas I think if you go to the session it's already set up for you' (Jill, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 39)   .

As discussed in earlier chapters, the pre-school pays careful attention to the mental health and wellbeing of the children in their care, and part of that is by working with parents who may be experiencing crisis:

'We do some counselling, but we don't call it that because we are not trained councillors, and we have to explain that quite clearly…You have to really weigh it, not be patronising, or appear to know it better, because we don't. They know their child better than anyone else. It's really about lifting their wellbeing but it's being clear that we're doing it for the child's sake' (Lila, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, deputy manager, 58).

As such, Lila demonstrates that close relationships with parents and open exchanges help to facilitate the sharing of information that can improve the lives of their children. The pre-school also uses a parents' evening to communicate with parents and share feedback around their children's progress. These events are called 'open evenings', and they have a social purpose,

for parents to get to know each other, bring their children and demonstrate some of the experiences available such as cooking on an open fire outside. In this way, they are an opportunity for the professionals to role model some of the experiences, activities and interactions that they promote as part of their specific ethos. There is opportunity to talk in privacy one to one, and Lila describes that they 'vary it all the time' depending on what they think parents need and would enjoy. Oscar describes it: 'we try and treat it as more of a family event with mums and dads and children and have a fire, more informal'.

Despite the emphasis The Mud-Pit Pre-school places on relationships with parents, only one of the parents interviewed had attended a parents' evening. Some parents did not know they were on offer: 'I don't think that they do parents' evening necessarily' (June), whilst Jill hints that a lack of organisation and communication meant she missed one: 'the letter didn't come through but anyway it got missed, that parents' evening, but it's only been one, once. I don't think as far as I'm aware that it's a regular thing'. Oscar acknowledges some of the downfalls that parents point out, stating that the setting could develop more opportunities for parents to talk with their children's key workers: 'we could probably do more than we do, I often think we should have an extra morning a couple of times a year where parents can come in, read the learning journeys without rushing, talk if we want'. Indeed parents did also highlight that they would like to see their children's learning journeys more often to review their progress, for example, Hayley states: '[husband] has never been to speak to anyone to find out how she's getting on or seen her learning journey, maybe if they sent that home every now and again, that would be lovely, because I think sometimes you can have a look at it but you're under pressure to sit in there'. Likewise, June points out the logistical issues of sitting down in the setting and looking at the journals at the end of the sessions when staff are trying to tidy up and go home. As discussed in chapter four, the professionals have highlighted a concern amongst the team about parents' preoccupation with school readiness. As such it is possible that limitations placed on parents viewing their children's learning journeys are a deliberate action taken by the setting to ensure that a professional is present to answer questions and provide reassurances, delivering and reinforcing their stance on school readiness and the importance of play.

There is a specific intention within the pre-school to engage parents in a social and collaborative way in order to facilitate relationships between parents, which is seen as advantageous for the fundraising and committee aspect of the setting. Manager Rita states that fundraising is so important because of the amount of fees that need to be spent on staff wages and resources. Parents voluntering and working together to fundraise is important. Lila states that they have a 'good community and a good set of parents who organise fundraising'. Likewise, Oliver highlights the collaborative element of parents working with the professionals:

'fundraising is all parent run, staff join in with that so there is interaction there'. Fundraising efforts have mostly been through collective events such as parties and open days. Parents that are part of the committee are able to shape the setting through influencing what kind of resources or experiences profit is spent on; however, some are unable to get involved because of the time pressures of having young children, such as Jill who has two young children and is expecting her third:

> 'I haven't got hugely involved with it, I know they are often asking for volunteers and help and things like that but I think when you are a working mum you haven't necessarily got the time to give the organisation, as much as I'd love to be on a committee, or to help out with fundraising' (Jill, The Mud-Pit Pre-school, 39).

For Jill she tried to help the setting in other ways such as donating food for snack times. Posey-Maddox (2016) discussed the challenges of involving parents in fundraising:

> 'It is important to understand how economically advantaged parents – influential actors… understand, negotiate, and shape… Doing so can reveal tensions and equity issues engendered by Neo-liberalism as already advantaged parents take on new roles as volunteer subject-citizens' (Posey-Maddox, 2016, p.179).

It has been well documented that class position positively determines the ability of parents to interact with educational settings and professionals through the use of their social and cultural capital. Reay's (1998) research on parental participation illustrates how family involvement in children's educational experiences is a powerful example of the importance of cultural capital in preserving educational inequalities. The literature identifies that: 'these families are…able to activate appropriate resources of economic, social and cultural capital to help them realise, as far as possible, their preferences for their child' (Vincent et al., 2010b, p.290).

The first section of this chapter reflects on the reasons for engaging parents in their young children's learning. It is discussed how this is enforced through policy guidance in the form of the Every Child Matters framework which stresses the importance of early intervention and safeguarding, and through the mandatory EYFS followed in the settings which promotes home-setting partnerships. Engaging parents in this way is seen as a powerful tool in raising achievement and ensuring children are school ready.

The second section discussed the different way each setting shared information and engaged parents. In the Sure Start Centre this took the form of Health Visitor signposting, home visits and classes which promoted behaviour change and 'good citizen' role modelling through parent-led classes. However, it was shown that parents often did not feel welcome in the Centre and felt there was a lack of engagement from the manager. At The Treehouse Nursery there was a wide variety of ways that professionals tried to engage parents. This ranged from daily diaries for younger children to parents evening, homework tasks and special events. However, parents had mixed views on this: some were enthusiastic and saw them as a demonstration of their love and commitment for their child, whilst others battled with guilt because of inflexible working conditions and time constraints on their free time. Despite a focus on school readiness, surprisingly the professionals felt that parents should focus on children's interests, using their environments, everyday experiences and discussions to help their children learn, rather than through formal learning activities which they were confident they were already experiencing in the setting. At Norbush Pre-school, professionals described their parent group as diverse, and of needing to tailor communication to each parent's need, which was predominantly done through informal verbal exchanges, or email. There was a concern from the manager about not oversaturating parents or giving out information that was not easily understood. The main purpose of engagement was about being on the 'same page' in regards to behaviour management rather than inspiring change in family life which was considered to be private. Concerns around children's independence meant that the professionals felt that parents should focus less on school readiness and more on children's self-care, personal hygiene and their ability to follow instructions which they felt were pre-requisites for a readiness to learn. A strong emphasis on young children's rights to play and a concern over parents' preoccupation with school readiness meant the professionals at The Mud-Pit pre-school mainly engaged parents to inspire them and (re)educate their understandings of the way young children learn. The setting's stance on the over-formalisation of early learning

experiences meant that they did not encourage home tasks, preferring to influence parents by sharing their specific ethos through examples of experiences through role modelling in person and photographs online. As such, this chapter has illustrated that the different ways professionals engage parents are diverse and determines both the forms, and degree of, information sharing between setting and home. The individual ethos of the setting, as well as the professionals individual and internalised understandings of the nature of childhood and quality early education all impact the degree to which parents are expected to act as co-educators.

7.1. Introduction

This chapter draws out the key contributions to knowledge made within this thesis and situates them within current academic discussions. Section 7.2 examines the theme of ethos, elucidating the research question: *'How do different Early Years professionals articulate the ethos of their setting?.* Section 7.3 discusses the theme of choice helping to answer the following research question: *'Why do parents use Early Years Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?'. Section 7.4* contains a discussion on the power produced by and between the state, parents and professionals and answers the third research question: '*To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years setting?'.* The professionalising of parenting is explored in section 7.5, addressing the final research question: *'What expectations surround parents involvement in their young children's learning and development?'*

7.2 Ethos

Considering the diverse ethoses of early education and care settings available in this small town was vital because of the previous preoccupation within children's geography about the experiences of school aged children (Butler and Hamnett, 2007) and in examining Early Years settings as substitute care for working mothers, rather than sites of education (Holloway 1998; 1999; McDowell et al., 2005). Attending to this deficit is important for two reasons, firstly because of a new-found concern about early childhood experiences and their lasting impacts on educational achievement and wellbeing, and secondly because of increasing government emphasis on using education earlier than ever before to help to produce future citizen workers. These considerations helped to answer the first research question: 'How do Early Years' professionals articulate the ethos of their different settings?'. There were three distinct ethoses shown in the four settings.

Firstly, there was an attempt to change behaviour and (re)educate parents in the Sure Start Centre. This phenomenon has been acknowledged within geographical research on

Sure Start Centres (Horton and Kraftl, 2011; Jupp 2012, 2013) and policies promoting behaviour change (Wainwright and Marandet, 2013; Jones et al., 2010; Pykett, 2013). This literature found that an 'attentiveness to minutiae' within the Centres contributes to 'the effectiveness of this policy-instigated, community-based intervention' (Horton and Kraftl, 2011, p.246) and that there are often strained 'uneasy' relationships between Sure Start Centre staff and parents because of the difficulties of translating policy into targeted interventions (Jupp, 2012), which directly impacts parental engagement.

This thesis confirms that attending to 'the minutiae' (Horton and Kraftl, 2011, p.246) should indeed be an objective of Centres, as mothers communicated how some aspects of the setting, such as the broken doorbell were practically and symbolically powerful enough to negatively affect engagement. This is an interesting contribution considering that the participants who used the setting were defined as skilled working class or middle class, observed by the manager as being 'mostly capable', suggesting that they were perceived as less needy and worthy of engagement and (re)education. This was evidenced by the parents' preference for expert-led sessions and a general lack of enthusiasm for the prevalence of parent-led classes which were implemented in an attempt to both professionalise parenting by using mothers to model and survey certain kinds of 'good' parenting, and to keep the Centre open every day amidst funding cuts to Sure Start Centres (DfE, 2015b). This builds on geographical literature that has looked at middle class parents' enthusiasm for expert-led extra-curricular support for older children (Holloway and Pimlott Wilson, 2014).

Mothers attended the Centre for a variety of reasons, to help their children socialise and learn and also to promote their own mental health because of the importance that was ascribed to friendship networks with other mothers. The discussions on the value placed on social interactions with other mothers builds on the small yet significant body of work exploring Sure Start Centres by Jupp (2013) and Horton and Kraftl (2009a; 2009b, 2011). They describe Centres as 'caringscapes', which was found here too. However, interestingly this forms a juxtaposition within the Centre, as it is experienced simultaneously as a place of friendship and support whilst also being a site for purposeful interventions aimed to promote behaviour change. Attempts by the Centre to address parenting deficits reflects the growing literature on the professionalisation of parenting (Wainwright and Marandet 2016, 2017; Holloway and Pimlott Wilson, 2016) and policy attempts to regulate parents (Edwards and Gillies, 2011; Daly, 2010) through repositioning family in the public sphere (Fairclough, 2000). This was demonstrated by a clear focus on safeguarding and early intervention through monitoring systems like registering Centre users and home visits for mothers who were described as difficult to engage. (Re)education centred around reminding mothers about the importance of what were

considered by the manager as basic, but undervalued parent-child interactions, such as playing together and reading, rather than 'relying' on technology such as iPads. This was mobilised through sessions that aimed to re-engage mothers in sharing experiences with their babies using simple objects around the house.

Secondly, in both The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school there was a preoccupation with school readiness and of equipping children with the skills associated with future achievement, such as pre-reading skills. This was despite resistance from some of the professionals who had concerns about the age appropriateness of policy expectations for young children, which in some instances was also promoted by parents. The Treehouse Nursery offered the most flexible sessions of the settings as well as the longest hours of care, which was attractive to working mothers, whilst the physical location of Norbush Pre-schools within a primary school reassured parents concerned with school transitions given its close alignment with school expectations and formal learning. Parents who explicitly sought the Norbrush Pre-school for this purpose demonstrate that concerns with school readiness are of critical concern to some groups of middle class parents. This suggests that competitive middle class cultures of education and cultural capital are occurring earlier than previous research has implied (Hamnett and Buteler, 2011; Reay, 1998). Since neither setting shared a strong ethos on aspects of early education or care, the professionals negotiated their own understandings with limited guidance or regulation. Examples of these occasions demonstrated that pedagogical concern about the impact of formalised learning experiences for young children (EPPE, 2004; Sylva et al., 2014; Bingham and Whitebread, 2012) has filtered through to professionals who incorporate these messages into their partial resistance against dominant policy messages and parents' preferences. Despite Early Years professionals being routinely referred to as lacking in power (Cameron et al., 2002; Elfer 2015), the professionals in both The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school demonstrated their ability to reject policy messages whilst simultaneously embracing others that they felt were in the best interests of children, for example around tailoring practice to individual children, particularly those from disadvantaged families (DfE, 2015b), the importance of play (Nutbrown, 2012), and prioritising social, emotional and communication skills (Public Health England, 2015).

Thirdly, there was an emphasis on promoting the wellbeing of children at The Mud-Pit Pre-school through an adoption of an experiential curriculum which promoted free play, outdoor learning and forest school philosophies. This setting had the most overt and easily observable ethos out of all the settings. The professionals communicated a sense of conflict experienced when employed in other settings, between what they understood theoretically to be good practice, and the contradictory pressures they experienced from policy messages

around early education. Their ethos was a defining feature of the care and learning experiences offered, filtering through the setting in various different ways, such as through the physical environment and in interactions between professionals and children and parents. This finding was surprising and concurred with critiques by OFSTED (2013) on the difficulties parents have in navigating the choice process because of the variations that exist between the way that settings talk about their provision and practice, which can be complex and difficult to access when making assessments based on quality and suitability. Instead, the ethos of the setting was more likely to retain parents and also motivate them to volunteer or contribute to the committee element of the setting because of a shared enthusiasm with their philosophies. Those that explicitly sought aspects of its ethos for their children did so for a number of reasons. Firstly because of a desire to replicate aspects of their own childhood, which featured higher levels of freedom and outdoor exploration than children now typically receive in traditional Early Years settings. This builds on the work of Holloway and Valentine (2000a; 2000b) who examined the social constructions of childhood and its spatial implications on ideal places for children. Secondly, because of concerns about target-driven educational systems leading to the decline of childhood play and spontaneity, some parents shared a concern with the setting about the pressurised environments of school and the subsequent detrimental effects on children's mental health. There is a multitude of research within early education literature on this topic (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014); however, the way different spaces for young children produce and negotiate policy messages that have the potential to affect children's wellbeing has been unattended to by geographical researchers. The setting took several different steps to confront this concern, ranging from charting children's wellbeing to offering informal counselling sessions for parents in crisis. As such, this research builds on the work of Kraftl (2013) who used a geographical lens to examine the varied alternative spaces of education and the way parents can disconnect from and reject mainstream ideas produced by the state.

Previously, ethoses around learning and care have only been examined in the educational settings attended by older children. This thesis demonstrates that though Early Years settings may not traditionally have been viewed as educational spaces, even the spaces young children and babies occupy are constructing themselves through diverse learning ethoses. Exploring the ways ethos was articulated by professionals showed a multiplicity of different, and sometimes contradictory, visions of what childhood should be and how Early Years education should shape the child and parent. These ethoses were shaped by professional constructions of good quality early education and practice based on adherence to, and rejections of policy discourses, for example, around school readiness. The implications of this

are important. As different settings construct themselves around their specific ethoses, nego-tiated by diverse Early Years professionals, children in the same community experience radi-cally different versions of Early Years education and care.

7.3 Choice

The theme of choice runs through the research findings, as parents had to negotiate choices concerning paid employment, negotiating work with motherhood whilst making choices about the education and care of their young children. The theme of choice opens up the second research question: 'Why do parents use Early Years' Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?'.

The extent to which ethos influenced choice was surprising, and concurred with the sociological literature that choices are made in 'theatres of emotion' (Vincent and Ball, 2001, p.643) and that mothers are burdened with a multiplicity of considerations: 'evidence about how people make family decisions—including how parenting might be combined with paid work, and how children should be cared for—shows that people do not act in this individualistic, economically rational way' (Duncan et al., 2006, p.256). Instead, decisions were made based on the influence of networks, recommendations and impressions of Early Years professionals upon visiting the setting. This finding builds on the growing work within Early Years education on the prioritising of attachments and relationships between children, Early Years professionals and their mothers (Page, 2010; 2011; 2014; Page and Elfer, 2013; Elfer 2012). This thesis demonstrates that there are new dual expectations from parents to both professionalise the workforce through their understandings of what constitutes high quality education and care, whilst simultaneously valuing loving familial interactions between professionals and their children. There were many tensions and dilemmas for the mothers who had to negotiate economic policy drivers that encouraged employment alongside their local choices, which featured a wide variation in quality, accessibility and affordability, and was considerably narrowed by what was feasibly available for each individual family based on their unique circumstances. This demonstrates that the idea that Neo-liberalism provides a landscape of choice is flawed. With limited intervention from the welfare state, mothers are expected to act as 'rational economic actors' (Gallagher, 2013a, p.1110) yet are unable to do so given that provision is patchy and diverse, a critique made by Green and Lawson (2011), Lawson (2007) and McDowell et al. (2005). Middle class parents demonstrated that they had the greatest ability to be selective in the choices available to them and viewed the largest number of settings with the biggest criteria of what they were searching for. This shows that Neo-liberalism allows the middle class to mobilise choices which far from being progressive, work to sanction and exacerbate inequalities.

Mothers' reasons for engaging in paid work in some ways demonstrates enduring traditions that have previously been examined in geographical attention on women's participation in the labour market (McDowell et al.l, 2006, Braun et al., 2008; Vincent et al. 2010a; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). Firstly, paid work was positioned as necessary to financially support the mothers' household. Secondly because work was an important part of the mothers' identity, providing them with independence and feelings of pride and enjoyment in their professional achievements. Finally, maternal employment was providing children with a positive citizen worker role model. However, this research is unique as it combines parents views with those of Early Years professionals who provide the education and care. It has shown that the expectations from professionals around mothers combining paid work and childcare was mixed, contradictory and class based. There were suggestions that less economically advantaged mothers were not as capable at engaging in activities with their children, and that this meant the ideal place for those children was in Early Years setting, rather than the home. This contributes to geographical literature about the repositioning of parenting as an expert skill, where parents should contribute more than love and care in order to be conceptualised as good parents (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Wainwright and Marandet, 2015; Jupp, 2012). This demonstrates an enduring association highlighted in historic work on moral geographies of mothering and working class children and institutions (Dyck 1990; Holloway, 1998).

In contrast, there was a concern that some mothers were perceived to work too much. The educational development of the child is seen as a class-specific marker of good parenting, and economically advantaged parents are seen as skilled providers of enriching experiences (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012), however, for the children of lower-middle and middle-class families, the home is seen as a valuable space for learning. This is because Early Years settings were not seen as suitable replacements for maternal care (Ansell, 2009), even if the setting fostered home-like spaces of care. This correlates with geographical work that has examined the importance of accepted social and spatial norms within Early Years settings (Gallagher, 2013c; Gregson and Lowe, 1995). Enduring regard for, and pervasive discourses surrounding the work of John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1989) is in this way shown to still be pertinent, since in this thesis attachment theory was shown to shape the childcare landscape through parents and professionals' expectations for the organisation of the physical space, practices and relationships within them. As such, parents and educators are depicted as being concerned that relationships are both home and family like. Kraftl (2013), in his work on alternative educational settings, demonstrated how important this was to parents: 'this was about having a family ethos[...]what I am calling a family-like relation…based around particular ways of relating to and feeling about one another' (ibid p.191). This indicates the prevalence of a social

norm which stresses the preference for home-based maternal care is enduring, and that mothers have increasingly difficult tasks in combining work that fulfils employer requirements, makes financial sense when taking into account the cost of childcare, and that provides the right balance for the emotional needs of the child and the mother.

Although parents discussed many of the different considerations they had made, cost was absent This is surprising; given the high cost of care in the U.K., many reviews of childcare use cite cost and family income as important factors in choice making (Rutter and Stocker, 2014; Roberts and Speight, 2017). Two possible reasons are suggested for the absence of discussion of cost. Firstly, it could be that parents did not feel comfortable equating their care choices with affordability or value for money. This would correspond with geographical literature on the commodification of care (England, 1996; Lawson, 2007; England and Lawson, 2005) which implies that these conversations are difficult:

> 'domains associated with needy subjects is in contrast to the public domain of economy which is characterized by calculative market rationalities and populated by autonomous rights-bearing individuals who are free to make their own choices' (Green and Lawson, 2011, p.641).

Geographers like Boyer et al. (2013) have discussed the blurred divisions between 'kin and non-kin' (p.518) as a result of the shared emotional connections between Early Years professionals and children. Emotional attachments have also been discussed by Elfer (2006) and the theory of professional love conceptualised by Page (2011; 2013; 2014) in explaining some of the intense bonds that exist between families and care settings, As such, thinking about arrangements of care as financial transactions is problematic. Secondly, it is possible that parents have internalised the responsibility and individualism expected of Neo-liberalist subjects. As such, the rising costs and privatisation of care may be unremarkable, which builds on the geographic interest in this area by McDowell (2004) and Smith (2005), and coincides with discussions of aspirational worker citizens (Braun et al., 2008; Gallagher, 2013b; Power, 2005; Lister, 2006) and mothers who prioritise their working identity in spite of the wage sacrifices needed to afford care for their children.

Parents acknowledged the importance of the Early Years period by attending to both their young children's emotional and intellectual development in the choice making process. This thesis has discovered parents have dual expectations: to secure a setting with a professionalised and educated workforce because of the value they ascribed to their children's educational experiences, whilst also seeking professionals who offered home-like, caring spaces which fostered strong and loving emotional relationships which reflected idealised spaces for young children. It has been demonstrated that there is a fallacy of choice for parents, despite

being encouraged to act as individualistic and Neo-liberal citizens parents did not select their children's Early Years setting in a rational, economic way. The thesis reveals how difficult these decisions are, demonstrating that expectations for Early Years settings far surpass simply securing replacement maternal care, and instead are informed by policy messages promoting pre-school education and moral discourses around motherhood, maternal care and attachment.

7.4 Power

The theme of power translated through policy via professionals, was embraced or resisted by parents to self-regulate, or regulate other parents and the provider, and is an important finding in the thesis. Discussion of this theme helps address the third research question: 'To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years setting?'. As discussed in the previous section each individual setting was forced to negotiate power in the form of regulating practices such as OFSTED and the EYFS. The duties placed upon them were translated imperfectly into practice as they were interpreted through different professional understandings and the personal beliefs of the professionals in each setting.

The emphasis on the reduction of the welfare state under Neo-liberalism sought to minimise a 'dependency culture' and heavy state intervention whereby the state became an enabler rather than a provider of public services (Butler and Hamnett, 2011). The increased punitiveness of the welfare system has been well documented. Rose (2000) discusses how these sanctions criminalise the needy: 'the criminal is a violator of his or her moral responsibilities to others: violating the bonds of obligation and trust…violating individual rights' (p.337). In this way, the individual fails in both their internalised personal responsibilities, as well as the wider expectations of the state. This indivualisation is an emphasis on citizens as social actors, not dependents who 'reflexively shape their own biography, and are responsible for the project of self' (Edwards and Alldred, 2000, p.436). Childcare has appeared on the policy landscape as a service with the potential to reap both social and economic benefits for society. Over the last 10 years, childcare policy has been increasingly directed at those thought to be either socially or economically disadvantaged. Policy discourses around social exclusion have contributed to the perceived importance of parenting skills, implying that intergenerational disadvantage is maintained through 'bad' parenting: 'parental non participation in the labour force has been regarded as not only perpetuating the conditions of social and economic disadvantage, but also setting a poor example for young children in later life' (Gallagher, 2013b, p.162). The government's stance on the importance of very young children being educated in professional

childcare settings is particularly notable in its approach to children deemed to be growing up disadvantaged by their economic situation. Since 1998, all children in the U.K. have been entitled to fifteen hours a week free education after their third birthday, demonstrating the government's commitment to 'school readiness'. In 2006 this was extended to disadvantaged two year olds (DfE, 2011). This was in response to growing evidence that home learning environments impact children's cognitive and social development from a very young age, indicating that high quality early education could counter the potential negative effects of living within circumstances that do not facilitate 'good' development (HM Treasury, 2004).

Sure Start Centres marked a significant change in the way the state interacted with families. Vertlea Sure Start Centre arguably held the most responsibility out of the settings examined in this thesis in regard to engaging parents, since they are a government-regulated initiative designed to improve outcomes for children and families and to reduce inequalities (DfE, 2013), thus bridging the gap between the welfare state and the family as a site of discipline and self-regulation. Sure Start Centres were a Labour initiative and part of preventative policies targeting high needs families, providing a new example of social support, intervention, regulation and as Parton (2006) labelled 'preventative surveillance'. The Sure Start objectives were to provide health, education, childcare and family support, in a one stop shop of services; with the overall outcome of providing children with better life chances and tackling cycles of disadvantage (Jupp, 2013; Horton and Kraftl, 2011). Gallagher (2013b) stated that Sure Start 'in its initial capacity[...].was envisaged to have the potential to break the cycle of disadvantage, a situation which is understood to perpetuate conditions of economic and social marginalisation for children in later life' (p.163). The overarching aim of Sure Start Centres is to positively influence families through education and behaviour change. This attention on parents and parenting is illustrated elsewhere in the thesis and is due to the growing acknowledgement of the importance of the Early Years for future achievement, where making social investments is seen to have the potential to break cycles of disadvantage and boost human capital and economic production. As Jenson and Saint Martin (2003) state: 'the goals are to ensure the future sustainability of social protection and social cohesion, by investing now' (p.96). Increased attention on the home and family, and the perceived need to reach all parents is part of the increased responsibility that parents take for raising adult workers of the future. Lister (2006) recognises the way children are constructed as 'becomings' rather than beings under a paid work focused and future-orientated model of citizenship. As Jupp and Gallagher (2013) state: 'parent-child relationships and practices of parenting are[...]clearly and unavoidably bound up with wider social, cultural, political and economic dynamics in diverse ways' (p.155).

Rose (2000) stated that since the mid-nineteenth century, education and the family have been 'more mobilised and instrumentalised governmentally in the name of good citizenship, public order and the control or elimination of criminality, delinquency and anti-social conduct' (p.324) than ever before. Foucauldian analyses of power, in particular around governmentality are useful in thinking about the way Vertlea Sure Start Centre mobilised power through its policies and ethos in order to engage mothers. Governmentality, as a concept refers to the strategies employed by governments in order to produce future citizens that are able to fulfil their objectives (Huxley, 2008). Rose (1999) stated that power mobilised through governmentality involved a range of techniques 'that seek to govern without governing…through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities' (p.328). Educational institutions and organisations have been traditional sites for geographical examinations of power and governmentality (Rose, 1999; Elden, 2016), and more recent work by Jones et al. (2010), Thaler and Sunstein (2008) and Pykett (2013) have looked at policies promoting behaviour change as part of nudging libertarian paternalist policy interventions. However, there has been insufficient attention to how this is mobilised through the spaces young children and babies occupy, as pointed out by Holt (2013), perhaps because these spaces have not traditionally been seen as sites of education for children or mothers. This is despite Lavelle (2015) pointing out that early intervention in the lives of families is a premise on which the social investment state is built and a process of discipline and governance in its seeking to produce 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1977) that change and adopt dominant discourses on how individuals should behave.

For Centres to have an impact, parents must engage in order to participate in change. There were a multitude of examples of power being exercised over mothers in the Centre, firstly, there was the universal signposting to the services at the Centre by community Health Visitors. Though it would appear to have been a poorly-coordinated exercise, mothers responded to the invitations. Some were concerned, believing they had been explicitly targeted and attended out of a sense of duty. Though their attendance was voluntary it was made clear to them that attending was the responsible action to take. Rose (1999) discusses how governing families specifically targets the working class so they understand that they are 'to be shaped, educated and solicited into a relation with the state…to fulfil the role of producing healthy, responsible, adjusted social citizens' (p.128), through state mechanisms that 'support the family in its 'normal' functioning…to fulfil its social obligations' (ibid). Some mothers were persuaded to attend the Centre because of mental health issues or past experiences of postnatal depression: 'by labelling certain maternal emotions as unnatural or damaging while portraying other discourses surrounding the happy, calm, and content mother as natural, mothers find themselves in the position of having to self-regulate their emotional lives to reach the

required standard' (Símonardóttir, 2016, p.110). Within Geography, the promotion of mental health in the post-partum period has not been well attended to, a shortfall considering the sustained interest in the emotional labours of motherhood (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). Secondly, there was the content of the classes and individual sessions. These ranged from sharing official guidelines around weaning and infant nutrition to the importance of play and maternal interaction, the latter being an area of concern with the manager, along with her personal disapproval of the over-use of screen time with babies and young children. Thirdly, there were more subtle instances of power within the Centre, such as the banning of hot drinks which communicated subliminal preferences for sessions to be more than social encounters between mothers. This contributes to the literature on the sometimes tense relationship between Sure Start staff and families (Lavelle, 2015; Jupp, 2012) in creating professional boundaries in spaces which are designed to appear homely. Finally, there was the employment of parent-led classes, which using normative examples of good parenting role modelled by good mothers as class leaders. As such, this research illustrates that power within the Centre is complex and not necessarily authoritarian, though is implicated in subtle every day interactions and practice.

The use of parent-led classes meant that some mothers exercised their own power, both over other Centre users, and on themselves. The disciplinary powers that govern parents in this way are "everywhere and … nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky, 1995, p. 36). Foucault's (1975) use of the panoptican as a metaphor for modern disciplinary societies can be employed as a lens in which to observe the practices of the mothers at the Centre. In Gallagher's (2011) analysis of power in primary schools, he states that power in educational spaces is 'an endless directionless game in which everyone is caught up' (p.49). The panoptican, a prison design used for controlling prisoners represents a 'repressive system based on a principle of permanent surveillance' (McNay, 1998, p. 93). As Foucault (1975) stated, this meant that 'we induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility' (p.201). Behaviour is ensured because prisoners 'never quite know when they are being watched, and so effectively police themselves' (Horrocks and Jevtic 1999, p.118). The enthusiasm some of the mothers had for setting up parent-led sessions in order to continue friendship groups formed within the Centre can be seen as a way of regulating and excluding other mothers, as they gravitated towards and encouraged the attendance of mothers with shared commonalities. Hierarchal observations of other mothers were informed by normative judgements of good parenting. This was illustrated by assessments made of those who were perceived as most needing of support but were observed as being too disengaged and unmotivated to attend: 'a normalizing gaze [that] establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them' (Foucault, 1975, p.184). Despite there

sometimes being diversity amongst the mothers attending classes, those leading them took responsibility in reproducing normalised parenting behaviours and parent/child interactions through monitoring and minimising deviations. The use of surveillance from mothers, as well as professionals within the Centre is a subtle yet pervasive tool in changing attitudes and behaviour; labelled by Foucault (1975) as a control mechanism. Foucault stated, 'the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives…a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it' (Foucault, 1980, p.38-39).

Parents at The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school also mobilised power; however not over each other, but rather the professionals within the settings as part of their concern with their children being school ready. This required the professionals to consider carefully the kind of engagement and involvement they wanted between families and their setting in order to ensure that parents' expectations were in line with their own ethos on early learning. This is a unique finding given research on parental engagement within primary and secondary engagement has generally show that professionals welcome parental aspiration (Hamnett and Butler, 2011; Butler and Hamnett, 2007). The monitoring of professionals and requests for extra support were examples of middle class parents ensuring the continuation of their class position through their children's educational achievements. Foucault did not hold that power is possessed, rather it is exercised; however, this thesis maintains that working class and middle class parents respond differently to their children's educational experiences because of the level of cultural capital that they possess, and their ability to foster and repro-duce social capital in their children. Bourdieu (1986a) stated that academic success is not based on natural aptitude alone, but is also a product of the amount of, and type of cultural capital inherited from the family milieu, which he stated 'made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating aca-demic success[...]to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions' (ibid, p.243). Reay's (1998) research on mothers of primary school age children demonstrated the importance of cultural capital in preserving educational inequalities. Similar findings by sociologists like Ball (2010) found that middle class mothers were unchallenged in sharing their views with their child's teacher and felt confident in their own knowledge and assertions. Educational expenditure is carried out by middle class parents through 'a combination of trans-missions at school, in the family and those bought in from the market, access to which simply and fundamentally depends upon the amount of economic capital available to the family' (Ball, 2010, p.159).

This research contributes to the geographical and sociological research on the powerful position of economically advantaged parents, including those described as 'just about managing' within educational settings. However, crucially this thesis demonstrates that these exclusionary practices begin far earlier than previously examined, before children have even reached school age. Middle class parents see their role as 'compensatory' and are able to use financial resources to compensate poor school teaching or provision, in the form of private tuition and extra-curricular activities, a preference for which has been explored by Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014). Geographical research that has examined parents' employment of their class position and social and cultural capital has typically focused on older children, school choice and uneven access to higher education for poorer children (Hamnett and Butler, 2011). It is posed that the reasons for these exclusionary practices starting so early is the filtering through of government messages and language choices which reflect a growing concern with children's readiness to learn at school age: 'the model of readiness for school is attractive to governments…the government has intervened increasingly through Early Years policy…tensions have been mounting amongst Early Years educationalists…arising from and compounded by the continued intervention of recent governments' (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012, p. 4). Whitebread and Bingham's (2012) critique of school readiness pointed out the difficulties Early Years professionals have in maintaining their conceptualised understandings of good quality Early Years education and care in a policy environment with increasingly formalised expectations for young children, much of which has undisputedly entered into parents' expectations for their children. There were several examples of parents exercising power over the professionals in both settings. In The Treehouse Nursery a reading scheme was implemented to encourage children who were considered to be 'school ready' to learn to read through one-on-one guided reading sessions and a book loan system. This was despite some of the professionals' concern with not acting like schools and this practice not being prescribed in the EYFS. Similarly, in Norbush Pre-school the professionals spoke with concern about a parent who wanted them to help her formulate a case for her daughter joining the reception class earlier than legal school age. In this situation parents were in a powerful position for two reasons, firstly because of their status as fee payers in a competitive market (Ball and Vincent, 2005) who could remove their children and choose an alternative setting, and secondly because of the relatively powerless position of professionals in Early Years settings (Cameron et al., 2002; Elfer 2015).

The relatively powerful position of the professionals employed at The Mud-Pit Preschool, a result of their educational status, was comparable with the positions occupied by teaching professionals within schools. Research within school environments has shown that these professionals hold significant power over parents (Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Reay, 2004;

Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). This is interesting considering that The Mud-Pit Pre-school's ethos premised on opposing traditional formal learning environments, which have long been associated with normative expectations for parents' abilities to engage with their children's education (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). A large proportion of staff were degree educated in an Early Years related subject or held qualified teacher status, which meant that a high status was given to the professionals in the setting from both the manager and the parents. The professional expertise and experience of the team was respected and there was implicit trust in them to act on behalf of the setting's ethos in their interactions with parents. The use of a Facebook page to share photographs of the children engaged in learning experiences was a method employed by the setting to share their learning ethos and in turn inspire parents and (re)educate them on the kinds of interactions and activities that they held were important for quality learning. They also helped to deter and dissuade parents from practices that they were concerned were developmentally inappropriate and risky for future learning but that were sometimes favoured by parents concerned about school readiness, e.g. dot to dot activities.

The use of the Facebook group is an example of libertarian paternalism, because it encourages the parents to engage in 'reflexive and sustained considerations of their own behaviour' (Jones et al., 2011, p.498). Jones et al. (2011a; 2011b) argued that behaviour change strategies within modern democracy warrants further attention, to which this thesis has attended. Though the Mud-Pit Pre-school's message differs from dominant discourses marshalled through state policy, they act as their own governance through the promotion of their agenda for children's learning. They are aware of parents who are 'non-ideal' or 'irrational' citizens (Jones et al. , 2013a, p.50) and tailor their approach to them through targeted interventions, such as one-on-one support meetings with the manager, for example, with young parents or middle class parents who are seen to be preoccupied with school readiness. As such, they identify parents who are complicit and those who are not: 'the targeting of segmented audiences…reflecting at its most basic a distinction between…'sophisticated' and, by implication, 'unsophisticated' people' (Jones et al. , 2011, p.488).

This thesis has produced significant contributions to geographical work on the power produced within educational settings. In this case, Early Years settings were examined, which have not previously been a subject of focus since they are not viewed as educational sites, conceptualised only as care spaces. Sure Start Centres were demonstrated to be places of preventative surveillance (Parton, 2006). Parents viewed as ideal citizens are given power over other parents through the use of parent-led classes, which appeared to be a favoured form of parenting education given the stretched services and staff shortages experienced in centres as a result of cuts. This thesis has demonstrated that the exclusionary practices of

middle class parents appear in a wider range of economically advantaged families, including those labelled as just about managing. Parents were interventionist into their children's Early Years education through the monitoring of professionals via methods involving persuasion, and at times intimidation, in order to get their children the extra support they feel they are entitled to. This revealed an interesting and unusual perspective within the Early Years whereby unlike school teachers, most professionals are viewed as relatively powerless, despite them having considerable influence over the practice and provision within their setting. This was especially apparent in this context, where Early Years settings provide a paid for service where parents are also customers, and hence have a degree of control over the provision they receive. This thesis has shown that new technology, such as the use of Facebook groups which share information in different formats to a select audience, can be used to target parents. This is demonstrated as a form of libertarian paternalism where 'non ideal' and 'irrational' citizens (Jones et al., 2013a) are encouraged to be complicit in a vision of 'good parenting' through (re)education and role modelling.

7.5 The professionalisation of parenting

Closely linked to the theme of power was the increasing professionalisation of parenting demonstrated by the expectations of professionals that they should act as co-educators. This theme has helped to address the final research question 'what expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?'. The repositioning of parenting as simultaneously an expert yet context-free skill has been discussed by geographers like Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson as well as within sociology by Gillies (2010) and Klett-Davies (2010). However, it has tended to focus on formalised learning environments for older children, and only more recently have the roles of parents in Early Years setting been acknowledged (Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Jupp 2013) as significant in the changing expectations for the involvement of parents. Accordingly, this thesis drives this area forward.

The extent to which parents were professionalised was directly related to the ethos of the setting and their beliefs around the purpose of their own role and expectations for children. In Vertlea Sure Start Centre there was a conscious effort to not overwhelm mothers with expectations in order to retain their attendance; and interactions and interventions with mothers were attempted in sensitive, 'small steps', an example of libertarian paternalism (Jones et al., 2010). There was a sense of disapproval around some aspects of parenting, for example, mothers not getting down on the floor to play with their children and the over use of iPads. This was implied to be a problem in the 'needier' of families, ignoring the contexts parenting

was performed in, such as the additional demands on mothers e.g. older children, mental health problems, experiences of poverty. Playing together was seen to be an essential and important component of a mother's responsibility, and maternal responsiveness and interactions were maintained as significant for good parenting. This has demonstrated that policies enacted in Early Years settings as well as schools perpetuate normative expectations of mothering (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013; Jupp, 2013; Crozier 2001), ignoring that parenting is actually performed in diverse contexts where the amount of capital possessed by each individual impacts their capacities to engage with their children's learning and development. In less high need families, a concern with children's achievements and competitiveness between parents was noted by the professionals, something that has typically been observed by those researching parents of older children (Vincent et al. 2010a; Ball 2010), thus demonstrating that a middle class concern amongst the 'just about managing' about children's advantage over their peers is starting in early childhood, outside of formal learning environments. Some mothers, however, attempted to professionalise themselves, for example, in their preference for expert-led classes and learning new information about parenting. Despite there being a distinct othering between 'us' and 'them' in terms of the Sure Start target demographic, mothers were still enthusiastic about expert-led classes, which as Clarke (2006) critiqued are aimed at working class mothers yet reflect 'middle class conceptions of motherhood' (p.701).

There were confusing expectations for parents at The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school, an example of the imperfectly translated policy messages that filter through both the setting as an organisation, and the professionals, implicated by their professional experiences and understandings. Parents were expected to be engaged and committed but too much involvement was frowned upon because of personal stances held by the professionals that contradicted the drive to get children ready for school. This demonstrated that there was a conflict between parents adapting to state expectations when the settings themselves resist them. As outlined in Chapter six, at the Norbush Pre-school, two of the parents were described as being unhealthily preoccupied with their children's development to the detriment of their enjoyment and the development of social and emotional skills, which were held by professionals as deeply important. A focus on what was considered to be basic but undervalued skills, such as being able to queue up, volunteer an answer at circle time, and for children to be able to dress themselves, has made important implications for the concern with the reduction of children's independence. Increasing restrictions on children's freedom have been noted by Valentine (1997) and Skelton (2009), and this research evidences that these restrictions are experienced not only by children and parents, but also by professionals who have to adjust their ideas about children's competencies. However, in both instances, the background of the parent was the driver for their enthusiastic engagement, in the first case

because of a poor parental experience of parenting and education as a child, and in the second case because of cultural and historic experiences of discrimination in the form of racism and sexism. Whilst there has been attention on the underachievement of BME groups of children, (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Crozier, 2001) there has been more focus on barriers to engagement with parents, as opposed to the abilities of parents to intervene positively in their children's learning through strong partnerships with professionals. Accordingly, this involvement was seen as a threat since the parents' visions were not aligned with that of the pre-school. Because of this, a compensatory role was taken by the parent. Though they were not deterred from continuing to advocate for their child's continued 'stretching' within the setting, they sought to ensure that their home environment was as proactive as possible in ensuring their child's future success.

Expectations for parents at The Mud-Pit Pre-school Centred around the ethos of the setting, and unlike in The Treehouse Nursery and Norbush Pre-school, there was a reticence to engage with parents whose stances differed from their own. It is suggested that because of their independent position and not-for-profit status, they did not rely as heavily as the other settings on parental satisfaction which enabled them to pursue more confidently their own objectives. Parents were professionalised; however, not in line with policy messages around school readiness, which they actively resisted, but rather on their pedagogical understandings of what constitutes quality learning experiences for young children. When parents support for their children breached their ideals, they were discouraged, for example, when children were given homework on their pre-enrolment school visits. Their stance on this was communicated to parents in a stark way, by the settings refusal to engage in future discussions with the local primary school. Expectations for parents were based on children being allowed freedom to play, access to the outdoors and a nurturing of their emotional needs through child-led inter-actions, modelled through photos on the Facebook page as ideal practice. However, for those without pedagogical understandings or the ability and motivation to learn about the shaping of their ethos, striking this nuanced balance appears challenging. This thesis demonstrates that even when Early Years settings actively resist dominant ideas about education and parenting norms they still reproduce class inequalities. Middle class parents were able to invest and engage more in the dominant learning ethoses promoted within the setting, building on the comments of Kraftl (2014) about the 'profitable adventures of the threatened middle class' (p.37) in spaces of alternative education. This ranged from purchasing expensive outdoor clothing and footwear that allowed for all year-round outdoor play, to sourcing mud kitchens, tree houses and dens in their gardens. These examples demonstrate that they are able to use both their cultural and financial capital to ensure their children hold advantage over their working class peers, who may not necessarily have access to the outdoor space in their home

,which limits the extent to which these parents can supplement their child's learning experiences in the setting at home.

Considerations of the way parents are being increasingly professionalised and recast as experts in their roles has revealed several contributions that this thesis has highlighted. Normative expectations for parents, similar to that found in school contexts, ignore the diversity of mothering experiences and potentially alienate less economically advantaged families. This was particularly evident in the Sure Start Centre, where there was distinct othering of 'needier' parents who were the intended demographic for the setting. The lower-middle class parents professionalised themselves through their preference for and determination to attend expert-led classes at the centre. Even within the category of 'just about managing', this illustrated that there are tensions at the opposite ends of the spectrum in the way families perform parenting practices. The professionalisation of parents demonstrates that even parents of young babies have internalised Neo-liberal notions of good citizenship through their determination to ensure their children get ahead. The unique contexts of Early Years settings was also illustrated in the diversity of the messages that were delivered to parents, which were filtered through policy understandings, professional experience and personal view points. Unlike in school contexts, parents find themselves striking a challenging balance between having too little and too much aspiration for their children.

7.7 Conclusion

This discussion has centred around four key themes: ethos, choice, power and the professionalisation of parenting. This thesis maintains that Early Years settings are now constructing themselves through diverse ethoses which directly impact young children's learning experiences, but that these are communicated in contradictory ways, shaped by professional understandings and experiences. The fallacy of choice has been revealed, as parents are demonstrated as unable to act in truly rational, economic, individualistic and Neo-liberal ways in the emotional, and conflicting decisions they make when sourcing replacement maternal care. Power was translated in different ways through and between policy, professionals and parents, as settings became sites of governance, and parents engaged in panoptic surveillance over other parents, whilst using their class positions, social and cultural capital to ensure the maintenance of their children's advantage. Expectations for parents of young children have changed, but perpetuate family norms and ignore the diverse contexts of parenting. Parents' role has been professionalised; however, expectations were conflicting, and many parents

voluntarily took on the role of professionalising themselves by ensuring their role as co-educator was fully acknowledged.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has contributed to wider geographical debate on parenting and Early Years education by investigating the way parents choose, use and engage with the Early Years settings their young children attend through discussions with mothers and professionals. The chapter reflects upon the original aim and objectives for this thesis, and discusses some of the most significant findings by presenting the original contributions to academic knowledge within the fields of study, before providing a final conclusion.

The Early Years are increasingly acknowledged as significant for brain development, where childhood experiences are seen to have the ability to shape lifelong learning and achievement. Perspectives on the nature and value of childhood have significantly impacted policy and practice (Dahlberg et al. 1999, James and Prout, 1997) regarding the physical environment, provision and experiences provided for young children in Early Years settings. These experiences and interactions are increasingly focused on educational outcomes. The government has acknowledged the importance of the Early Years period and has taken a progressively more interventionist approach into the lives of families. In addition, new concerns about safeguarding and the importance of early intervention in 'at risk' families (Gillies, 2011) has necessitated a form of preventative surveillance (Parton, 2006) from professionals employed in settings attended by families and young children. From a social investment perspective, the government equates each individual as a potential worker who can productively contribute to society (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006; Lister, 2003). It is maintained that by investing early in the lives of young children, the potential for reducing later welfare dependency is achieved, thus breaking enduring cycles of deprivation. The government has responded to this through the implementation of free entitlement funding for three and four year olds to access free early education in Early Years settings and through childminders, and since 2006 for eligible two year olds. The creation of Sure Start Children's Centres in 1999 further exemplifies this commitment. The Centres see children as a product of their parenting and environment, and offer targeted promotion of health care, early

education and family support with the intention of transforming disadvantaged communities (Jupp, 2013; Horton and Kraftl, 2011) and decreasing the likelihood of children enduring costly economic and social marginalisation in later life (Gallagher 2013b). Additionally, family learning (Wainwright, 2017) and attempts to professionalise (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) and (re)educate parents through behaviour change policies (Wainwright and Marandet, 2013) are examples of libertarian paternalist policies (Pykett, 2013, Lavelle, 2015) which 'nudge' (Thaler and Sustein, 2008) parents to behave in a context free, normative way (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013, Jupp, 2013, Crozier, 2011).

Accordingly, Early Years Settings have become increasingly regulated and heteronomous through the mandatory elements of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This has also been demonstrated through re-envisaging the purpose of Early Years Settings, away from a place of care in the absence of the working mother, to a place where young children receive an education in order to begin their school life with the skills that are maintained as significant for their future success (Gallagher, 2013c). However, many of these skills have been contested, and there is a concern about the age appropriateness and potential damage (House 2011, Palmer, 2007) that formalised, schoolifed learning can have on young children (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011; Nutbrown and Clough, 2014). Emerging research on international perspectives that stem from alternative discourses of childhood and the purpose of early education have revealed positive associations with a later school age, and a creative, individualised curriculum based on child-led play (Moss, 2015, Nutbrown and Clough, 2014).

Since the family is now seen as a critical arena for citizenship, targeting parents has become a crucial part of ensuring the rearing of responsible future citizens (Edwards and Gillies, 2011). Parents have struggled to take on Neo-liberal responsibilities, making individualistic and challenging decisions (Gallagher, 2013b, Wainwright and Marandet, 2017, Clarke et al., 2006) in sourcing appropriate Early Years providers for their young children. The changing role of parents has also necessitated that education professionals work in new ways to engage families and encourage them to act as co-educators. However, there is an imperfect translation of policy, as professionals communicate messages that are influenced by both the unique ethos of their Early Years setting, and their own professional and personal beliefs regarding early education impacted by their educational training and their own childhood experiences.

8.2 Research aims

Geographers are beginning to attend to some of the issues detailed above. Prevailing research by Dyck (1990), England (1996), and Holloway (1998) looked at women's participation in the labour market and their arrangement for replacement care in their absence, whilst school choice has been examined by Butler and Hamnett (2011). However, surveying the literature revealed there has been an oversight on examining parents' decision making process in light of the re-envisaging of childcare as early education, choices which perpetuate certain ethoses around the purpose of childhood and have important implications for parents' spatial preferences. As such, this thesis answered the first two research questions: 'How do Early Years' professionals articulate the ethos of their different settings?' and 'Why do parents use Early Years' Settings, and what factors shape their choice of setting?'

Horton and Kraftl (2011) and Jupp (2013) have examined Sure Start Centres as places of friendship and strained, uneasy relationships where policy is translated into practice through targeted interventions. Unequal power relationships between parents and professionals have also been explored in the school context by Philo (2000), Gallagher, (2011) and Elden (2016); however, an examination of the literature revealed a shortfall in examining the growing number of Early Years settings that are not state maintained, but are increasingly regulated and professionalised and thus mobilise policy messages through their interactions with children and their parents. Partnerships between parents and schools has been well researched, in particular focusing on class (Vincent et al., 2004; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). This should be extended further to the Early Years context, given that Early Years education is increasingly conceptualised as a form of early intervention and governance over family life. Accordingly, this thesis asked the final two research questions: 'To what extent are parents engaged in their young children's Early Years' setting?' and 'What expectations surround parents' involvement in their young children's learning and development?' In doing so this thesis addressed the omission of thinking about Early Years settings as educational spaces, by considering their diversity and the ways they disseminate their specific learning ethoses in varied ways. The impact Early Years settings have, ranging from parental choice to engagement strategies that aim to (re)educate, survey, nudge and control parents, particularly mothers, was thus explored.

8.3 Key contributions to knowledge

In answering the aims discussed previously, this thesis has made several original contributions to knowledge within three bodies of work: Geographies of Education; Geographies of Children, Youth and Families; and Sociology of Education. A contribution to the Geographies of Education has been offered by demonstrating that children experience classed reproduction due to unequal access to childcare services. To date, geographers have tended to focus on educational disparity in the context of school and higher education, rather than Early Years. This is despite there being a vast difference in the ethoses held by Early Years settings, which significantly influences the practice and provision within. This diversity exists because, despite the introduction of the EYFS, Early Years' settings vary significantly in terms of their practice, provision and professional expertise, in contrast to state funded schools. This thesis presented how each of the four settings constructed different ethoses. These ethoses were demonstrated as being filtered through, and influenced by, policy frameworks and different professionals' personal beliefs. As a result, class reproduction begins to emerge at a number of stages. Firstly, this is evidenced through parental choice. This thesis illustrated the fallacious nature of supposedly Neo-liberal and individualistic choice by showing that parents make decisions that are socially and culturally influenced, with significant value placed on networks of recommendations. This means that parents find it difficult to make truly objective decisions about their children's early education because they are effected by both their emotions and the choices made by other mothers. Secondly, this is shown through the rise in alternative settings. Increasingly privatised Early Years settings set themselves apart by their unique ethoses. This thesis has demonstrated that because of a growing popularity for non-mainstream settings, favoured by more economically advantaged families, the contrast in children's experiences of Early Years settings is vastly contrasting even within small geographical areas. As such, the findings of this thesis sets an agenda for educational early years research in geography which not only looks at who gets access to what type of service, but also examines what those services are seeking to achieve

This thesis renews the agenda for geographies of children, youth and families to focus on the families of babies and young children. This thesis has demonstrated that the experiences of parents and families has a consequential and significant impact on young children. This is because parental choice influences young children's early educational experience, whilst simultaneously Early Years settings influence parents and family life through different

methods of engagement and (re)education. This research demonstrates that Early Years' settings are complex sites of power. These examples of power were exercised in subtle and class-specific ways. Engaging parents was a considerable focus across all the settings examined in this thesis, despite their individual ethoses. This thesis provides an interesting example of engagement through social media, demonstrating that settings are modernising their approaches and capitalising on the parent-group's engagement through their digital presence. Parents transmit power in varied ways, using their capital and class position to regulate the behaviour of other parents through forms of surveillance. In contrast, others used stories of their underachievement and experiences of discrimination as ammunition to motivate professionals to break cycles of educational failure for their children. Complex relations of power, produced and shared between parents and professionals, brings renewed focus to the family and Early Years through highlighting the association between parental engagement and children's early educational achievement.

The growing professionalisation of parenting outlined in this thesis contributes to the Sociology of Education by demonstrating that Early Years settings implement methods of control in order to achieve the aims of both the setting and expectations outlined by policy. Changing expectations for parents has demonstrated the increasing professionalisation of parenting, re-casting it as an expert skill. This thesis has illustrated that expectations for parents begin much earlier than previously thought. Across the settings, parents were encouraged to be co-educators, active and willing participants in their children's home learning experiences, demonstrated through their commitment to different home-setting tasks. However, this was not differentiated to take into account families' unique home circumstances. The 'just about managing' parents in this research who occupied a small town, which was neither affluent nor deprived, shed light on this under researched group who, despite their apparent unremarkable status, evidence the everyday experiences of power and control those in the middle encounter.

This thesis has outlined the political importance of attending to Early Years, because Early Years settings are much more than just spaces of care. Instead, they have been shown to be spaces of early education, intervention, parental (re)education and sites of complex power interplays. They appear to empower women by offering services for the employed mother, but professionalised expectations ignore family diversity and further burdens mothers, recasting the home into a place of seemingly great educational significance. As such, the social and political implications of parental choice and engagement highlight how Early Years settings shape children and parents experiences by reducing, or reproducing classed inequal-

ity. Considering the increasing significance attached to the Early Years period, and the associated impact these years have on lifelong learning and wellbeing, Early Years settings warrant further attention.

8.4 Suggestions for future research, policy and practice

The extending of this analysis of Early Years settings to include playgroups would be a valuable direction for future research. Playgroups are often run from shared premises like community centres or church halls, rather than purpose-built institutional spaces. According to the Childcare Act 2006, they are required to be registered providers meaning they must follow the EYFS and meet welfare requirements around safety and provision, staff-child ratios, security checks and record keeping (Childcare Act, 2006). In the past this was not the case, and playgroups were informal, and unregulated places for children to attend, with or without their parents for short sessions, run by volunteers rather than Early Years professionals (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009). However, the enduring association of playgroups with volunteering and parental involvement, as well as their historical preference for 'warm, homely and mothering' (ibid, p.118) spaces, make them an interesting site of analysis. Similar changes have occurred to childminding practices. Given the important past work of geographers like Dyck (1990), Gregson and Lowe (1995), Holloway (1999) and McDowell et al. (2005) who examined negotiations of motherhood, childcare and the home sphere, this could be a consideration for future research.

It is recommended that professionals employed in Early Years settings are supported to create deeper relationships with parents in order to facilitate a better understanding of families' individual circumstances and backgrounds. This echoes policy guidance which emphasises 'tailored' approaches that realise that 'context is an essential factor' (NCSL, 2011, p.3). In doing so, more sensitive, tailored approaches can be established to encourage participation, thus avoiding isolating parents or rejecting their understandings surrounding Early Years education. A finding of this thesis was that parents experienced considerable difficulty in achieving the often contradictory and exacting levels of engagement expected from the different settings they attended. Policy guidance has started to acknowledge the role of professionals in raising not only children's, but also parent's self-esteem:

> 'True parent partnership involves harnessing and utilising all the potential and strengths that parents can bring…Parents who feel more efficacious and who believe in their capacity to influence their child's performance will exhibit greater involvement' (NCSL, 2011, p.6)

Professionals rarely acknowledged the way in which policy messages and media publicity around school readiness effected not only their practice, but also parents' perceptions of what children should be achieving. Interviews with parents revealed that many factors influenced their beliefs about what their children should be doing in their Early Years settings. Parents' eagerness to engage was simplistically explained by professionals as fuelled by a sense of competition; of wanting their children to hold academic success over their peers. However, this research has shown it was a result of complex factors, often fuelled by fear, such as a concern of not repeating their own educational underachievement, or an experience of sexism or discrimination within their own culture that they believed education could overcome.

This thesis has demonstrated that professionals across the settings are invested in supporting young children's learning, and acknowledge that working alongside parents facilitates this. However, different professional understandings, personal experiences, and educational backgrounds of staff across the settings clearly influenced the nature of their engagement and partnerships. This was illustrated in considerable differences in the ways professionals responded to parents through their communication, information sharing, and through their attempts to positively influence family life in a way to benefit children's home lives. This thesis recommends that policy guidance around Early Years education, especially within the EYFS (2017) framework needs to be clearer in outlining what effective engagement and communication should look like. Sharing information with parents is as a key element of 'enabling environments', yet there appears to be an unwritten assumption that professionals have the skills and experience to follow the guidance in a nuanced and sensitive way. To date, guidance for professionals surrounding positive parental engagement has mainly focused on at-risk families and vulnerable groups. It is professionals who are undoubtedly the experts of the parent groups using their settings, and policy messages surrounding parents have been critiqued for envisaging families as homogenous groups, ignoring the diversity of contexts that parenting is performed in (Crozier, 2011; Vincent et al., 2010b; Wainwright and Marandet, 2017). As such, better equipping professionals with tools and skills to engage with all parents would be helpful in striving towards more consistent approaches to family engagement across the childcare landscape in a way that is still tailored to individual families and their specific needs.

8.5 Conclusion

In summary, the original findings of this thesis have provided a unique geographical exploration of the increasingly important educational and political implications of young children's attendance in Early Years settings. It has done so by demonstrating the growing diversity that exists between Early Years settings, drawing attention to the subsequent disparity experienced by children in relation to parental choice and pre-school experience. School readiness was demonstrated as being an increasingly important feature of the political agenda for education. This research has shown that this was reflected in the practice and provision of Early Years settings. However, this thesis identified that these messages were often confused and contradictory as they were translated by diverse Early Years professionals who were unavoidably influenced by their own experiences and personal beliefs. As such, this research established that there are considerable challenges for parents in achieving effective engagement with their young children's Early Years settings when their own expectations for their children's achievement did not match up to that of the professionals. Accordingly, Early Years settings were illustrated as being complex sites of power. It was demonstrated that not only are professionals using increasingly interventionist forms of surveillance, governance and behaviour change to shape parents, but also that parents use their class positions and historical experiences of underachievement and discrimination to advocate on behalf of their children to ensure their children's success. In doing so, this thesis has made significant contributions to the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families and the Geographies of Education. The thesis has established that early years' settings as educational spaces are sites of significant social and policy investment aimed at transforming educational and social disadvantage by targeting the crucial stage of early childhood and educating both children and their parents. These spaces are, paradoxically, spaces of power enactments which can reproduce rather than challenge enduring inequalities as models of intervention advantage families with higher levels of cultural capital.

Spaces of early education and care: exploring ethos, choice and parental engagement

Dear Parent/Carer,

Your child's Pre-school is taking part in a study with Sophie Beer, a PhD student from Loughborough University. The study is looking at how different Child Care Settings help parents to help their children learn at home, and how parents feel about the support that is offered.

This questionnaire is trying to find out:

- why you came to this setting and what you like about it

- what kinds of things you do at home with your child

- whether you feel like support is available for you here, and what kind of support you prefer to receive

The researcher would be very grateful if you could fill in this simple tick box questionnaire. There can be *no wrong answers*. Your answers and your identity will be kept *confidential.* It is up to you whether you want to complete this questionnaire, and *you can say no.*

At the end of the questionnaire is some information about having a chat with Sophie the researcher in more detail about some of the issues you will be asked about in this questionnaire. If you have a chat with Sophie, you would be given a **£10 ASDA supermarket voucher** as a thank you for your time. If you think you might be interested, or if you would like some more information or to ask some questions first, please fill in your contact details on the back sheet.

_____

If you would like more information about the study, please email Sophie at:
⊠ s.beer@lboro.ac.uk, or you can call her on ☎ 01509 222794

Appendix item two: questionnaire

1. Your children	Please write the answer
How many children do you have?	
How old are your children?	
How many children do you have attending [setting name]?	
How old was your child/children when they first began attending [setting name]?	

2. Which statements describe your working situation? *Please tick as many as apply*	Please tick
I work part time	☐
I am a full time parent	☐
I work full time	☐
I am a student	☐
Please explain what the main reason is behind your current working situation (e.g. for financial reasons)	

3. How is your child/children currently cared for? *Please tick the different care options that your child/children uses for each day of the week.*

	Please tick														
	Child 1					Child 2					Child 3				
	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F	M	T	W	T	F
A playgroup*															
At home by me/other parent															
A nursery*															
A pre-school* (joined to a primary school)															
A nanny															
An Au Pair															
A child-minder															
A Sure start centre*															
Grandparents or family															
Friends, neighbours															

*Please name the childcare settings your child attends:

4. Your child's attendance at [setting name]	Please tick
My child/children attends for *one morning or afternoon* a week	☐
My child/children attends *every day*	☐
My child/children attends *once* a week	☐
My child/children attends *twice* a week	☐
My child/children attends *three* times a week	☐
My child/children attends *four* times a week	☐
Does your child attend [setting name] for…	
Free funded hours at age two	☐
Free funded hours at age three and four	☐
Free funded hours at age three and four and some additional hours	☐

5. To what extent do the following statements reflect your *preference* for the care of your child/children in an *ideal world*?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would like…my child/children to be looked after in a nursery or pre-school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like…my child/children to be cared for in my home by a nanny or an au pair	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like…my child/children to be cared for by a child minder	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like…my child/children to be cared for at home by me/other parent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like…a family member/friend to care for my child/children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like…my child/children to be cared for at home by me/other parent but to also attend some classes/sessions with other children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I have a different preference for the care of my child:

6. How important were the following factors in your decision to start using childcare for your child/children?					
	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Of little importance	Unimportant
To help my child/children learn and develop	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
So that my child/children could be cared for whilst I worked	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To help my child/children socialise and have independence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To help my child/children get ready to go to school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accessing support services available (e.g. specialist equipment, play therapy)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
So that I can have a break	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
So I/we can get out of the house	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

There is a different reason behind using childcare for my child/children:

7. How important were the following sources of information in helping you reach a decision for the care of your child/children?					
	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Of little importance	Unimportant
The recommendation of a friend/family member	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The recommendation of my health visitor/midwife	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information/advertisement from a flyer or	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

leaflet (in local community or online)					
My own research e.g. through their website, Ofsted.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Something else was important:

---

8. To what extent do you agree that the following factors were important in choosing between the different childcare settings available?

	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Of little importance	Unimportant
A good rating through Ofsted	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Flexibility around my working hours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We can walk there	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Location, easy to get to	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Good resources and equipment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A good outdoor environment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A friendly and welcoming atmosphere	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My 'gut instinct'	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Specialist services available for me/my child (e.g. specialist equipment/play therapy)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Specialist support available for me (e.g. parent classes)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Something else was important:

---

9. When you first started using [setting name] did you have any concerns?

No ☐

Yes ☐ (continue below)

To what extent do you agree that the following reflect your concerns when you first started using [setting name]?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My child's happiness	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
That the staff would not look after my child as I would like	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
That it might be unfriendly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
That I/my child might be judged or discriminated against	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The financial costs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child's safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Something else has been difficult:

10. Have you ever experienced any difficulties in using [setting name]?					
No ☐					
Yes ☐ (continue below)					
To what extent do you agree that the following have been difficulties you have faced whilst using [setting name]?					
	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
Costs and fees	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Communication/relationships with staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Expectations for me as a parent (e.g. homework tasks, volunteering)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child being separated from me/other parent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making sure my child is being cared for	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Making sure my child is given a good standard of early education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I had a different concern:					

11. Have you used any of the following services here or at another childcare setting?	
	Please tick
Baby/toddler groups or classes, e.g. baby massage, baby sensory class, dancing, music and rhyme	☐
An educational class or programme such as chatter babies or baby signing	☐
Stay and play sessions	☐
Specialist support for my child, e.g. speech and language therapy, physical therapy	☐
Specialist support for me, e.g. language classes, social parent groups, employment advice, parenting classes	☐
Another service:	

About your child at home

1. To what extent do you agree that the following statements are a reflection of your family life at home?					
	Strongly agree	**Agree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Disagree**	**Strongly disagree**
We have a relaxed approach taking each day as it comes, e.g. few fixed activities, meal and bedtimes when child seems hungry or tired.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We have a very regular routine and generally stick to this, e.g. set activities, meals, bedtimes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We have some routine but like to be flexible, e.g. some routine activities, some flexibility in meal and bedtimes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would describe it in a different way:					

2. Which do you think is the most important learning environment for your child?	Please tick
The home (and out and about)	☐
[setting name]	☐
I think the home and [setting name] are equally important learning environments	☐

3. How often does your child take part in the following at <u>home</u> and <u>out and about</u>?	Every day	Most days	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Once a month	Never
We talk together	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We learn to name objects around the house/out and about by pointing and naming	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We share story books	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They/we play outside	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They play with other children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They help me with different jobs (e.g. cooking, shopping)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We go to different places I think they will find interesting (e.g. the library, a café, the park)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They do 'messy play' (e.g. art and creative activities like cutting, sticking, painting, sand, water play, play-dough)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They watch/play with educational games or programmes on the T.V/tablet/computer	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We sing and learn nursery rhymes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We practice colours, shapes and numbers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
We practice recognising letters, words and making sounds	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. When you think about the activities in the previous question, to what extent do you agree that the following statements are a reflection of why you do these activities?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My child finds them fun/stimulating	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My research shows me it's important for my child's development, e.g. from books I've read, information online, baby/toddler apps.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I found out they were important from friends/family members	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have been advised through professionals or the information they have provided me with, e.g. leaflets from my health visitor, that these activities are important	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do them because of my 'instinct' or 'gut feeling' as a parent	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have learnt through [setting name] or another childcare setting that these activities are important	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do them for another reason:					

5. To what extent do you agree that the following factors might limit you from doing the activities above regularly at home?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My working hours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I need to have 'me time'	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My responsibilities looking after my child's other siblings	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child already gets plenty of opportunity to do these at [setting name]/another child care setting	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I need to have time with my partner	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My responsibilities at home e.g. laundry, cooking	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do them for another reason:					

6. When you think about how [setting name] helps you to help your child learn and develop, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Not satisfied, I would like more support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am satisfied, I receive everything I need for me and my child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I did not expect to receive any support here, I would go elsewhere for support if I needed it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

7. If you had a concern about child's development, to what extent do the following statements reflect the approach that you *think* you would take?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I would speak to a friend/family member for advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would wait for my child to start school and see what their teacher said	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would do some research (e.g. online)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would talk to my health visitor or G.P.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would speak to someone at [setting name] for advice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would do something else:					

8. When you think about your child's development to what extent do you agree that the following statements reflect your concerns as a parent?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My child's social behaviour (e.g. how they interact with other children)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child's speech, (e.g. how they communicate, pronounce sounds and links words together)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

My child's awareness of letters or text like being able to recognise the letters in their name	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child's recognition of numbers, colours and shapes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child's physical skills (e.g. walking, being able to ride a bike, feeding themselves, potty training)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Another area concerns me:					

9. If you were to receive information or support about an area of your child's learning, to what extent do you agree that the following would be <u>helpful</u> and <u>useful</u>?	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
A leaflet, information sheet or book on the subject	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being directed to a practical class at the pre-school on the subject with my child	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Being directed to or told about a website or online forum	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Open evenings/talk or presentation at pre-school on the subject					
A one on one chat at pre-school with someone who knows me and my child					
Someone coming out to visit me at home to talk with					
I would find something else helpful:					

About you

Age					
Gender					
Marital status *please tick*	Married	Living with partner	Living alone, in a relationship	Living alone	Living with friend(s) or family member(s) ☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	
Do you have a disability or long term health problem? (please explain)					
Does your child have a disability or long term health condition? (please explain)					

1. What is your ethnicity?	Tick
White: British	
White: Other	
Black: Caribbean	
Black: African	
Asian: Indian	
Asian: Pakistani	
Asian: Bangladeshi	
Asian: Chinese	
Mixed: Black	

Mixed: Asian	
Other:	

2. Language		
What is your first language?		
Would you describe yourself as a confident speaker of English? *Please circle*	Yes	No
Would you describe yourself as confident in reading/writing English? *Please circle*	Yes	No
What language(s) do you speak at home? *Please list*		

3. Employment status	Tick YOU	Tick PARTNER
Full time parent		
In full time employment		
In part time employment		
On maternity/paternity leave from employment		
Not currently employed		
Seeking employment		
Unable to work (health reasons)		
Full time student		

4. What is your highest educational qualification? E.g. BTEC, GCSE, A-Level, Degree	
You:	Your partner:

6. Is there anyone currently in paid work in your home? Yes ☐   No☐ (if yes, please go to Q.7)

7. Is the main wage earner in your family:

An employee   ☐

      How many people work for the employer?   1 to 24 ☐   25+☐
      Do you/they supervise other people?   Yes   ☐   No☐

Self-employed/freelance without employees ☐

Self-employed with employees   ☐

      How many people do you/they employ   1 to 24 ☐   25+☐
      Do you/they supervise other people?   Yes   ☐   No ☐

8. What best describes the sort of work the main wage earner does? *Please tick one box*	Tick
Semi-routine manual and service occupation such as: *postal worker – machine operative – security guard – caretaker – farm worker – catering assistant – receptionist – sales assistant*	
Technical and craft occupation such as: *motor mechanic – fitter – inspector – plumber – printer – tool maker – electrician – gardener – train driver*	
Senior managers or administrator (usually responsible for planning, organising and co-ordinating work, and for finance) such as: *finance manager – chief executive*	
Clerical and intermediate occupation such as: *secretary – personal assistant – clerical worker – office clerk – call centre agent – nursing auxiliary – nursery nurse*	
Modern professional occupation such as: *teacher – nurse – physiotherapist – social worker – welfare officer – artist– musician – police officer (sergeant or above) – software designer*	

THANK YOU!

Thank you for completing this questionnaire! Would you consider talking to Sophie the researcher in more detail? The chat would take no longer than an hour and could take place at your childcare setting, your home or mine. Please leave your details below, you would be thanked with a £10 ASDA supermarket voucher!

My name_____

My contact details_____

Alternatively, you can contact Sophie using the contact details on the front page. *(please remember your details will not be used anywhere in the project)*

Appendix item 3: Interview questions for parents

Choosing the setting

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you came to use [name of setting], how and when you came to choose it for your child?

2. Did anyone, or anything encourage you to attend [name of setting], for example a special relationship you've had with a staff member?

3. Do you think [name of setting] is a positive place for parents and children, why do you think that?

Using the setting

4. Can you tell me how you felt when you first came to [name of setting]?

5. Would you say that most of the parents using [name of setting] are local parents? Do you feel you have something in common with the other parents here?

6. What have you found most useful about [name of setting]?

Parenting

7. What services here or elsewhere, have you used for your children?

8. What is your favourite part of being a parent, how do you most enjoy spending time with your child?

9. What is the hardest part of parenting? Would you say it is harder to be a parent now than in the past? Why is that?

10. Do you think mums and dads have different responsibilities as parents?

11. How could [name of setting] support you more as a parent?

Child's development

12. Do you do anything to help your child learn at home or when out and about? Why do you do that? e.g. reading, colours, shapes, letters, numbers, singing, 'flash cards', online games, educational programmes on tablet/pc/tv

13. Where do you get most of the information about your child's development? e.g. friends, other parents, childcare setting, professionals, online

14. Has [name of setting] helped you to be more confident helping your child, can you tell me about that?

Support from setting

15. Have you ever been given any/directed to any resources by [name of setting] to help your child learn at home? Did you find them helpful? e.g leaflets, posters, free reading books, names of websites/online games

16. Can you recall a time where you spoke to a professional at [name of setting] about the development of your child? How did you find that?

17. If you had a concern about your child's development, do you think someone here could help you?

Involvement in setting

18. Can you tell me about how you've been involved in [name of setting], any special events you've attended or information evenings? Did you enjoy them or find them useful?

19. What kind of information do you receive from [name of setting] about your child's development? e.g. daily diary, verbal feedback, parents evening

20. Is there anything that [name of setting] is not currently doing to support parents in helping their children learn that you would find helpful? What kind of support would be useful?

Appendix Item four: Interview Questions for professionals

Local area

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your role here and your professional background?

2. Where do you think most of the parents using [name of setting] come from, would you say most of the parents here are local?

3. Could you say something about the main characteristics of your parent group?

4. How would you describe the development, generally, of the children here?

Parent's care choices

5. As a professional, how do you want parents to feel when they first come here?

6. What do you think is the most important thing about [name of setting] for children and parents?

7. Can you tell me what you think parents need and want from a setting like this?

Parenting

8. What do you think the parents here at [name of setting] find hardest about being parents? Do you think it is harder to be a parent now than in the past?

9. Do you think mums and dads have different responsibilities as parents?

Involving parents/sharing information

10. How do you share information with parents about their children's learning and development? e.g. development diaries, learning journeys, parent evenings

11. What kind of things do you do to involve parents here at [name of setting]?

12. Do you offer any special services or events for parents? Can you tell me about them?

Home Learning

13. Do you think generally that parents here at [name of setting] take steps to help their children's learning and development, why do you think they do that?

14. What kind of things do you think parents should be doing to help their children learn when at home, or out and about? Why do you think this?

15. Do you think parents should be doing more to support their children's learning, why do you think that they don't do more?

Parental partnerships

16. Do you think it is your responsibility to help parents?

17. Do you think helping parents support their children's learning is reflected in the EYFS and through the requirements of OFSTED, could you tell me a bit about your experience or knowledge of this?

18. On a whole, do you think parents want and appreciate your support?

19. Do you think some parts of parenting should be private? e.g discipline, lifestyle, diet

20. Do you find some parents difficult to engage with, can you tell me a bit about that? Have you overcome any of these issues?

21. What do you enjoy most about working with parents, what is the biggest challenge?

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