

# **Ethical Sensemaking in Childcare Practice:**

Applying care ethics and practice theory  
to early years provision in the UK

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## Declaration of Authorship

I, Zoe Raven, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Zoe Raven

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## Abstract

The UK early years sector is facing an ongoing ethical challenge of balancing quality with affordability and accessibility, with a workforce that is underqualified, undervalued and underpaid. The purpose of my research is to identify the factors which facilitate or deter ethical practice, from macro to micro levels. The feminist ethics of care perspective provides insights into the historic underappreciation of the practice of childcare, and the valorisation of education over care, and I combine this with practice theory to examine the phenomenological experience of providing childcare, providing insights into the nature of ethical childcare practice.

Using data from interviews of a purposive sample of leaders and practitioners from early years organisations across England, and supplemented with field notes and diary entries, I examine the facilitating factors, or barriers, for embedding ethical practice in early years settings. Key findings of the research are, firstly, that ethical childcare practice is inhibited by the current underfunding and marketisation of the sector, and that organisational purpose affects the inclusivity of childcare provision. An ethics of care evaluative framework exposes the unintended consequences of political or business decisions. Secondly, using practice theory, I evaluate the agency of individuals, highlight the importance of routine dynamics and sociomateriality and demonstrate the embodied nature of childcare practice. Thirdly, by combining the ethics of care and practice theory I develop the concept of ethical sensemaking to create a model of embodied ethical sensemaking, demonstrating how ethical sensegiving can be used by leaders and practitioners to raise awareness of ethical issues in childcare settings, and how these can then be embedded in embodied ethical practice.

My argument is that an ethics of care perspective is needed throughout the early years sector, from government and organisational policies through to care routines and practices within early years settings. Ethical sensemaking and sensegiving can provide a way to evaluate and instil high quality care in daily routines and practices, and embodied ethical sensemaking can help to embed ethical childcare practice in early years settings.

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# Chapter One Introduction and Context

## 1.1 The Research Purpose

### 1.1.1 The research problem

It is not easy, at present, to provide ethical childcare in the UK, as I will explain in this thesis. By childcare, I mean early years care and education for infants and children below school age, which caters for the needs of working families. By ethical childcare, I mean high quality provision that is also affordable, and accessible to all, and which supports the development of, and doesn't exploit, the early years workforce. Childcare provision in the UK is heavily marketized, with day nurseries offering high quality care and early years education becoming increasingly unaffordable or inaccessible to many families. Childcare practice is undervalued, and early education and childcare provision is underfunded. In addition, the early years workforce is experiencing a crisis of low morale, declining levels of qualifications, and severe recruitment difficulties, which all have a potentially negative impact on quality.

The purpose of this research is to explore the underpinning factors that facilitate or hinder the provision of ethical early years practice. I use an ethics of care perspective, combined with practice theory, to examine whether and how macro to micro levels of purpose and intent, professional identities and other factors such as resources and environments may affect quality and inclusivity in day nurseries. In doing so, I make a contribution to ethics of care literature as well as to practice theory and offer practical insights into the ways in which ethical childcare practice can be facilitated in UK day nurseries through a process of ethical sensegiving and sensemaking, and I extend this to propose a model of embodied ethical sensemaking.

Within the early years sector there is generally a consensus over what constitutes high quality in meeting the developmental needs of children in a nurturing and happy environment. I would add to this that ethical high-quality childcare prioritises the child's needs above everything else and is available for all families. The 'everything else' might include economic drivers such as the desire to make a profit, convenience (for managers, practitioners, parents or parents' employers) and 'all families' means making the childcare universally accessible and affordable. The ethical perspective also means that no-one should be exploited, particularly practitioners and families,

and I endorse the premise that childcare provision outside the home is a necessity for many families to allow parents to work.

### 1.1.2 Why it's important

The benefits of high-quality childcare have been recognised for many years, both in the UK (F. Field, 2010; Allen, 2011a; Tickell, 2011; Mathers et al., 2014) and across the world (OECD, 2006). The particular importance of high-quality childcare for children from disadvantaged backgrounds has also been extensively studied (Melhuish, 2004; F. Field, 2010). Childcare is also recognised as “the single most important driver of the gender pay and labour market participation gap” (Abid, 2021). There is increasing recognition of the importance of consistent, responsive caregiving for children’s emotional development, which in turn affects cognitive development (Gerhardt, 2004), but high-quality provision is often only accessible and affordable for affluent families, due to the marketisation of the sector (Lloyd & Penn, 2013). While large corporate chains of nurseries dominate the market, small providers struggle to be financially sustainable, and the early years workforce lacks professional status and adequate remuneration, which has led to a recruitment crisis (Lloyd, 2018). This in turn has a negative impact on the ability of a nursery to provide continuity and consistency in staffing. Government funding policy is also failing the poorest children (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019; Ofsted, 2016).

This inequality is partly due to inadequate investment, and partly due to the funding model being dependent on market mechanisms. This is intended to give parents choices as consumers of a service but has had the unintended consequence of a “Matthew effect” (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018) of accumulated advantage, in that more affluent families benefit more than families with lower incomes. There is also a lack of understanding of the complexity of practice in early years care, particularly of the youngest children in nurseries, and of the way in which national and organisational policies have an impact on the quality of childcare. I contend that education is valorised over care, and that the assumption that care is part of education ignores the “basic question of whether nurseries should be modelled on the intimacy and spontaneity of family interactions or the more professional and planned interactions of school” (Elfer, 2007, p. 169). It also ignores the fact that “care and education not only have different

antecedents, but have different underpinning ideologies arising from those different histories” (Sims, 2014, p. 4).

The inequalities in provision and the lack of understanding and appreciation of childcare practice are symptomatic of a wider undervaluing of care in society, and in this research I aim to explore and understand the value of embedding ethics of care in childcare provision. In doing so, I consider the relative power influences within early years organisations to understand how these impact on individual agency and I unpick the granular detail of childcare as a situated practice to illuminate the influences and draw attention to its tacit and hidden aspects. Using practice theory, I aim to “make the hidden obvious” (Noblit & Hare, 1988), and to challenge the historic assumption of childcare being naturally a woman’s role. More equal parenting roles would improve the lives of working women, and the gender imbalance within the early years workforce may contribute to the stereotyping of caring roles (Van Laere et al., 2014). I will draw out the links between these disparate issues of social justice and hope to demonstrate that they could all be improved if an ethics of care was to be adopted more widely in society.

### 1.1.3 What is known

Research has already been done on the benefits of high quality early years education (OECD, 2006; Mathers et al., 2014), the problems of government underfunding and marketisation (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), and the need for more attention to an ethics of care (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993), including within the early years sector (Goldstein, 1998; Rosen, 2019; Taggart, 2019). The problems facing the workforce are also well documented (Bonetti, 2020; Lloyd, 2018) as is ‘schoolification’, whereby education is valorised over care (Van Laere et al., 2012). Less attention has been paid to the influences on care practices themselves within the early years sector. The ethics of care has been applied to other sectors, particularly health and social care, (Cloyes, 2002; Molterer et al., 2019; Sevenhuijsen, 2003) but although there have been numerous discussions about the ethics of care in relation to education, (Langford, 2019) these have been primarily in relation to schools rather than settings offering childcare to very young children. Practice theory and routine dynamics have similarly developed insights into practice and routines in a variety of sectors, (Feldman,

Pentland, D'Adderio, et al., 2021; Nicolini, 2012a) but these have rarely been used as a theoretical perspective on early years practice.

By applying the ethics of care and practice theory perspectives to the problems outlined above, I make both theoretical and practical contributions, and hope that some elements of these will have wider relevance, offering potential research opportunities in other fields. In doing so, I use and extend the paradigm of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), both within the research process and as a way of understanding the process of how, and whether, ethical intentions influence early years practice, as experienced and described by research participants.

#### 1.1.4 The research driver

My personal quest began as an attempt to answer the question of whether not-for-profit organisations were more likely to provide ethical childcare than the corporate nursery chains. Having worked in the sector for over thirty years, in both private and not-for-profit organisations, I had encountered an increasing number of practitioners who had chosen to move from the large chains to smaller nurseries, and often to those operated by charitable social enterprises. Their stated reasons centred on a perception that the corporate nurseries seemed to be, in their words, “all about the numbers, not the children” and I was curious to understand the practical implications of such a statement.

I wanted to explore if and how for-profit key performance indicators (KPIs) in the corporate settings could really make a difference to childcare practice. I knew that there was a complex range of types of settings, with operators in private, voluntary and state-funded (maintained) settings, with very different motivations and forms of governance. I also knew that there wasn't a clear correlation between quality and the type of setting, and wanted to understand what factors made a difference. Most early years literature focused on practice rather than organisational factors, and usually focused on state-funded provision, with very little examining ethical issues in early years settings, and particularly those that provide full day care for working families. In wanting to understand the drivers behind ethical practice in day nurseries, I realised that this was an area that had not yet been explored.



### 1.1.5 The research question

My research question, then, is to ask what are the factors that influence the extent to which early years childcare is provided in an ethical way? This can be broken down into three parts. Firstly, at the macro level:

- What impact do government policies have on the ability of early years organisations to provide ethical childcare?

Secondly, at the meso level of the sector and early years organisations:

- What are the organisational factors that influence the extent to which early years organisations are able to offer ethical childcare provision?

Finally, at the micro level of individuals:

- Within the agency of individuals in early years organisations, what determines the extent to which decision-making and practice is ethical?

The ultimate aim of these questions is to discover how ethical practice can be embedded in early years settings.

Each of these questions inevitably overlap, with some factors having an impact at different levels. The focus is therefore on unpicking the strands of influence, recognising that there is less likely to be a causal sequence that determines the ethical nature of provision than a combination of factors which may either facilitate or hinder the effective implementation of ethical intentions.

## 1.2 The Theoretical Lens

### 1.2.1 The Ethics of Care

The ethics of care is a feminist moral theory which has been developed in different disciplines, including psychology, education, philosophy and politics (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Ruddick, 1989; Tronto, 1993) and its relevance for the early years sector has been increasingly recognised (Goldstein, 1998; Langford, 2019; Rosen, 2019; Taggart, 2019). In the next chapter I will explain in more detail the ways in which care ethics provide an appropriate theoretical framework for my research, but the

rationale is threefold. Firstly, the focus on the role of women as primary carers addresses an ongoing feminist challenge, which is still very relevant in a sector where 98% of the workforce is female, (Bonetti, 2019). Despite an increasing recognition in many societies that childcare is an issue for working families, not just for mothers, women still shoulder a disproportionate amount of childcaring responsibilities. The ethics of care recognises the relation of power and care, both in the allocation of responsibility and also the implementation of care practices. Secondly, the phenomenological focus on the relationality of care practices is particularly helpful in the analysis of embodied, tacit knowledge and skills (Hamington, 2004). Finally, it recognises both the vital importance of care, and the ways in which the concept of care spans the macro to micro levels of analysis, from the political, social and organisational, down to individual relationships and acts of caring practice. As (Seigfried, 1996) put it “there is something about caring that ought to be central to values systems.”

### 1.2.2 Practice Theory

As I will explain in the next chapter, the ethics of care provides an alternative concept to the rationalist ethics of justice, and similarly, practice theory offers a “practical rationality” as an alternative to scientific rationality (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). It stems from a relational ontology, which I will discuss in chapter three, and is based on an existential ontology which presupposes that we are always immersed in specific sociomaterial practice worlds (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). This research is situated within the practice world of childcare, and primarily of day nurseries, and I will use concepts from practice theory and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to unpick and explore whether and how ethical intentions can be embedded in childcare organisations. In taking a phenomenological approach, I will examine the ways in which childcare practice, particularly in terms of providing physical care, is also embodied, and intuitive (Hamington, 2004; Noddings, 1984). By ‘zooming in’ to the micro details of practice and ‘zooming out’ to meso and macro levels of analysis (Nicolini, 2009b) I hope to shed light on how ethical intentions, or other motivations, are accomplished within specific daily routines in nurseries, and also on how organisational or sector-wide policies facilitate, constrain or impede those intentions.

### 1.2.3 Pragmatic Feminism

Pragmatism “values the primacy of practice, the importance of experience, and an acceptance of fallibilism” and feminism “views women’s lives as important sites of knowledge and seeks to transform society towards social justice” (Bardwell-Jones & Hamington, 2012, pp. 1–2). There are a variety of different interpretations of feminism, but I consider a pragmatic feminist approach appropriate for this research. Context, experience, the relationship of politics and values, the production of knowledge and an emphasis on diversity and a dialogue with the community are described by Bardwell-Jones and Hamington as key commitments of feminist pragmatism, and the relationality of this approach “argues that we cannot split the private world of the home from the public world of the political” (Thayer-Bacon, 2012, p. 146). This recognition of the inseparability of the public and private in early years care and education is at the heart of this research, which bridges the range of childcare practices from maternal care to commercial provision.

### 1.2.4 Ethical Sensemaking

In the course of the research, it became apparent to me that a process of sensemaking in organisations (Weick, 1995) was taking place within early years settings, in two different types of circumstances. Firstly, in response to situations where practitioners were unable to carry out childcare practices in a way that they felt was in the child’s best interests, and secondly, when the ethical aspect of a particular practice was highlighted or challenged. The Covid-19 pandemic also provided a more typical example of an unplanned event that would naturally give rise to sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). During the analysis of influences on ethical practices, the concept of ethical sensemaking began to emerge, and I will expand on this in reference to specific empirical examples. It is also an example of how the ethics of care and practice theory can usefully be combined, as my interpretation of ethical sensemaking is based on the conjunction of these two perspectives.

## 1.3 The Research Context

### 1.3.1 The UK Childcare Sector

Day nurseries are the most commonly used form of childcare for pre-school children (Department for Education, 2019) and the childcare market as a whole is worth an estimated £5.5 billion (Simon et al., 2020a). The market is dominated by corporate chains in terms of the number of places, but single site operators (often owner-managed) have the largest number of settings, albeit with fewer places overall, as they tend to be smaller. There has been a gradual increase in the average size of nurseries, and in what is perceived by operators to be a financially viable number of places, and the impact of size is one of the factors considered in the research study. The sector is heavily regulated, primarily by Ofsted, with statutory requirements for physical space, staff ratios, and the quality of care and education (Department for Education, 2021b). Families use nurseries for both childcare and for early education, but non-working parents often use sessional care provided by voluntary pre-schools. The focus for this research is on settings which provide childcare for working parents, either full- or part-time, and from the end of maternity leave to school starting age. The scope of the research is the United Kingdom, but the empirical data are almost wholly from early years settings in England, as funding and curriculum guidance is devolved to the individual nations.

The workforce is predominantly female, (Bonetti, 2019) with problems in recruitment and retention, which are partly due to low pay and high work demands (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). Childcare has historically been seen as a career choice for less academic females, an issue that has continued to frustrate early years professionals, particularly those with graduate qualifications. The status of the profession is also of concern, with the most common reason for wanting to leave the early years sector in a recent survey being “Feeling undervalued by government” at 77% (Early Years Alliance, 2021, p. 5), which was cited more highly than poor pay, and was probably a direct result of the way many in the early years sector felt taken for granted during the Covid-19 pandemic. As one survey respondent commented “The early years sector is to education what the care homes are to the NHS. We were left hung out to dry” (ibid. p. 11).

## Organisation types in the childcare sector

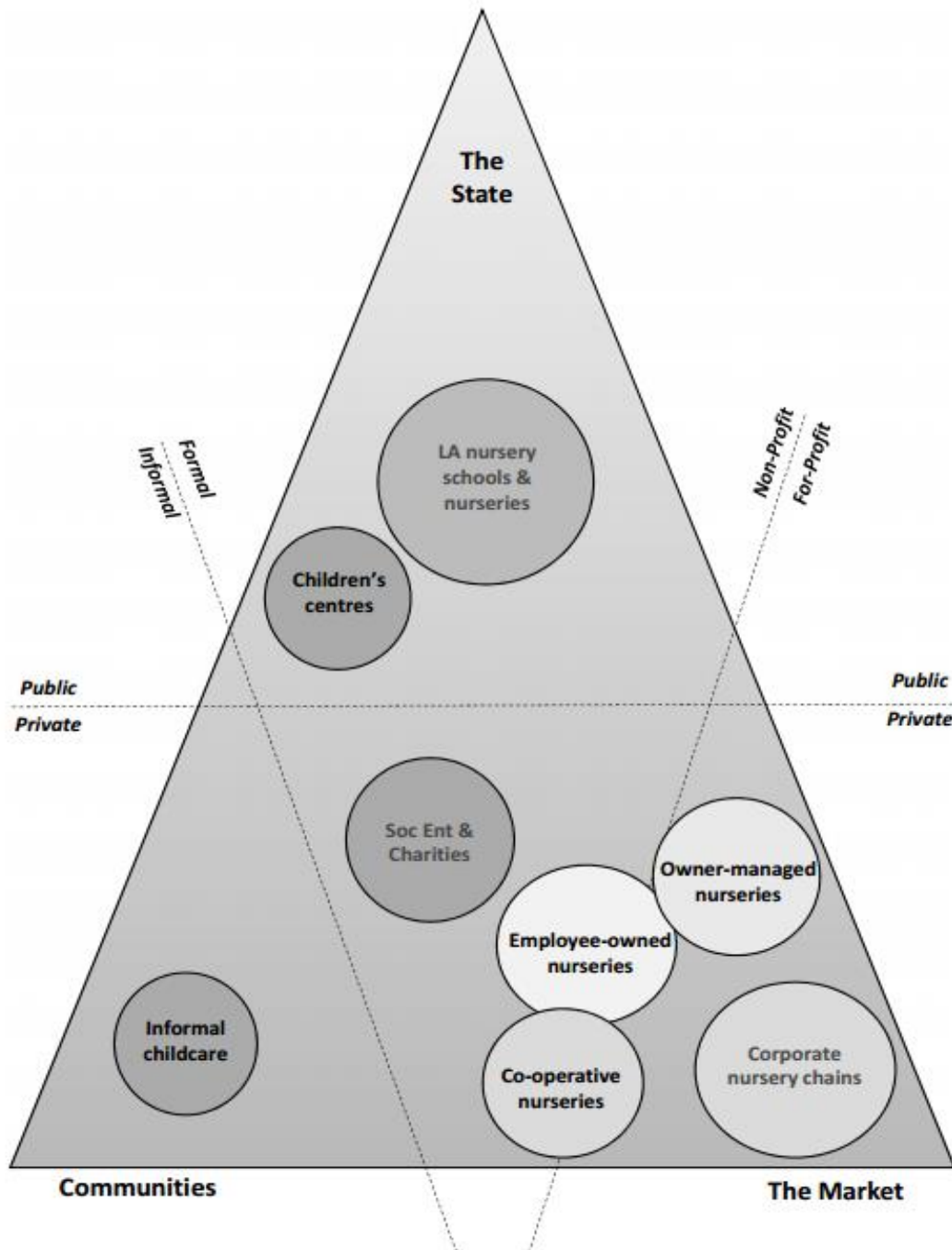


Figure 1 Organisation types in the childcare sector, adapted from a diagram created by the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2016, p. 30)

### 1.3.2 Government Policy & Funding

The UK government has increasingly recognised the importance of early years care and education and has responded with increased public spending and a significant rise in policy attention. In the early 1990s, early years spending was less than £100 million in 2018-19 prices, and in 2020 it was estimated that government funding for early years totalled £5.6 billion (Simon et al., 2020a). Originally supply-side, (direct funding of childcare services) funding transitioned into demand-side mechanisms, (mainly in subsidies to parental fees) and a reliance on markets to provide sufficient childcare places. Currently, all children in England aged over three are entitled to 15 hours (term-time) of funded early years education, and working parents may be eligible for an extended entitlement of 30 hours (Department for Education, 2016). A recent report by the Sutton Trust concluded that this extended entitlement “may be contributing to the recent widening in the attainment gap, by doubly advantaging the better off with additional hours” (The Sutton Trust, 2021, p. 5). The poorest children are given greater access to funded places at the age of two, but then have less funded hours at the age of three, if their parents do not work, or work sufficient hours, to claim the 30 hour entitlement.

Availability and affordability do not necessarily make provision accessible to all, (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014) as for poor and immigrant families there may also be practical barriers. These may include a lack of flexible opening hours for families on unpredictable, zero hours contracts, a lack of knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, or language barriers. The issue of quality in the early years sector is also contentious, with data suggesting that settings in deprived areas being more likely to be judged of low quality (Ofsted, 2016). Government policies have an emphasis on sufficiency rather than quality, and although it is widely recognised that the qualification level of the workforce is a key factor, recent research suggests that this is deteriorating (Archer & Merrick, 2020). A previous Labour government had an aspiration for every early years setting to have a graduate leader by 2017, but this was quietly shelved by the following administration when the Graduate Leader Funding was discontinued (Mathers et al., 2011). The attainment gap between more and less advantaged children has increased

in recent years, and has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, (The Sutton Trust, 2021).

### 1.3.3 Childcare, Education, and Schoolification

The rhetoric of narrowing the attainment gap often presents early years care and education as a panacea (Allen, 2011a) but as I will explain in the next chapter, terminology in the early years sector can also reinforce an insidious privileging of education and an undervaluing of the critical caring role for children. This has historic roots, and education has always been reliant on public funding, whereas childcare is largely seen as a service to be provided by the market, with working parents as the consumers. There are enormous and ongoing ramifications of the dual purpose of early years settings, in offering both early education to prepare children for formal schooling, and childcare to cover the working day. Although there is clearly scope for these to be integrated, I will explore the impact of the valorisation of education over care, which has been increasingly recognised in recent years (Sims, 2014; Taggart, 2016; Van Laere et al., 2012).

### 1.3.4 Terminology

As is common in any sector, early years practitioners share a professional vocabulary, and my immersion in the sector was a significant advantage in conducting interviews, as I was able to fully understand accounts of practice without needing clarification. I was aware that interpretations of some early years concepts may vary, but these were usually clarified naturally as interviews progressed, particularly when examples were given. This research sits within organisational studies rather than early years, however, and I therefore need to clarify and explain the terminology that I will use throughout the thesis. Firstly, I will use 'early years' and 'childcare' as generic terms for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), encompassing early education as well as childcare. I will use the word 'care' when discussing childcare practices which are specifically focused on a child's physical and emotional needs, rather than having an educative focus. The age range of 'early years' is commonly considered to be birth to eight years, but as I am focusing on day nurseries, the age range for this research is primarily around six months to four years. Within that age range I will refer to infants as generally being the youngest group within a nursery (usually up to around 18

months), toddlers generally around two years of age, and pre-school children in the three-to-four-year age range. In the UK, children usually start school in the Autumn term following their fourth birthday. Some of the settings (a commonly used term for all early years providers) included in the research also ran school-age childcare provision, so occasionally there are references to older children, and 'forest school' as a term may refer to an activity offered within early years provision, or to a wholly outdoor setting (Maynard, 2007).

The terminology of gender is increasingly contested, and many earlier research documents refer to mothers and maternal in ways which now seem stereotypical and reductive. I will discuss in more detail the challenge of addressing the gender imbalance in the workforce and in parental engagement, and, for the sake of a smoother reading experience, I will use the word 'gender' when discussing the imbalance in the workforce, which is predominantly female, even though I am aware that any comparison of the sexes is an inextricable mix of biological sex and social gender constructions (Fine, 2017). For the sake of fluency, I will also use the term 'parents' to include carers, who may be non-familial. Practice is a word with multiple definitions, and 'early years practice' is commonly used to describe the actions and methods used by adults in early years settings to care for and to educate children, with a general accepted version of 'best practice' taught in vocational training courses and monitored and regulated by Ofsted. It is also sometimes contrasted with theoretical approaches – 'in practice' referring to what really happens, as opposed to the ideal; theory in use, as opposed to theory espoused (Argyris & Schon, 1974). In the next chapter, I will explain my choice of the ethics of care as a lens through which to examine the practice of childcare.

The evolution of different names for roles in the early years sector, from nursery nurses to educators, illustrates the attempts to shift societal perceptions of childcare. The abbreviation of the National Nursery Examination Board, NNEB, was a long-standing qualification for what were usually termed 'Nursery Nurses.' The association of infant care with nursing stems from the welfare origins of childcare, and a minority of nurseries still have 'matron' as a job title for those in charge. The change of name of the Pre-School Playgroup Association to the Pre-School Learning Alliance deliberately switched the emphasis from 'play' to 'learning.' They have since changed name again,



to the Early Years Alliance, reflecting their wider remit to represent all types of early years provision, not just the traditional sessional pre-schools. Some early years providers have recently campaigned for the use of ‘teachers’ as an attempt to raise the status of early years qualifications, but I am adopting the commonly used term practitioner to refer to the adults working in early years settings.

The different levels of qualifications have a range of titles, so I will usually refer to them by their level. Level two is a qualified nursery assistant, with most practitioners then proceeding to a level three, which is the most widespread, and which allows practitioners to be given supervisory responsibilities (Department for Education, 2021b). Level fours are rare, as most practitioners progressing beyond the standard level three undertake a foundation degree, which is level five, and graduates (with relevant degrees) are level six. A few practitioners have masters degrees, which are level seven, but these are more commonly found in those involved in teaching or leading practice.

## 1.4 My Research Journey

### 1.4.1 My background

As mentioned above, I have worked in the early years sector for over thirty years, after originally training and working as a secondary school English teacher. My parents were involved in the sector throughout my childhood, with my mother running a pre-school, and then a nursery, and my father running a toy shop, which then became an educational supplies business. When I couldn’t find a nursery that I liked for my eldest daughter, my parents encouraged me to open my own, and my family and I moved into a converted Wesleyan chapel and lived upstairs for ten years, while I ran a nursery downstairs and learned the theory and practice of childcare and early years education. I then expanded the company into a group of eight nurseries before deciding that a private limited company was not an appropriate form for an organisation which had by then developed a cross-subsidy financial model, which meant that profitable nurseries in affluent locations were subsidising nurseries in areas of deprivation. I formed a charity, handed over control to the board of trustees, continued in the role of Chief Executive, and continued to grow the organisation, Acorn Early Years Foundation

(Acorn), which now has seventeen nurseries, several related early years services and provision, an annual turnover of £12m, and over 400 employees.

I had continued with my professional development, completing an MBA, and working as an associate lecturer with the Open University on their foundation degree in early years, and I became active in the sector, speaking at conferences, writing articles for sector magazines, and undertaking action research with my colleagues. The trigger for undertaking the PhD was a combination of the experience described above, which piqued my interest in the influence on childcare practice of organisational types of governance, and also the experience of giving evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee about the government plan to increase the funded entitlement (HouseofCommons, 2016). In preparing for the latter, I read the research that underpinned government policies, and was deeply concerned by its apparent lack of understanding of the sector, and, in my view, poor quality. I initially intended to focus on the impact of government policies, but then realised that a more enduring and potentially impactful research area would be to focus in on the range of influences on ethical practice, from macro to micro, and as I conducted my initial literature review, discovered the ethics of care and then at a later date, practice theory. I used my network within the sector to recruit a purposive sample of interviewees, and despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, succeeded in capturing first-hand accounts of ethical and unethical childcare practice, and the views of a range of participants about the significant influencing factors.

#### 1.4.2 My Research Paradigm and Methodology

My research stems from a relational ontology and epistemology, perhaps reflecting my immersion in the field of early learning, where social constructionism is a natural paradigm, emphasising the importance of socio-cultural influences on children's development. I also draw on different disciplines and take a post-structuralist perspective in some areas. A relational approach necessitates reflexivity and a moral awareness of the consequences of our words and actions, and this ethical emphasis is very appropriate for my research focus. It also naturally feeds into a relational methodology, adopting a social constructionist definition (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006), focusing on relational processes rather than the interrelations between individuals. This means that my research focus extends beyond the words

spoken in the interviews to explore other forms of socio-material communication within settings. The risk of this approach is the difficulty of pinning down specific insights and conclusions - the concept of relational knowledge has been called 'inescapably diffuse' (Eberle, 1995, p. 212). Phenomenological analysis enables insights into the development of organisational knowledge and culture and the relational dynamics of leadership and governance in early years settings.

My research strategy was to conduct interviews across a range of roles, within a range of types of early years settings. I initially intended to focus on fewer, representative organisations as case studies, but this strategy became problematic, due largely to the impact of the pandemic, and as I will explain in chapter four, I extended the scope to a wider range of settings, including some within my own organisation. My inductive approach also evolved into an abductive approach, as the iterative process of reading and re-reading my data led me back to the literature of sensemaking, which then informed the subsequent analysis.

#### 1.4.3 The Research Material

The data gathered for this research consist of transcribed interviews, notes of informal observations, personal diaries, and a range of information gathered from publicly available documents and social media. This includes grey material and research conducted by other organisations with related interests. The face-to-face interviews were recorded and then transcribed, and the interviews online were recorded with video as well as sound, which enabled a closer review of facial expressions and body language. In the visits to different settings I was also given guided tours, which proved very helpful to ascertain the quality of practice, as I perceived it, and of the environments in the settings, but also in observing the visual communication, the atmosphere, the culture of staff behaviours, and of the relationships between managers and their practitioners. Additional background research included examining Ofsted reports, company accounts and the participation of interviewees in sector issues, whether of funding or practice, in views expressed on social media, and published articles.

#### 1.4.4 Ethical Research Issues

Given the subject matter of my research, it was of critical importance that I maintained high ethical standards in the research process. I was also very aware that my position in the sector was both an advantage and a potential risk, particularly when it came to using data from my own organisation. Fortunately, I did not plan to use any direct observations, so it was relatively easy to gain informed consent from my participants, and I feel confident that at no point did I abuse my position of power or trust. That is not to say that ethical issues were not present, and I will explore these later in the methodology chapter. Ethics approval was also sought from and given by the university, both at the outset and also when a change in methods was necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 1.5 The Findings

#### 1.5.1 What I found

The findings from the interviews confirmed that there are a wide range of influences on the practice within early years settings, and disparate views on the relative importance of these. I found that interviewees' interest in aspects of ethical practice depended to a large extent on their roles, but that the auspices of their organisations, and their personal ethical code were seen by them as significant factors. In exploring the micro level of practice, I found differing levels of awareness of, and/or ability to articulate, the ways in which ethical codes affected practice, and I found that taking a practice theoretical approach to the data allowed an insight into the process of ethical sensemaking by research participants, and by myself, of how practice was influenced in terms of its ethicality. In terms of insights, I was particularly struck by the impact of training, professional development and of professional self-identity. I also gained a new appreciation of sociomaterial aspects of childcare practice and how an awareness of sociomateriality shed further insights into ethical practice. The tacit and embodied nature of ethical childcare also became increasingly obvious.

At the meso level of organisational influences, the research evidence demonstrated that a for-profit driver could have a negative impact ethically, but there was also plenty of evidence of highly ethical private, for-profit provision, and accounts of non-ethical practice in settings without significant financial drivers. Finally, at the macro level, I

found confirmation of the fundamental importance of the need for an ethic of care in government policies, and in wider societal views of parenting and childcare. I first organised the data thematically, and then took an iterative approach, revisiting each interview in the light of insights gained from a first reading, to further reflect on my findings. I also triangulated some of the evidence by examining social media posts, company records, and my own informal observations in the settings that I was able to visit pre-lockdown. My insights were primarily about the ways in which ethical intentions can influence practice most effectively, and about the ways in which non-ethical practice arises; not intentionally, but as a kind of ethical slippage, potentially illustrating the comment that “the sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good” (Arendt, 1978).

### 1.5.2 Theoretical Contribution

My research offers a theoretical contribution in three areas. Firstly, I demonstrate the relevance of the ethics of care to early years practice as an appropriate ethical lens through which to evaluate the influences on childcare practice. It also provides insights into the reasons for childcare being undervalued, and I demonstrate the direct links between care ethics and child-centred practice. It also provides an evaluative framework that spans all levels, from macro to micro. Secondly, using practice theory, I explore the granular detail of early years practice and reveal the tacit, intuitive, and embodied elements of ethical practice. Practice theory also provides an insight into the influence of sociomateriality and of routine dynamics. Thirdly, I develop the concept of ethical sensemaking, combining practice theory and the ethics of care to explore sensemaking processes at all levels, and I demonstrate how both sensemaking and sensegiving can influence the ethical nature of childcare practice. In particular, I develop the concept of embodied ethical sensemaking which provides an insight into the way in which ethical practice can become embedded, by being embodied.

### 1.5.3 Practical Contribution

The practical contribution that I offer with this research is threefold. Firstly, the insights into the ways in which policies impact on the quality of care, particularly in terms of inclusivity, which may be of interest to policy makers and ethically minded

organisations. Secondly, within organisations, the insights into ethical sensemaking, and the exploration of care practices will enable those responsible for developing quality in childcare within settings to have a greater understanding of both the importance of an ethic of care and the ways in which this can be successfully embedded in practice. Finally, those with an interest in training and developing early years practitioners will find practical insights in how ethical awareness can be nurtured through training, reflective practice, sensegiving, and an embedding of an ethics of care, particularly through an awareness of how ethical practice can become embodied.

## 1.6 The Thesis Structure

### 1.6.1 Overview

In the literature review in the next chapter I will focus on the ethics of care, why this is relevant to the early years sector, and how it has developed and can be applied. In chapter three, I will discuss theories of practice and sensemaking, and pragmatic feminism. In chapter four I will then explain the research methodology, before describing the findings of my empirical research in chapter five. Four chapters are then devoted to the analysis of these findings, beginning with intentionality and purposes in macro forces in chapter six. These will span socio-political drivers, organisational auspices and purposes, parental expectations, and practitioner motivations. In chapter seven I will explore the meso level of how purposes are translated into policy, and the impact of other influences. These include funding policies, regulatory influence, sector activism and communities of practice. Within organisations, I consider the relative influence of boards, managers, the agency of practitioners and parental influence. Chapter eight explores the way in which policies are translated into practice, and the role of routines and sensemaking. Sociomateriality, sensory experiences and embodiment also become a central focus. In chapter nine, I conclude the analysis by using the paradigm of ethical sensemaking to examine both the pro-ethical facilitators, and how these help to embed ethical practice, the barriers to ethical childcare, and the process of ethical slippage. In the final chapter I evaluate the findings and analysis and draw linkages and conclusions from the various insights gained during the research project. I propose a model of embodied ethical sensemaking, drawing together aspects of embodied care and sensemaking. I then offer a summary of the

theoretical and practical contributions resulting from my research, describe the limitations, and identify potential research opportunities for the future.

### 1.6.2 Zooming Out and Zooming In

In the literature review chapter, I begin with the micro level of the origins of the ethic of care in maternal practice, examine the contribution of practice theory and sensemaking, and then expand the perspective outwards to consider the organisational and macro levels of political caring. In the findings chapter, I also begin with the micro level of individuals, and then expand the perspective outwards. In the analysis chapters I then begin at the macro societal level, in order to understand the context, and then zoom in to the meso and micro level of analysis, to reveal actor dispositions and behaviours, (Howard-Grenville et al., 2016) before zooming out again in the discussion, in order to reveal and articulate the relatedness between the granular level of practice and the texture of interconnected practices, and practice networks, of the setting, the organisation and the sector. The metaphorical movement and framework of “zooming in” and “zooming out” of practice enables the repositioning of perspectives to foreground different aspects of practice and acknowledges the interconnectedness of different practices within childcare provision. Both the ethics of care and practice theory share a relational ontology, and a recognition that the “sequential selective re-positioning” involved in the zooming in and out (Nicolini, 2009b) enables different perspectives to be taken, enriching the understanding of what is involved in ethical childcare practice.

In this opening chapter, I have described the scope and intentions of my research and outlined the content of this thesis. I have begun the explanation of why this study is relevant and useful to the early years sector, and the rationale for my methodology. In the next chapter I will begin to explain why I believe care ethics and practice theory provide an appropriate theoretical framework for my research questions.

## Chapter Two Literature Review: Early Years and the Ethics of Care

### 2.1 Introduction

I will begin this literature review with the concept of ethical early years practice and why I believe it to be important. I will then discuss a range of literature from the ethics of care, or care ethics, using those terms interchangeably. I will explain why I believe this perspective is relevant and useful for my research, and will focus particularly on the ethics of care in relation to early years practice. I will trace its development through different disciplines, beginning with the maternal perspective, and will explain why that is relevant to the early years sector. I will then discuss the macro level of political and societal attitudes to care, and care at the sector and organisation level, and the debate about whether care by organisations is even possible. I will then consider the application of care ethics to the micro level of childcare practices.

The literature review will span a range of disciplines, from education, philosophy and psychology, to politics, economics, sociology, management and leadership. I will also examine evidence from grey literature, sector press and social media. While ranging widely across each of these fields, I am limiting my discussions to those areas most relevant for my research into the influences on ethical early years practice.

### 2.2 Ethical Early Years Practice, and the Relevance of the Ethics of Care

#### 2.2.1 Definitions

The term 'ethical' is generally taken to refer to morally 'right' behaviour and practices, and in the world of early years practice it is generally agreed that this means putting children's needs first. The principles of inclusion are embedded in early years practice, and ethical practice would ensure that children from all backgrounds, including those with disabilities, are given access to high quality early years education and care. My personal interpretation of ethical early years practice also extends to the issue of accessibility and affordability, in that I believe high-quality provision should be available to low-income families as well as affluent families. Within a nursery, I would deem it to be unethical, for example, for children from low-income families to miss out on freshly prepared hot meals or activities such as forest schools, which might be the



case if such things are only offered as optional extras. At the micro level of childcare practice there is also the potential for unethical practice if practitioners are insufficiently attentive and responsive to individual children's needs. My definition of ethical early years practice, then, is provision which prioritises the needs of children above the convenience of parents, practitioners, shareholders, and government targets. It also avoids exploiting practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders, including the wider needs of the community and the natural world, by adopting ethical employment practices, ethical charging practices, and environmentally sustainable working practices.

'Early Years' usually refers to the period from birth up to statutory school age, which in the UK is the term after a child's fifth birthday (Department for Education, 2018a). Early years education usually refers to the three-to-five-year age group, recognising that most children have their final year of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in a Reception class in a school. In terms of childcare, the age range extends to include school-age children, with Ofsted regulating provision for children up to eight years of age. There are several commonly used abbreviations in the sector: Early Childhood Education (ECE); Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), which is my preferred choice, as it places care before education. It is also the abbreviation adopted by UNESCO, who also refer to early childhood as the period from birth to eight years (UNESCO, 2021) and whose sustainable development goal includes the target 4.2: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education." (UN, 2021). A full glossary of early years terminology is included in appendix one.

### 2.2.2 Why it matters

There is widespread recognition of the benefits of early childhood education (Allen, 2011b; Mathers et al., 2014; OECD, 2006; Tickell, 2011) and also of its particular importance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Field, 2010; Melhuish, 2004). There is also increasing recognition that childcare and early education needs to go beyond the basic provision of keeping children safe and physically cared for, and that nurturing touch is "an essential requirement for social brain development" (Clark, 2020, p. 5). There is, for example, an acceptance that infants being bottle fed should

be held in a caring way, with eye contact and gentle words, and that feeding an infant without any communication, or, worse, by propping infants up to feed themselves, would be considered unacceptable and unethical.

The issue of inequality of access to high quality provision is increasingly acknowledged, with the government's own words stating "the uncomfortable truth...that although early education is better than it has ever been, it is still not benefiting our poorest children as much as their peers." (Ofsted, 2016, p. 3). Inadequate government funding, and the demand-side funding system are blamed by many (Burgess-Macey et al., 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Van Lancker, 2017) but the ability of practitioners to provide high quality care and education when recruitment, training and support are being adversely affected by financial pressures has also been identified as a significant factor (Bonetti, 2019; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Clark, 2020). There is a general consensus about what constitutes good practice at the micro level (Mathers et al., 2014), but less so at the organisational level, or how it can best be facilitated at the macro level, and I hope to demonstrate how the ethics of care provides a useful lens to examine these issues.

### 2.2.3 Autonomy and agency

In order to understand the drivers behind behaviour that might determine whether childcare practice is delivered in an ethical way, an understanding of how and whether employee behaviour can be controlled by leaders and managers is important, and this raises the issue of employee motivation. Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor, 1960) highlighted the importance of ethical employment practices and trust in order to harness intrinsic motivation, an attitude which is now mainstream (Handy, 1976, 1994) and taken by some much further along the continuum of greater autonomy and decision-making for employees (Semler, 1993). Autonomy and agency are important factors in ethical decision-making, and (Trevino, 1986), recognising the potential impact of the immediate job context, the organisational culture and of colleagues, proposed three variables which influence how consistent people are when faced with ethical dilemmas. Her interactionist model suggested that lower levels of confidence, independence and autonomy make people more susceptible to accepting unethical acts, and that whether staff members are encouraged to be involved in decision-making may influence how susceptible they are to being complicit in unethical

behaviour. Performance measures clearly also affect ethical decision-making, again reflecting organisational purpose and mission, and how the process of care is perceived will affect the status of practitioners, and potentially, therefore, their ability to uphold high ethical standards. The behaviour of individuals is “closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations” (Granovetter, 1985, p. 504) and this research explores the extent to which people behave in line with their roles and company policy, professional codes of practice, or as individuals with their own ethical values.

Within the education sector, autonomy is recognised as a critical aspect of child development, recognising that infants are born into a relationality that is critical both for their cognitive development and their social and emotional wellbeing. Early years professionals and care ethicists share a recognition that the development of a child’s independence does not change their fundamental need for caring relationships. From a wider perspective, there is no consensus on the meaning of autonomy (Willett, 2012) and it has been argued that “the myth of autonomy is a dangerous and deceptive myth that is a holdover from classical liberal’s assumption of individualism” (Thayer-Bacon, 2012, p. 146). For the purposes of this research, the issue of autonomy is the extent to which individual practitioners can be held responsible for the degree to which their childcare practice is ethical, and the debate about whether autonomy is compatible with relationality (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000), though fascinating, is not directly relevant for this research. What is relevant is the view of care ethicists that “autonomy and independence are about the capacity for self-determination rather than the expectation of individual self-sufficiency” (Williams, 2001) as this view, which will be explored in later chapters, arguably underpins ethical childcare practice.

#### 2.2.4 The relevance of care ethics for Early Childhood Care and Education

Care is both a practice and a value, which covers the personal and political realm (Held, 2006) and the ethics of care has a natural affinity with the world of childcare and of early years education. Children need to feel loved in order to be able to learn and develop effectively, (Gerhardt, 2004) and this might be framed as “care, concern and connection” (Martin, 1992), care as an attitude (Noddings, 2002), care as a moral practice (Tronto, 1993) or seen as a buzzword in education which neglects the complexity underlying the nature of the work involved (Goldstein, 1998). It is the underlying complexity which I hope to explore, unpicking what makes the difference

between ethical and unethical practice, and demonstrating the ethical importance of care in the early years sector, at all levels. A care perspective as a moral theory can have global relevance, with early years settings playing a role in the development of future generations. Caring can be “transformative” for children, and, it can be argued, feminist moral theory can be seen to “develop around the priority of the flourishing of children in favourable environments.”(Held, 1993, p. 87).

Apart from the importance of nurturing care and education for young children, the ethic of care, as a feminist moral theory, takes account of the needs of working mothers, and challenges the exploitation of a poorly paid, undervalued, largely female workforce in the sector. Moral issues are confronted constantly in the practice of childcare, and the relational approach of an ethic of care is the most appropriate perspective for examining the influences that make a difference in the care of children, and for their parents, the practitioners in the settings, and more widely, for society. In order to address the research question about what the facilitating factors or barriers to ethical childcare are, I need to adopt an ethical framework, and as well as the reasons already given, the ethics of care seems to me to be a natural choice for a feminist working within a sector that has care at the heart of its practice. It is also an ethic that has its roots in childcare, in maternal practice and maternal thinking.

#### 2.2.5 The history of early years theorists and their links to care ethics

Although this research sits within the school of business and management, it ranges across several disciplines, and the context is the early years care and education sector. It may therefore be helpful to outline key theorists from early years academic studies in order to clarify where they are themselves influenced by other thinkers and theorists. Table one, below, lists those I consider to be particularly influential on current early years thinking and practice. Of the eleven listed here, more than half are psychologists, reflecting the early interest in child development from a cognitive perspective, and of the educators, only the two women in the list were specifically interested in the early years age range. Theorists focusing specifically on early years care and education came later, but the training and development of early years practitioners usually covers the work of the theorists in this list. Some ideas, like Piaget’s stages of development, are now considered to be problematic, in not reflecting more recent neuroscientific discoveries, but others, such as Froebel and

Montessori, have seen a renewal of interest in recent years, with their pedagogies widely adopted within the early years sector. They also have a place within the development of maternal thinking, as I will explain below.

The table lists the key figures in the development of early years thinking, but in recent years there are a host of influential figures too numerous to list here. The thorny issue of quality in early years provision has been extensively explored, with two influential studies being the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project, known as the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) (Gardiner, 2018). All early years settings must comply with the standards set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Department for Education, 2021b), but the curriculum and pedagogy followed by individual settings is not prescribed, although aspects such as sustained shared thinking (Howard et al., 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) are widely recognised as important features of high quality provision.

*Table 1 Early Years Theorists*

<b>Name and dates</b>	<b>Nationality &amp; profession</b>	<b>Main ideas</b>
Friedrich Froebel (1782 – 1852)	German educator	Invented the kindergarten and believed that ‘play is the highest expression of human development in childhood’
John Dewey (1859 – 1952)	American philosopher, psychologist, pragmatist and educational reformer	Education as a process of living, schools as social institutions, and progressive, experiential learning
Margaret McMillan (1860 – 1931)	Scottish nursery school pioneer and activist	Campaigned to improve children’s health and education, including the provision of meals
Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925)	Austrian social reformer and	Spiritual-scientific ‘anthroposophy’ focusing on

	philosopher, founder of Waldorf schools	freedom, imagination and creativity
Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952)	Italian doctor and educator, founder of Montessori education	Encouraged children to work and learn independently, using specific didactic materials
Lev Vygotsky (1876 – 1934)	Russian psychologist	Sociocultural theory of development as socially mediated. Developed the concept of the zone of proximal development
Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980)	Swiss psychologist	Children have four stages of cognitive development in a fixed order
Jerome Bruner (1915 – 2016)	American psychologist	A constructivist approach to learning, including the concept of scaffolding
Urie Brofenbrenner (1917 – 2005)	Russian-American psychologist	Ecological systems theory, viewing child development as a complex system of relationships within a series of wider environments
Loris Malaguzzi (1920 – 1994)	Italian educational philosopher	Founder of Reggio Emilia, a child-centred approach
Albert Bandura (1925 – 2021)	Canadian-American Psychologist	Social learning theory and social cognitive theory, emphasising importance of observational learning

## 2.3 The Development of the Ethics of Care

### 2.3.1 The beginning of the ethics of care in Ruddick's maternal thinking

A feminist philosopher has been credited with beginning the discourse around ethics and care (Ruddick, 1980, 1989), and the concept was then developed by a psychologist (Gilligan, 1982) before being taken up by an educationalist and philosopher (Noddings, 1984). Care ethics have since been applied to diverse disciplines, reflecting its universal applicability, from the micro level of care practices through organisational studies and extending to global politics. I will begin my discussion with Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking, which "arises out of actual child-caring practices" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 346).

Ruddick's argument was that the experience of mothering and maternal practices gives rise to a different way of thinking, in the tradition of Habermas, Wittgenstein and others who, she says, contend that "*all* thought arises out of social practice" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 347). Thinking, she argues, "is governed by the interests of the practice out of which it arises, and the act of thinking names and elaborates the "given" reality to whose demands practice is responding" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 348). Nearly thirty years later, Ruddick clarified that she had set out "to elucidate the "*rationality of care*," taking mothering, and the maternal thinking it expresses, as a primary instance." (Ruddick, 2009, p. 305). She explained in the later essay that she rejected the idea of "women's intuition" or "feminine sensibility" as marking an absence of mind or thought, and in her book on maternal thinking, she expanded on her "practicalist" view that "thinking arises from and is tested against practices." (Ruddick, 1989, p. 13)

Ruddick asserts that "intellectual activities are distinguishable, but not separable from disciplines of feeling" and describes maternal thinking as "a unity of reflection, judgment and emotion" (Ruddick, 1980, p. 348). Her writing is in the tradition of rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, and in asserting that "like militarists, mothers work with and through bodies" she anticipates the later debate about embodied care. Similarly, in pointing out in the same article that "neither children nor their mothers could distinguish in their bodily lives between rich elaborate mental play and the "merely physical"" (Ruddick, 1989, p. 206) she recognises the importance for children of embodied and sensory learning. Ruddick's three elements of maternal



practice; preservation of the child, fostering growth, and guiding children to be socially acceptable, were influential for later educationalists (Elfer, 2007). She was clear that her idea of mothering was not dependent upon a biological relationship, and her views anticipated calls for a more care-full pedagogy, (Luff & Kanyal, 2015)

A focus on maternal practices, outside of the field of healthcare, and giving mothers a platform, was “a novelty in 1989, before the baby-crazed twenty-first century” (Richards, 2009, p. 299) and the focus on thought in relation to the physicality of birth, nursing and childcare was trailblazing. Ruddick’s work has been criticized for ethnocentrism and universalising, (Keller, 2010; Richards, 2009), for straddling different genres (Khanna, 2009), and for “reinforcing a one-dimensional view of women as creatures of the family” (Dietz, 1985, p. 20). I agree with Keller that it isn’t necessary to abandon universalism in order to acknowledge racial ethnic differences in maternal practices, as preservative love is undoubtedly a universal goal when caring for children, but Ruddick has a tendency to gloss over some of the complexities and differences in maternal practices, which are not universal, as they are often culturally specific. The universalising criticism is particularly valid, I feel, in her treatment of fathers. Ruddick herself acknowledged that “although maternal thinking arises out of actual child-caring practices, biological parenting is neither necessary nor sufficient” (Ruddick, 1980, p. 346) but arguing that in an ideal world there would be no more fathers, but “mothers of both sexes,” sharing parental care, feels like a very dated perspective today. Ruddick seems to assume that fathers have no innate desire to care for their children, absolving them of their parenting responsibilities. She was a trailblazer, though, in taking early childcare practices seriously, and recognising the complexity of thought involved in caring for the very youngest, and the ethical dimensions, which is a key issue in this research.

### 2.3.2 Gilligan’s psychological perspective

Carol Gilligan’s landmark book (Gilligan, 1982) about the ‘different voice’ of women, was probably even more influential than Ruddick’s, and her exploration of maternal consciousness is relevant for a workforce which is predominantly female and working ‘in loco parentis.’ Gilligan’s work was ground-breaking, in challenging the rights and responsibilities view of morality, and in arguing that girls and women approach ethical problems from a more relational perspective, which she viewed as a moral strength,



not a weakness. In later works Gilligan developed a persuasive argument that recognising the relational voice could help to combat patriarchy (Gilligan & Snider, 2018), but in her insistence on women having a “different voice” Gilligan could, like Ruddick, be accused of reinforcing gender stereotypes. Like Ruddick, Gilligan made it clear that her distinction between male and female voices is “a distinction between two modes of thought...rather than to represent a generalization about either sex” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 2). Some of her generalisations about women’s experiences and attitudes now feel outdated, but in citing Piaget’s influence on views of child development on the need for greater care and respect of differences, she provided a rich seedbed for later child psychologists in terms of the importance of caring relations and connections (Zeedyk, 2006). Gilligan’s main message was that women had an “overriding concern with relationships and responsibilities” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 16), a theme which was taken up shortly after by Nel Noddings, who took the relational perspective a step further, and undertook one of the most detailed and significant studies of ethical care practices.

### 2.3.3 Noddings’ ethics of care as a relational approach

The original subtitle of Noddings’ ‘Caring’ was ‘A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.’ Nearly thirty years later, she changed this to ‘A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education’ (Noddings, 1984, p. xiii), recognising, perhaps, that tying the approach to gender was potentially limiting and misleading, but also reflecting her growing belief in the importance of the caring relation. To begin with, Noddings, citing Gilligan, explains “I have used the language used in *Caring* the language of the mother, as contrasted with that of the father.” (Noddings, 1984, p. xiii) and she further explained that she was keen not to lose “the centrality of women’s experience in care ethics” (ibid, p. xiii) later extending her argument about maternal instinct being a source of morality (Noddings, 2010b). She is probably best known, and most relevantly for my research, for her phenomenological analysis of care, and for her distinction between types of care and caring.

Noddings begins her most well-known book, “Caring,” by asserting her belief that the caring relation is ethically basic, locating “the very wellspring of ethical behavior in human affective response.” (Noddings, 1984, p. 3) In focusing on the motivation for caring she then outlines her concept of “natural” caring. This, according to Noddings, is “the social condition we treasure and want to establish or preserve” (Noddings,

1984, p. xv) and describes maternal and other instinctive caring motivated by love or inclination. She argues that this commitment and self-definition of being “one-caring” is not just a manifestation of morality but the foundation of it, with “a commitment to care as the guide to an ethical ideal.” (ibid p 42). Noddings contrasts the instinctive, inherent behaviour of many parents with a conscious decision to care, which she describes as “ethical caring” which requires a more deliberate intent. Noddings explains later that she did not “mean to suggest that the capacity for natural caring does not need cultivation” (Noddings, 2002, p. 29) but she argues that the self-identification of ourselves as caring helps us to overcome a dislike or resentment of caring tasks and responsibilities. This is clearly relevant for those in paid caring roles, as in childcare, as is her argument that the act of caring for others helps to develop the moral orientation of an ethic of care, and that if children can see and assist in genuine caring done by adults, this can act as an “incubator for the development of caring” (Noddings, 1984, p. xiv).

One aspect of Noddings’s relational approach is the insistence on the importance of reciprocity from the “cared-for”. Although I would argue that there are inevitably instances where some children may be unable to provide the response that Noddings considers to be crucial, she makes a useful differentiation between receptive, attentive caring and empathy. She engaged in a debate with Michael Slote over his interpretation of the term empathy, and argued that empathy “retains a heavy cognitive connotation” (Noddings, 2010a, p. 6). Noddings describes a chain of events in a caring process as beginning with attentiveness to another’s situation, when she insists necessarily precedes empathy. When the “one-caring” then puts aside their own personal goals or purposes in order to satisfy another’s needs, Noddings calls this “motivational displacement” and the point of what she calls “ethical” rather than “natural” caring is that this might require a deliberate decision to overcome personal reluctance. The focus on motivation for caring has, however, been criticized as a weakness (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), in that it suggests an assumption that with the right motivation, caring becomes unproblematic, disregarding issues of power relations, which I will explore later, as this also applies to the potential exploitation of the early years workforce.

#### 2.3.4 Maternalism

One factor which may contribute to the undervaluing of early years professionals is maternalism, which is not the relationship of a mother to her child, but “the cultural understandings attributed to this role by society” (Ailwood, 2007, p. 157) and it has been associated with childcare for many years. The German inventor of kindergartens, Friedrich Froebel, saw maternalism as the basis for being a good early years practitioner, although his ideas were mocked at the time. His suggestion in 1844 that women should be able to train to teach children was greeted with laughter from his all-male audience (Bruce, 2021). His idea was that an early years teacher should operate as a “mother made conscious” (Steedman, 1985) and that good teaching would be based on what good mothers did naturally, but making it more overt. The conflation of mothering and teaching, or the idea of teaching as a version of mothering, can be seen as the feminisation of a trade. The majority of teachers of young children were men in the early part of the nineteenth century, and the recruitment of women into the teaching workforce was seen as way for working class women to enter a profession, and therefore improve their social standing. The result, Steedman argues, is that the feminine was then reified and formalised within the theory and practice of primary schooling, but with an inevitable emphasis on care rather than education, a tension which has influenced early years education and care ever since.

Another influential figure in early years care and education was Maria Montessori, who, as the first Italian woman to graduate with a medical degree, in 1896, based her ideas in scientific research. This undoubtedly helped her ideas to be accepted, particularly as she combined them with an idealisation of mothers, and more traditional perceptions of the role of female teachers of young children, advising that “She should study her movements, making them as gentle and graceful as possible, that the child may unconsciously pay her the compliment of thinking her as beautiful as his mother, who is naturally his ideal of beauty” (Ailwood, 2007). Montessori and other educators such as Froebel (Bruce, 2021) were key figures of the kindergarten movement, which focused on love, care and maternalism to varying degrees (Aslanian, 2015) but which also began the professionalisation of early care and education. There is undoubtedly a tension between maternalism and professionalisation within the early years sector, which will be explored within this research, particularly as maternalism is arguably a contributory factor to the low pay of the early years workforce.

## 2.4 The Application of Care Ethics

### 2.4.1 Care ethics, power relations, and emotional labour

It has been argued that “care ethics has also tended to conflate sex and gender with the universalizing narrative of ‘motherhood’, and has under-theorized the relation of care to power” (Cloyes, 2002, p. 212). Care has been described as “both an opportunity and a danger in relation to work with young children” (Barnes, 2019, p. 17), recognising the ambivalent and sometimes negative connotations of the concept of care, and in the early years sector, of care in comparison to early years education. Feminists are understandably wary of the oppressive potential of caring roles. Noddings’s distinction between “ethical” and “natural” caring is a useful concept for considering care ethics in relation to a paid workforce instead of familial, unpaid childcare, and the research interview data include discussion of the extent to which caring skills are natural, or innate, rather than deliberately cultivated. Ruddick’s example of the different kinds of care given by a father taking his child to a day care centre, and the day care worker then caring for his child, illustrates the difference by describing the caring effort of the father being a response to his relationship with the child, whereas the day care worker’s caring effort is more likely to be in response to her working role (Ruddick, 1998). This then brings in the concept of emotional labour, and the issue of if and how those in caring roles are themselves cared for.

The concept of emotional labour has been portrayed as potentially exploitative, when “the private management of feeling is socially engineered” (Hochschild, 1983, p. xviii). The commodification of emotions by customer-facing roles resonates with the early years sector, as there is often a need for practitioners to appear calmer and happier than they may feel. The phenomenological experience of faking cheerfulness is not necessarily exploitative in the context of early years care and education, however, as practitioners can derive satisfaction by being a source of comfort for children, and the feeling of being needed, and of being effective in a caring role, can increase self-esteem (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). The emotional demands on early years professionals were recently recognised as “intense” in an All Party Parliamentary Group report, which also highlighted the dangers of inadequate support potentially resulting in practitioners seeking to avoid children’s demands, or becoming “blind” to them (Clark, 2020, p. 32).

The ethical dimension of emotional labour in early years settings potentially arises in terms of the employer-employee relationship, and in coping with infants and children in distress. Practitioners who see their vocation as a calling may suffer emotional distress in tolerating poor pay and conditions in order to continue supporting children and families who are dependent on them. This may have a negative impact on their own families, particularly in working long shifts to help maintain mandatory staffing ratios, and raises the question of whether practitioners' families should be more visible stakeholders (Anastasiadis & Zeyen, 2022).

Another term which has been used to describe the ways in which practitioners employ emotions within their work with children is professional love (Page, 2018). Whether this is seen as a kind of performative professionalism (Taggart, 2011) or a more fundamental requirement for early years practitioners to adopt, there is increasing neuroscientific evidence that infants and children have a fundamental need for carers who are attentive, and that their emotional security depends more on the kind of care they receive in their early years than on any innate temperament (Gerhardt, 2004). Modern care ethicists agree that the historical perception of childcare being naturally suited to women is damaging and erroneous, and a phenomenological exploration of caring practices will hopefully help to elucidate the factors involved in providing attentive care. There is a strong link with feminism in the literature of care ethics, and although the understanding of the social construction of gender has rapidly developed in recent years, there is still an ongoing debate about the gender imbalance in the early years workforce, and no consensus on how best to resolve it (Van Laere et al., 2014).

One final point about power relations and emotionality is about the emotional investment of parents in their child's childcare arrangements. The "emotional stickiness" (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021) of the relationship between parents, their child and practitioners mean that parents cannot exercise the kind of consumer choice a market transaction would usually involve, and the policy of parental choice is therefore "fundamentally flawed" (Gallagher, 2017). The power relations are not uni-directional; parents' choice is limited by their concern for their child's attachment to a practitioner, and their potential parental guilt (Boyer et al., 2013) but practitioners also face possible exploitation because of *their* emotional attachment, which may offer job

fulfilment, but may also tie them into working arrangements that abuse their professionalism. A key concern for feminists is the exploitation of the female early years workforce, and the way childcare is still seen by many as an issue for mothers rather than for parents. Care ethics is at the heart of that debate and offers a way to assess the ethical basis of childcare itself, which is fundamental to the research problem.

#### 2.4.2 The personal is political: Care ethics and feminism

The persistence of the “full-time mothering ideological norm” (Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow, 2000) was the result of women remaining “almost universally in charge of infant and early child care” (Dinnerstein, 1976, p. 26) for many generations. ‘Fathering’ still has very different connotations to ‘mothering,’ but there is increasing recognition of the need for equally shared parental roles. One of the concerns raised by feminists in relation to the ethic of care has been in asserting the need to base childcare practice on mothering, or familial care, there is the danger of perpetuating the exploitation of women in childcaring roles within the family. “The school drop-off is political, the staying home when the kids are sick is political” (Fine, 2010, p. 79).

There is also the risk of vilifying collective childcare provision; by critiquing the commodification of provision, it is important to recognise that this should not necessarily cast aspersions on the ability of early years practitioners to provide emotionally supportive childcare. The separation in policy between support for nursery education and funding to subsidise childcare for working parents can also be seen as a legacy of an expectation by some that mothers could, or should, stay at home with their babies, and a belief that going back to work after maternity leave is a lifestyle choice rather than an economic necessity. The role of childcare policies in reducing gender inequities in the labour market has received less attention as a justification for government intervention in childcare provision than the drivers already discussed in chapter one (Paull, 2013).

Care ethics are seen as a feminist ethic for several reasons. The first is because of the origin and perpetuating experience of women as primary caregivers, not just because of the historical association, but also because of the biological association, with the birthing and breastfeeding experience of mothers. Secondly, it is because of

the way in which “caring expresses ethically significant ways in which we matter to each other, transforming interpersonal relatedness into something beyond ontological necessity or brute survival.” (Bowden, 1997, p. 1). This broader view of care is echoed by other feminist care ethicists (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Held, 1993; Noddings, 2002). Thirdly, care ethics are important to feminists because of the exploitation that caring responsibilities can cause, whether in the home or the workplace, with a workforce that is still almost wholly female. There isn’t a consensus amongst feminists, however, about the role and importance of the ethics of care, particularly in terms of a political theory of care, and the ‘care vs justice’ debate (Bowden, 1997; Gilligan, 1982). Care ethics, it has been argued, has “tended to conflate sex and gender with the universalizing narrative of ‘motherhood’, and has under-theorized the relation of care to power” (Cloyes, 2002).

The politicization of care, Cloyes argues, raises both possibilities and problems, and she argues for a conception of care as both a process and practice of feminist politics as well as being critical for the caring professions. Care has been described as an important aspect of ecofeminism, and as “above all a practice of hope,” recognising and celebrating relationship and embodied emotion (Phillips, 2019). The argument that care ethics offer an alternative to masculinist conceptions of justice (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1995) is taken a step further by Gilligan and Snider’s suggestion that, patriarchy, which they define as “a set of rules and values, codes and scripts that specify how men and women should act and be in the world” (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 6) perpetuates pathologically gendered roles which repress the ability of boys and men to express relational feelings and repress the true voices of girls and women.

A criticism of the early care theorists was that their work was underpinned by an essentialism around gender differences (Williams, 2001), but later theorists have moved away from a gendered binary to a recognition of the issues of intersectionality, and many have adopted a wider political perspective. I will now move away from the theoretical analysis of care ethics to look at the literature covering its application, from a macro to micro level. I will first summarise, in table two, below, some of the key theorists and texts used in this research. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but places care ethics texts and their authors in chronological order, and in listing the disciplines, demonstrates their philosophical base.

Table 2 *Ethics of Care Theorists and Key Texts*

Author	Discipline	Key works & Overview
<b>Chodorow</b> Nancy	Psychoanalytic sociology	<b>The Reproduction of Mothering (1978)</b> – argues that social construction of gender roles is created by males and females being mothered differently
<b>Ruddick,</b> Sara	Philosophy	<b>Maternal Thinking (1980)</b> – first to argue that different thinking practices emerge from child-caring practices, and then <b>(1989)</b> extends to politics of peace
<b>Gilligan,</b> Carol	Psychology & ethics	<b>In a Different Voice (1982)</b> – argues that women think differently to men, with their relational perspective creating an ethic of care (cf justice)
<b>Noddings,</b> Nel	Philosophy & education	<b>Caring (1984)</b> – takes a relational and phenomenological approach to the ethic of care, and applying it to education
<b>Tronto,</b> Joan	Political science	<b>Moral Boundaries (1993)</b> – argues for the ethic of care to be applied to politics
<b>Bowden,</b> Peta	Philosophy (feminist ethics)	<b>Caring (1997)</b> – focuses on the complexity of caring practices rather than principles of caring
<b>Hamington,</b> Maurice	Feminist philosophy & ethics	<b>Embodied Care (2004)</b> – argues that embodied practices of ethical care can provide a transformative approach to social justice
<b>Held,</b> Virginia	Philosophy	<b>The Ethics of Care (2006)</b> – argues for care ethics to be used as a moral framework, and for care to be seen as fundamental



## 2.5 Ethical Care Practices from Macro to Meso

### 2.5.1 Political caring

The political aspect of caring has been explored by several writers (Barnes, 2019; Engster & Hamington, 2015; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993) and the greatest strength of the ethics of care has been described as “its ability to bring back *the political* to feminism” (Robinson, 2015, p. 295). The political issues in relation to care ethics in the early years sector range from accessibility and inclusion, the quality of caring practices, the powerlessness of the workforce, and the issue of funding. The current debate about staffing ratios (Department for Education, 2022) encapsulates two of these; the stated driver being to reduce the cost of childcare, but with a potential consequence of increasing the burden on practitioners and diluting the quality of care for children. Care ethics offers a moral perspective on what happens in practice when such political decisions are implemented. At a macro level, care ethics have been applied to international relations (Robinson, 2018), and at a national, rather than global, level, research evidence in policy documents attests to the desire of some international organisations to encourage caring practices within early years (Alston, 2018; OECD, 2006; UN, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

The apparent strategy for shifting responsibility for poverty away from the state and onto parents has been commented on by many in the early years sector (Lloyd & Potter, 2014; Oppenheim & Milton, 2021; Penn, 2017; Save the Children, 2018; Simpson et al., 2015). The government’s own education committee has been equally critical of government policy, commenting that “the Government’s flagship 30 hours childcare policy appears to be entrenching disadvantage.” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). Funding is always a contentious issue, when there are so many other areas of care and education competing for limited funds, but there is extensive literature in both the UK and Europe about the damaging effect of neoliberalism on the early years sector.

### 2.5.2 The problem with neoliberalism

Neoliberalism has many interpretations, but in the context of the early years sector I am referring to the reliance on the market for the provision of childcare and early years education. Such an approach arguably “positions the underlying cause of inequality as the fault of children and families who have failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them” and the neoliberal stance of the current government “does not address the ongoing systemic issues that create and maintain disadvantage.” (Sims, 2017, p. 4). Sims’s critique of the impact of neoliberalism on the early childhood sector identifies two key issues which are both relevant to this research project; firstly, the concern of the ‘push-down curriculum’ and emphasis on school-readiness, and secondly, the drive to professionalize the early years workforce, which, she argues, “requires an acceptance of discretionary decision-making” which is “in tension with the neoliberal positioning of them as enforcers of the standards set by the state.” (Sims, 2017, p. 6).

A particular concern for the childcare sector is the potential impact on quality of the underfunding of the early years entitlement (Department for Education, 2021a), which is shared to an extent by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2016, p. 3). The current neoliberal approach to early years funding is based on a belief that by adopting a demand-side funding model (through an entitlement to a number of hours of free nursery education) the government is empowering parents to make choices. A supply-side funding model, which would directly fund early years settings, would instead give the state direct control over those settings, which would interfere with a model of free market economics. The resulting marketisation of the sector, however, is a contentious issue, and one which potentially has a direct impact on the ability of early years settings to provide ethical childcare.

### 2.5.3 The critiques of marketisation

Criticism of the marketisation of the early years sector has been prevalent in early years academia over several years (Lloyd & Penn, 2013; Penn, 2011; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Simon et al., 2020a). Their argument is that childcare should not be treated as a commodity and that markets are inevitably inequitable; “for-profit care is often exploitative, and distorts or damages quality and equity of access.” (Penn, 2013,

p. 20). There is also an argument that the market cannot provide effective measures of good care, due to “its complexity, low rate of return, and labor-intensive nature” (Tronto, 2010, p. 159). A concern has been raised by feminists that resistance to commodification may encourage the devaluation of caring work by mothers not in paid employment, but it can also be argued that the move from unpaid home-based childcare to professional childcare can be beneficial for both children and parents. “As women are increasingly employed outside the home, mothers with no talent for or interest in child care can do other work, and those with better skills and more understanding can be paid for the work of helping children thrive.” (Held, 2006, p. 111)

There are, arguably, a number of advantages to a childcare market from an economic perspective, in that flexible pricing reflects consumers’ preferences and suppliers’ costs of production, and competition encourages efficiencies, innovation and private investment (Paull, 2013). Privatisation, for example, has been portrayed as more efficient and innovative, compared to “the ‘red tape’ of traditional educational bureaucracies” (Cribb & Ball, 2005, p. 118). The problem with this idealised view of how to provide the best childcare for the lowest cost is that childcare is not a typical service, and Paull identifies several problems; firstly that parents may not be able to make the best choices for their child, given the other pressures and factors involved, and it may be difficult for them to complain or change provider once a child is settled in one nursery, thereby inhibiting the competitive forces. Secondly, a particularly ethical issue is the variation in quality that inevitably results from market competition, when poor quality may be tolerated if it is financially viable to operate with low standards. There are also potential difficulties in recruiting a highly qualified workforce, if training is limited to mandatory requirements in order to reduce costs.

The problem with the marketization of childcare is not that it has an economic value, but a concern with how market worth is applied and how childcare is evaluated, which will lead to my exploration of how leaders and practitioners view their organisational and individual purpose. Held’s discussion adds weight to the protests of the early years academics in rejecting the neo-liberal commodification of childcare. She is emphatic that childcare and early years education “should not be governed by market norms” (Held, 2006, p. 122). The current UK government’s strategy of privatisation and subsidy funding that is demand-side instead of supply-side, is pushing the UK

further away from the European models that achieve more equitable childcare provision (Van Lancker, 2017). Marketisation and demand-side funding may be factors that hinder the provision of ethical childcare, but there are other factors at the organisational level that need to be considered. Commodification has also been identified as having a detrimental influence on the quality of practices such as Forest Schools (Leather, 2018), particularly in the way marketisation can narrow the scope of activities away from child-centred learning towards measurable outcomes.

## 2.6 Care ethics at the organisational level

### 2.6.1 Can organisations care?

The question of whether organisations care has been widely debated (Kahn, 1993; Liedtka, 1996; Smith, 2005; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). One view is that an institution “cannot care-for in the sense prescribed by care theory...What it can do is to provide and support the conditions under which caring relations can prosper.” (Noddings, 2015, p. 83). Many organisations will express a caring ethos in their policies and public statements, but failing to translate protestations of caring-about into genuine care in practice could be described as “carewashing” (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 11), or “moral marketing gloss” (Bellacasa, 2017, p. 9). The debate about whether organisations can themselves care ranges from the approach of care ethicists who advocate an approach based on the ideal of family life (Martin, 1992; Noddings, 2002) to those who focus more on the political perspective of power relations and the problems of reconciling care with organisational bureaucracy (Ferguson, 1984; Liedtka, 1996; Tronto, 2010).

Caring for those who are themselves care-givers is clearly a key task for organisations which claim to be caring. The development of the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) has helped to highlight the potentially exploitative relationship between employers and employees, and the need for childcarers to be emotionally accessible to the children they care for can lead to a risk of burnout and emotional withdrawal if they are not themselves given emotional support. Kahn’s account of how social workers were or were not emotionally supported illustrates how the responsibility lies with those with hierarchical responsibility, and whether they give or withhold care to their subordinates is seen as a crucial for preventing job burnout,

particularly when there are constraints on material resources (Kahn, 1993). The parallels with childcare settings are easy to recognise, particularly when staffing levels are limited to the minimum necessary for compliance, but individual children are in need of more one-to-one attention than the ratios allow. In particular, Kahn’s assertion that administrators need to take on supportive, empathetic roles, as well as direct line managers, is an interesting angle to explore when comparing large bureaucratic nursery chains with smaller settings, and the factors that influence how emotionally supportive different types of nursery are (or whether it is simply determined by individual personalities).

There is very little empirical research in the early years sector about organisational features that may have an impact on ethical practice, such as type, purpose, size, structure, and culture, other than the recent work on the large for-profit nursery chains (Simon & Owen, 2019). Leadership and governance have been studied within the sector more widely, (Kagan, 2018; Muijs et al., 2004; Palaiologou & Male, 2019; M. Sims et al., 2015) but not as much as in the maintained sector and in schools. In researching how policy and purpose is translated into practice, the influence of leadership and governance will form part of the examination of micro level processes, but only in relation to ethical decision-making and as a direct influence on practice, as the wider range of leadership and governance is beyond the scope of this research.

### 2.6.2 Entrepreneurial processes and care ethics

Size of organisations has been considered widely in literature outside the early years sector, and one discussion of the issue of size links Tronto’s four phases of the ethic of care with four stages of the entrepreneurial process in organisations with a social purpose (André & Pache, 2016). Table three, below, considers this argument in relation to childcare.

Table 3 The implications of applying a care ethics framework to the entrepreneurial process. After (André and Pache, 2016)

<b>Entrepreneurial Process</b>	<b>Social Entrepreneurship Process (care ethics framework)</b>	<b>Ethical Implications for Childcare Organisations</b>

<p><b>Opportunity Recognition:</b> identifying needs/market gap</p>	<p><b>“Caring About”:</b> identifying needs of others, particularly people in need – an “engrossment” and empathic connection with others’ situations</p>	<p><b>Nursery locations:</b> identifying locations based on the childcare needs of local families, not targeting affluent areas or providing childcare that is unaffordable for many</p>
<p><b>Opportunity Filtration:</b> assessment of the business case in terms of potential profitability</p>	<p><b>“Taking Care of”:</b> decision whether to act to meet the identified need based on a feeling of responsibility</p>	<p><b>Policy decisions:</b> basing charging policies on criteria of affordability and accessibility (balanced with financial sustainability rather than maximising profits)</p>
<p><b>Venture Creation:</b> development of the service</p>	<p><b>“Care Giving”:</b> development of the provision of care as a service, and in a way which demonstrates a caring attitude</p>	<p><b>Embedding care into practice:</b> ensuring that childcare practices are delivered with sensitivity and respect</p>
<p><b>Exchange Stage:</b> the iterative process refining, adapting and improving the service, shaped by the exchange of information between entrepreneurs and stakeholders</p>	<p><b>“Care Receiving”:</b> critically analysing how care is received and its impact, by listening to care recipients’ needs and their assessment of the care received</p>	<p><b>Reflexive Practice:</b> ensuring that childcare practitioners reflect on their practice, gain feedback from parents and other stakeholders, and evaluate the impact on the children, including capturing the child’s voice</p>

Andre and Pache applied an ethics of care framework onto the entrepreneurial process, but their identification of three ethical challenges of scaling up also applies to the early years sector. Firstly, social entrepreneurs (Peredo & McLean, 2006) typically rely on complex business models due to the focus on serving underprivileged beneficiaries, as do most day nurseries, who, regardless of whether they are for-profit or not-for-profit, access government funding for low-income families. The dependence on new revenue streams can focus attention away from the beneficiaries and toward resource providers, and as organisations grow, the specialisation of job roles can lead to the finance function taking a dominant role over those providing the childcare service. Secondly, process optimization and the creation of non-caring roles can lead to bureaucratisation, and a focus on efficiency at the expense of social impact. Thirdly, the process of evaluating social impact can lead to pressure to demonstrate evidence, which can focus on those results and practices that are more easily measured, leading to a focus on outputs and outcomes at the expense of the caring process (Archer, 2017; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Andre and Pache conclude that the scaling up of operations as organisations grow can challenge the ethics of care of the original social entrepreneur, which resonates when looking at the acquisition of small family-run day nurseries by large nursery chains. The largely female workforce is also an important factor to be considered.

### 2.6.3 Feminism, bureaucracy, and organisation size

Feminism is relevant and important to this research, not just because of the largely female workforce and the ways in which they are at risk of exploitation (Bonetti, 2019; Cameron, 2020), but also because the sector is providing a service for women returning to work after maternity leave. Organisational structures, one of the factors explored in this research, have been described as deeply gendered (Acker, 1990), and within the childcare sector, the publication of gender pay gap reports have confirmed that the minority of males are generally on higher salaries than early years practitioners, which is usually a reflection of their roles typically being in administration, particularly finance, and catering (Nursery World, 2018). Acker's description of gendered job roles, symbols, clothing and conversations is relevant to the early years sector; whether staff uniforms are unisex, and whether staff room environments and conversational topics make male practitioners feel welcome.

(Ferguson, 1984) rejected bureaucracy as a masculinist hierarchy of power, and as being antithetical to caring values. (Bowden, 2000) and others have suggested that organisational size may be a problematic factor: “Hierarchy impedes care; yet, hierarchy is the only well-developed model that we have today to organize large institutions.” (Liedtka, 1996, p. 197). A contrasting argument (du Gay, 2000) suggests that elements of bureaucracy can provide good governance, which is arguably essential for ethical childcare. (Ashcraft, 2001) proposed a ‘feminist bureaucracy’, building on the concepts of ‘bounded emotionality’ (Mumby & Putnam, 1992) to create an ‘organized dissonance’ which uses ‘ethical communication’ as a way to embrace and resolve the conflicts between roles in hierarchies by embracing egalitarian practice. Her single case study is situated in a workplace where an awareness of gender and power relations underpin the core service dealing with domestic abuse, so is arguably limited in its application, but her ideas have also been considered in relation to organisations within the childcare sector. In both cases, she suggests that a kind of relational bureaucracy is needed, in contrast to classic bureaucratic organizational structures that “can reinforce a form of professionalism that frames caring and collaborative relationships as *unprofessional*” (Douglass & Gittell, 2012, p. 268). The issue whether size affects an organisation’s ability to embed an ethic of care is of critical interest in the childcare sector, where small family-run nurseries are increasingly being replaced by nurseries that are part of large corporate chains, and this is explored in the research interviews, particularly with practitioners who have experience of working in a range of settings.

## 2.7 Care ethics at the micro level

### 2.7.1 Caring leadership

Having discussed the societal context and the sector and organisational level of influence on practice, I will now explore the micro level implementation of care ethics beginning with the aspects of leadership that might affect policy formation and implementation. The role of leaders and leadership in ethical practice is too broad an area to be covered in detail in this research, but I will briefly explore what kind of leadership might facilitate the delivery of ethical childcare, in particular ethical leadership and relational/feminist leadership. Other types of leadership and management theory, such as pedagogical leadership, servant leadership and caring



management, similarly offer helpful insights, but I will focus particularly on the intersection of leadership, ethics, feminist and early years literature. As this research project is focussing on influencing factors, the 'moral person' aspect of honesty, trustworthiness and integrity is of less significance than the 'moral manager' dimension, which "represents the leader's proactive efforts to influence followers' ethical and unethical behaviour" (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 597), which could also be described as ethical sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), a concept I will discuss in more detail later. In his discussion of managerial ethical leadership, Enderle similarly differentiates between the scope for freedom of action by individual leaders, pointing out that personal influence, in essentially asymmetric relationships with colleagues, is limited by macro and meso factors, and that managerial ethical leadership needs a context of corporate ethics (Enderle, 1987).

As I have discussed, nursery managers are often constrained by government and sector policies, or by organisational goals. If personal leadership is influence over people, and corporate leadership is influence over an organisation, the asymmetry applies in both cases. Nursery managers clearly have more power and influence than early years practitioners, but their influence on boards of directors, trustees and governors may be very limited, and viewing leadership in terms of top-down, bureaucratic paradigms does not reflect the context of complex, dynamic and interactive organisations today (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This research will investigate the origins of specific nursery policies that affect the ethics of childcare provision, particularly in terms of inclusivity, and such decisions are unlikely to be made by one person. Whether, for example, forest school sessions are offered as optional extras or universally available to all children, may be a decision made by managers, governing boards, practitioners, and with internal and external influences. Analysing those influencing factors in that decision, whether financial, sector guidance, parental influence, or personal, professional codes provides an insight into the origins and development of ethical childcare practice. Fisher and Tronto (1990) identified four "ability factors," preconditions for caring activities, all of which can be applied to childcare practices; time, material resources, knowledge and skill, and each of those will be explored in this research.

There have been many examples of individuals influencing corporate policy (Collins, 2001; Davis, 2016), and leadership theory to this research offers potential insights into the processes of leadership that may influence outcomes at the level of practice (Dinh et al., 2014). In early years leadership, for example, there are multiple levels of analysis, both top-down and bottom-up. In the former, leaders' creation of ethical norms guide behaviour, codes of conduct and policies are enforced, and ethical (or unethical) behaviour is modelled (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Male and Palaiologou have argued that 'praxis' offers a more appropriate term for the kind of leadership needed in childcare; 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970). The extent to which nursery managers see their role as dealing with wider issues than the day-to-day running of their setting potentially affects how they behave in ethical decision-making if it is influenced by external policies or the organisational purpose being primarily for profit or social impact. The whole-child approach is an important aspect of the focus on ethical childcare. In education, it has been suggested that the "best interests of the student" should be adopted as the basis for a professional paradigm for educational leaders (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 25) and an equivalent insistence on the best interests of the child is at the heart of ethical childcare. I have mentioned inclusivity as an area where ethical decision-making can be assessed in practice, but reflexivity is an integral aspect of this, as the most difficult inequalities to address are often due to unconscious cognitive bias and a lack of reflexivity. Contemplative leadership (Grandy & Sliwa, 2017) also offers a way to examine ethical leadership behaviour that is relational, reflexive and contextual, and focuses on leadership activity rather than the quality of leaders, and the centrality of reflective practice in high quality childcare provision resonates with this.

Relational leadership has been described as "an inherently moral and dialogical practice" and a "way of being-in-relation-to-others" (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1428,1430). This echoes other discussions on the relational dynamics of leadership and organizing (Uhl-Bien, 2006) which recognise the interdependencies of organisations and of team members. The focus is on relating as a process rather than the emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) of individuals. One of the most pertinent features of a relational perspective is that knowledge is recognised as "socially constructed and socially distributed" (Dachler & Hosking, 1995). I contend that this is

true of early years settings, where individual perceptions of developmentally appropriate practice, for example, are heavily influenced by social norms and by discourse within nursery teams. This research explores the processes by which knowledge and skills are communicated and reproduced within settings, unpicking the process of leadership and influence, particularly in terms of ethical decision-making. Individualist theories of power, it has been argued, as with leader-follower theories of leadership, can encourage viewing social worlds 'in terms of domination and submission' (Gergen, 1995, p. 34) but a relational perspective can focus on the emergence of power in micro-social processes. It also allows the examination of language used and the ways in which linguistic patterns can reinforce mindsets and local ontologies in teams of staff. Analysing the discourse and terminology used by both managers and practitioners in describing leadership roles and their influence may establish whether there is common ground in the kinds of leadership in the sector, which may then have implications for the culture and ethos of settings and their staff teams.

### 2.7.2 Professional identity

The issue of professional identities in the childcare workforce is relevant for this research because it can be perceived as undervaluing care as a process, with the suggestion that "professional development initiatives...are solely based on professionalising the learning roles" (Van Laere et al., 2012). If, as they suggest, early childhood education and care "is increasingly conceptualised as preparation for compulsory schooling" there is a danger that early years practitioners may lose the holistic viewpoint that ethical childcare needs, taking into account the instrumental role of families and losing sight of children's natural learning strategies of play, exploration and relationships with carers and other children. As well as the challenge of schoolification, which potentially undermines the caring role of practitioner, valorising instead the teaching role, there is also the issue of entrepreneurialism and the encouragement in government policy for day nurseries to apply commercial principles (Osgood, 2004). Professionalisation as encouraged by the government has also been seen as having a "disempowering, regulatory gaze in the name of higher standards" (Osgood, 2006) and this research may shed insights into how professional identity is performatively constituted.

The tensions between care and education have been related to self-identities of early years professionals (Goouch & Powell, 2013) and the need for curriculum documents to recognise 'care' as "a critical feature of infant and toddler pedagogical practice" has also been noted as necessary to enhance the professional status of infant-toddler pedagogy (Davis & Degotardi, 2015). One proposal has been for "a politics of occupational identity and values that move beyond the dualistic 'non-professional/professional' divide" (Moss, 2006), arguing that "it is in the first place a political and ethical choice" whether a more holistic approach to early years education, which encompasses an understanding of a child's care needs is really valued. Moss suggests using the concept of a pedagogue, rather than the traditional teacher/carer model used in early years, drawing on European notions of pedagogy being "a relational and holistic approach to working with people."

Professional identity is itself a field for academic study, but for this research the relevant aspects are those which influence behaviour, and specifically whether practices are ethical. This focuses attention on identity as part of a social group; "The tendencies which shape people's behaviour *ideologically* can be seen at work 'in' the social practice, as influencing the formulations one 'voices' in attempting to claim one or another 'position' for oneself" (Shotter, 1993). This social constructivist approach encourages an examination of the way language used within childcare settings is both formative and relational, and helps to determine whether self-identities in nurseries are of, for example, 'nursery nurses,' 'early years professionals' or 'teachers' and whether or how that affects behaviour and practice. It has also been suggested that women are more likely to make "moral decisions based on context-specific principles" which are themselves based on relationships "rather than on the grounds of their own autonomous judgements" (Somers, 1994) and that "social identity" and "social agency" are more fruitful concepts for considering the formative influences on identity. This again seems to be an approach that would be helpful in examining the influences on practitioner behaviour in early years settings. Identity and participation in practices are closely linked (Handley et al., 2006) and in this research I explore the ways in which practices influence professional identity.

One further aspect of professional identity in relation to childcare practice is the way in which "care has become qualified" (Barnes, 2012, p. 61) and the "care deficit" that

can occur when the children of migrant workers may be left behind in order for their mother to earn a salary caring for the children of wealthier families. Barnes is concerned with the way in which care is integrated into policy, fulfilling the duties of the state to cater for the welfare and wellbeing of citizens, but although her primary focus is social care, her argument has relevance for the early years sector, particularly in her insistence of the need for care to be of appropriate quality, acknowledging that poor care is not care, and that care is itself an intensely political issue, requiring consideration as a value and as a practice. This is relevant for the issue of professional identity, as the difficulties in accessing high-quality childcare should not be seen as a problem for mothers, but for families, with the professional identities of working mothers being themselves dependent on such provision.

### 2.7.3 Relational pedagogy

Before moving onto the performative nature of early years practice, it is also worth noting that one way in which the ethics of care resonates in the early years sector is in relational pedagogy. As Noddings herself has pointed out; ‘advocates of relational pedagogy do not agree entirely on how to define it’ (Noddings, 2004), but the relational aspect of education has been recognised by many philosophers, including Aristotle, Buber, Dewey and Heidegger, and the link between ethics and educational theory relating to early childhood has been explored by several authors (Freire, 1970; Gilligan, 1982; Martin, 1992; Noddings, 1984). In their ‘Manifesto of Relational Pedagogy’, one group of authors proposed several ‘principles of relation’ asserting, amongst other things, the primacy and complexity of relations, and acknowledging, in the final statement, that “Relations are not necessarily good; human relationality is not an ethical value. Domination is as relational as love” (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 7). Relational pedagogy might be seen, however, as a potential solution to the schoolification issue, and help to address the concerns about the lack of democracy in education; warnings about the danger of power relations have been forcefully argued by several early years academics (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Lloyd & Penn, 2013; Moss, 2014; Naughton, 2005) although the context of these arguments are usually educational settings rather than nurseries and other settings providing full day care for infants and toddlers.

Pedagogy itself is a problematic term in early years, as it is an unfamiliar term for many in the UK, although widely used in Europe. It encompasses a more holistic view of education than “teaching” suggests, but this research is focused not on early years education, but on early years practice, by which I mean everything that takes place within early years settings. There is an inherently relational aspect to pedagogy, in that “all human experience is ultimately social...it involves contact and communication” (Dewey, 1938, p. 38) particularly in the early years, which, according to Dewey, “preserves the social and human centre of the organisation of experience.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 83). Critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020) similarly sees the role of education as being interrelated with moral and political practices, but in the context of this research is perhaps more relevant to the education of early years practitioners, rather than in early years practice.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained why I believe the ethics of care provides a relevant and helpful perspective for exploring ethical issues in early years practice, and how it might provide a theoretical and practical framework for answering the research questions. In explaining the development of care ethics I have highlighted its feminist origins and the multi-disciplinary nature, covering psychology, philosophy and education. I have shown how care ethics relates to the macro level of political policies, the meso level of sector and organisational caring, and whether, or how, care can be embedded within organisations. At the micro level I have then considered care ethics within leadership, within individuals and their professional identity, and how an ethic of care can inform pedagogy. This theory will now need to be applied to research data to fully assess its relevance and the level of insight it might help to provide, but first I will move on to theories of practice and will explain how these will also help to illuminate the way in which policies, pedagogy and practice within children’s day nurseries can be influenced in terms of their ethicality.

## Chapter Three Practice Theory, Pragmatic Feminism, and Sensemaking

### 3.1 Introduction

Before explaining my rationale for using practice theory in conjunction with the ethics of care, I will first clarify some terminology. Practice as both a noun and verb can refer to action (as opposed to thought or ideas); to something that is regularly done; or the act of doing something repeatedly in order to improve a skill. It can also, as a noun, refer to a vocation for which one needs extensive training, as in medical or legal practice. The practice of childcare is usually understood by practitioners in the early years sector to refer to both habitual routines and actions that take place in all early years settings and also as a professional practice. Practice is always social practice (Wenger, 1998) giving meaning and structure to our lives, and practices are “shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’” (Whittington, 2006).

Practice theory is an approach which recognises that practices carry and create meaning, with one fairly comprehensive definition suggesting that it is “a family of orientations that take orderly materially mediated doings and sayings (‘practices’) and their aggregations as central for the understanding of organisational and social phenomena.” (Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). The distinctive features of practice theory, according to (Nicolini, 2012b), demonstrate the relevance for early years practice. Firstly, practice theory foregrounds the importance of activity, performance and work in the way all aspects of social life are created and perpetuated and is inherently relational. Secondly, it focuses on the critical role of the body and of material things, and on the practice rather than individuals. It also conceives of knowledge as a form of mastery, recognises the influence of routinisation, and draws attention to intentionality, power and discourse. Organisation is seen as emerging from the sense-making which is itself “located in the material and discursive activity, body, artefacts, habits and preoccupations that populate the life of organisational members.” (Nicolini, 2012b, p. 7).

Practice theory itself, however, has a multitude of interpretations and applications, and in many ways provides a vocabulary with which to explore practices, rather than a framework for analysis. I will explore some of the terms used within practice theory,

outline the different kinds of practice theories and then explore the application of practice theory to organisational learning and communities of practice and its affinity with pragmatic feminism. The embodiment of care practices demonstrates the relevance to the childcare sector, as does the focus on sociomateriality in care routines, and in routine dynamics. Finally, I consider the literature around sensemaking, as I argue that this provides insight into the way in which ethical intentions can influence practice.

## 3.2 The relevance of Practice Theory for Early Childhood Care and Education

### 3.2.1 Tacit knowledge

Early years practitioners are not always able to articulate the knowledge and skills that inform their practice, relying on expertise that has become intuitive and normative. The description of social work practitioners being “not so much theoretical as they are practical, concrete and intuitive” (Parton, 2003, p. 2) applies just as much to early years practitioners. Parents too, often speak of relying on a ‘gut instinct’ in selecting childcare provision, similarly to Joan Tronto’s example of a teacher declaring that she could “just tell” whether or not the principal and teachers in a school were caring within ten minutes of entering (Tronto, 2010, p. 159). This kind of sensory awareness is something that can be explored through the concept of tacit knowledge. Within the early years sector, Froebel, an influential theorist, described the ideal teacher of young children as being like “a mother made conscious” (Steedman, 1985), which links the idea of tacit knowledge back to the maternalism described in the previous chapter.

The concept was first developed by Polanyi, (1958), who called “the area where the tacit predominates to the extent that articulation is virtually impossible...the *ineffable domain*.” (Polanyi, 1958, p. 87). He was the first theorist to recognise the embodiment of skilful knowledge, illustrating his argument with a discussion of how cyclists keep their balance, or how swimmers stay afloat, and the impossibility of articulating the process. He also identified the way in which “our tacit powers decide our adherence to a particular culture and sustain our intellectual, artistic, civic and religious deployment within its framework” (ibid p264). Polanyi’s view of the non-codifiable nature of tacit knowledge was then further developed and challenged by management theorists, and was popularised by Nonaka and Takeuchi, who put forward a model for



“converting” tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. Their knowledge creation model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) has been criticized for trying to operationalise and articulate something that is “essentially inarticulable” (Tsoukas, 2002). They stressed the importance of their Japanese intellectual tradition of the “oneness of body and mind” but then argued that tacit knowledge could be externalised to become explicit, and that explicit knowledge could be internalised. Bodily experience is seen as a critical part of that internalization and they give kneading dough as an example of a tacit skill that can be “sympathized” in order to be transmitted as tacit knowledge. How and whether tacit knowledge can be articulated or transmitted is one of the areas to be explored in this research, but rather than accepting Nonaka and Takeuchi’s compartmentalised model of tacit and explicit knowledge conversion I am more convinced by the argument that “tacit and explicit knowledge are not the two ends of a continuum but the two sides of the same coin: even the most explicit kind of knowledge is underlain by tacit knowledge...New knowledge comes about not when the tacit becomes explicit, but when our skilled performance – our praxis – is punctuated in new ways by social interaction” (Tsoukas, 2002, p. 15).

Tacit knowledge has been interpreted in different ways by different scholars, and a useful distinction between two ontological-epistemological assumptions (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019) separates out the literature that treats tacit knowledge as a discrete entity that can be converted or combined, from the phenomenological assumptions that underpin the practice-based approach that matches my own stance, and which I believe can best be applied to the early years sector. The three distinguishing features of this approach are that tacit and explicit knowledge are “irreducible and mutually constituted”, that “sociomaterial practices are inseparable” from tacit knowledge, and that “embodiment matters.” The inseparability of individual from collective tacit knowledge will be a key aspect to explore further with the research data.

### 3.2.2 Practice theory and the ethics of care

The practice of care has been theorised by several authors, including Noddings (2002), whose phenomenological analysis of care concluded that “receptive attention” is the essential characteristic of the caring encounter. The need for an ethics of care perspective to link with practice theory is explained by Tronto (2010), who argued that Noddings’s approach of modelling care institutions on the family relies too much on

elements of care that we take for granted in a family setting but that need to be made explicit in an institutional context. In order to identify antecedents of ethical childcare practice it will be useful to consider the ways in which practice can be theorised, by combining concepts from care ethics, such as embodied care, with practice theoretical concepts such as tacit knowledge and routine dynamics.

There are a range of practice-based approaches and no single agreed definition of practice theory, but practice theories share several characteristics, and Nicolini, (2012a) identifies five of these, all of which are relevant for this research project. Firstly, they are fundamentally processual and inherently relational, and foreground the importance of activity, performance and work. Secondly, they recognise the critical role of the body and material things, and thirdly, they focus on the practice of individuals, which balances and situates society, agency and human action. Fourthly, knowledge is conceived of as a form of mastery, embodied in practices, including discursive practices, and finally, there is an emphasis on interest and power. As Tronto has argued, there is “a great danger in thinking of care as a commodity, as purchased services, rather than as a process” and there is a need to understand “the full process of care, which includes attentiveness to needs and the allocation of responsibility” (Tronto, 2010, pp. 164–165).

Bourdieu (1990) was a key figure in the early use of practice theory in organisational studies, and as a practising ethnographer, one of his main concerns was how to study and represent practice. He was also motivated by a desire to tackle the role of the education system in social mobility and social justice, and “wanted school learning to be an instrument for social integration” instead of the acquisition of knowledge being “a mechanism of social division” (Robbins, 2008, p. 32). Bourdieu’s theory of practice was essentially relational, in that individuals and activities are seen as definable in relation to each other. There have been different interpretations of his concept of habitus, but it is at the heart of his debate about how to reconcile social structure and individual agency, and it conceptualises the relation between the objective and the subjective, and how social facts become internalised (Maton, 2008). In researching the antecedents of ethical childcare practice, habitus is a useful concept. It is in some ways similar to the notion of Polanyi’s tacit knowledge (Nicolini, 2012a), and Giddens’s routinization (Giddens, 1984), which he defined as “the habitual, taken-for-granted

character of the vast bulk of the activities of day-to-day social life; the prevalence of familiar styles and forms of conduct". The nature of childcare practice and the relatively low academic qualifications of much of the workforce mean that unwritten rules, intuition, and the mastery of social and emotional skills are key requisites of effective practice, as I hope to demonstrate.

Bourdieu's relational perspective also helps to avoid an assumption that ethical decision-making can be reduced to individual agency, but instead takes a more contextual view of behaviour, encompassing both agency and structure, and focusing on the mutually interdependent layers of social reality. If habitus can be located at the agentic end of the relational continuum of structure and agency (Tatli et al., 2014), Bourdieu's concept of field can be seen as the structural context for ethical childcare; the regulatory framework and other sector-specific practices. Bourdieu's concept of capital is similarly relevant, particularly cultural capital, which is now named in the revised inspection framework (Ofsted, 2019c). The inclusion of it in early years practice recognises the role that it can play in social mobility, and it is therefore a key part of ethical provision. Mealtime etiquette for pre-school children is an example of cultural capital as part of practice which directly relates to ethical dilemmas in early years provision, when children from low-income families are not funded for meals, and potentially miss out on learning critical social skills, depending on the policies and practice of the nursery and the way funded hours are allocated.

Foucault is another highly influential figure in the field of practice theory, and his work on the 'micropractices of power' (Foucault, 1977; Naughton, 2005) is very relevant in an examination of influences on practice, particularly when considering ethical conduct in childcare settings, as the agency of practitioners will be determined by power relationships within settings. Foucault also identified the intimate relation between self-care and care for others (Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). His work on ethics encouraged a practice-based approach, and a consideration of how ethical practices are enacted, and an awareness that it is something done on a day-to-day basis rather than as discrete actions (Dey & Steyaert, 2016). Foucault recognised the relational aspects of practices of freedom, and encouraged a continuous commitment to everyday, mundane practices of freedom, seeing freedom as a practice rather than a telos. He also asserted the connection between power and knowledge and described how the

body is “invested with relations of power and domination” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). Foucault’s delineation of the complexity of power relations is particularly helpful when approaching ethical practice through the lens of practice theory; “The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others” (Foucault, 1982) which can therefore be applied to practices such as training, not just in direct instruction within the workplace.

The combination of practice theory and the ethics of care, then, will allow an exploration of the mundane routines of childcare practice, in order to discover the influences on how childcare is carried out. The question of whether childcare practice is high-quality and inclusive invites an inquiry into the influences that determine the ethicality of the practice, and the ethics of care provide a framework from which to assess that ethicality. Practice theory allows an examination of the granular detail of childcare and will hopefully elucidate elements of embodied care and tacit knowledge that comprise important features of effective ethical childcare.

### 3.2.3 Praxis

The concept of praxis, commonly defined as the application of theory to practice, may help in applying practice theory to ethical childcare practices. Hannah Arendt linked praxis to freedom and plurality, and also to dialogue (Arendt, 1958), and Paulo Freire emphasised the power and political potential of praxis; “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.” (Freire, 1970, p. 60) The neologism ‘praxeology’ has also been adopted with aims to “produce knowledge and actions which are directly useful to a group of people” (Pascal & Bertram, 2012) and they describe praxeological research as ‘profoundly political’ in its democratisation, with its encouragement to practitioners to deeply question how and why things are done, and its strong ethical code of action, giving voice and power to all those involved. The focus on praxis, they argue, enables practicalities, competencies, processes and actions to recognise the influence of powers and values in the childcare environment. The potential for praxis to be a unifying concept in social justice leadership has been argued in relation to school leadership, “because it captures the dynamic interplay between the reflection and action needed for this work in schools” (Furman, 2012, p. 213). Furman also argues that school leadership programmes need to have “a clearer and more holistic framework regarding the

*capacities* needed by social justice leaders” (Furman, 2012, p. 201). The examples she then gives focus on reflection, interaction and the development of relationships across a range of dimensions, from micro to macro.

Another feature of practice theory that is particularly relevant for the early years sector is that “for practice theory, people count” (Whittington, 2006, p. 615) and that it takes account of the “connections between what goes on deep inside organizations and broader phenomena outside” (ibid p617). Whittington makes a useful distinction between ‘practices,’ which he used to refer to “shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’, this last in the broadest sense” and ‘praxis’ which refers to the actual activity of practitioners, “what people do in practice.” He then proposes a framework for strategy practice research, which is itself beyond the scope of this research, but which offers a useful perspective, particularly in linking the way in which “intra-organizational praxis is marked by extra-organizational practices; successful practices are carried out by influential practitioners; praxis forms practitioners” (ibid p627). I will explore this idea further in the research analysis.

One application of this approach can be seen in the research carried out in the context of school leadership, and which concluded that pedagogical leadership “is praxis as it is concerned with the actions and the processes of constructing or deconstructing knowledge according to the context of the learning groups and individuals” taking social context into account, and recognising the complexity of interactions of children, adults and the ecology of the community (Male & Palaiologou, 2015). This interpretation of praxis resonates with ethical practice in the early years sector, which will require practitioners to question prescribed policies and practice if they are not in the best interests of the children. One reason for the need for pedagogical praxis has been identified as the current context of “an ideological struggle concerning the value of play within the sector as opposed to a climate of child performativity” (Palaiologou & Male, 2019, p. 23). The disconnect between sector values and political policy reforms in the UK highlights the need for a greater understanding of the practical implications of policy on pedagogy and practice.

### 3.2.4 Phronesis

Finally, the concept of phronesis is also a term which may prove to be helpful in the analysis of ethical early year practices, and is linked to praxis, with some scholars seeing phronesis as reflection on the action of praxis, or the wisdom of experience (Pascal & Bertram, 2012). Others refer to phronesis as practical knowledge, or practical wisdom, and the term is usually associated with Aristotle, in several useful explorations of his conception of phronesis (Dunne, 1993; MacIntyre, 1981; Nyberg, 2008). In particular, the emphasis on the association with virtue ethics (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2022) is helpful in examining the role of ethical intentions as part of the practitioner's application of practical wisdom in situations which require a response outside of rule-bound procedures; using instinctive responses which have been developed through experience within the sector. When practitioners are immersed in childcare practices, they experience the work physically, through their emotions, sometimes intellectually, and with moral values also influencing their actions, to a greater or lesser extent. Phronesis helps to pinpoint the situatedness of specific responses, which are inevitably based on lived experiences, both within and prior to the work situation. The aspect of phronesis that I think will be most helpful in this research is the performative, embodied, instinctive element, or "engaged judgement" (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014) that takes account very specific situations, with practitioners using their senses, embodied and instinctive reactions, and in the context of individual and collective moral values.

## 3.3 What kind of practice theory?

### 3.3.1 Practice and process studies

Early years education increasingly focuses on process, not product, demonstrated by a move away from children being pressured or encouraged to take home a painting or collage at the end of their nursery session as evidence that they'd had a productive, educative experience. Modern technology, sharing photos and videos with parents, has helped to demonstrate the learning that takes place in messy play, for example, that has no 'product' at the end. It is not surprising that Brofenbrenner is a popular theorist on early years training courses. He took a holistic approach to childhood, emphasising the influence of processes and conditions on children's development. Process, which he defined as "forms of interaction between organism and

environment” was placed at the core of his bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1979). One of the key features of process research is the sensitivity to time, which is particularly important when studying dynamic situations and the way in which routines and practices evolve.

The first wave of process theorizing began in the late 1960s (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016) with writers like Weick, although Weick himself admitted that he rarely used the term process (Weick, 2010). He nevertheless drew attention to a view of organising as a process, rather than organisation as a static phenomenon. A second wave of process research highlighted even further the importance of experience and temporality, including writers who focused on the complexity and ever-changing nature of reality and on ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’ (Shotter, 2006). This research uses practice theory as a perspective through which to explore the influences on practice within early years settings, but a sensitivity to process is a complementary approach. A processual worldview is “an orientation, not a doctrine” (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016, p. 16) and this has a natural affinity to the world of child development and of the ways in which practitioners work to support that development in changing circumstances and with children from varied backgrounds.

The distinction between first wave ‘weak’ process theory, underpinned by a “*substance* ontology” (Sandberg et al., 2015) and the second wave of ‘strong’ process theory, with its “*becoming* ontology” is perhaps best illustrated by the distinction between the chronological sequence of clock time and the felt experience of time. A ‘strong’ process perspective prioritises perceptions rather than entities, and this enables a focus on relationships and entanglements that constitute organising processes (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). This is potentially a useful perspective for early years organisations, in which relationships have a direct influence on the provision. A nursery, with that view, is always evolving and changing, depending on relationships and actions, and the influence of external forces, rather than a static entity which remains stable without conscious interventions.

In terms of practice theory, the range of perspectives is equally diverse, and is best explained by using illustrative examples of the application of a practice perspective. In the context of the early years sector, there are several relevant applications, and in the next section I will begin with the way in which a practice theory perspective can be

applied to learning and professional development. An overview of key theorists and texts is also provided below in table four. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review, but highlights key authors that have influenced this research.

Table 4 Practice Theorists and Key Texts

<b>Key Authors</b>	<b>Key Texts (&amp; dates)</b>	<b>Relevance to this research</b>
Argyris & Schon Schon	Theory in Practice (1974) The Reflective Practitioner (1983)	Distinguished between espoused theories and theories-in-use; began exploring tacit knowing-in-action; created a conceptual framework for describing interpersonal action; developed reflection-in-action
Bourdieu	Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977)	Highly influential, and introduced and developed the concepts of capital, habitus and the field. His conceptual frameworks bridged structure and agency, objectivism and subjectivism, and emphasised relationality in his theory of practice
Foucault	Discipline and Punish (1977) The Subject and Power (1982)	Highly influential, within early years and ethics as well as in practice theory, but particularly in terms of influences of power, practices of freedom and deconstruction.
Giddens	The Constitution of Society (1984)	Useful analysis of agency and structure, and developed the notion of practical consciousness as part of his structuration theory
Shotter	Cultural Politics of Everyday Life (1993)	Social constructionist and psychologist who argued for understandings of human activity 'from within' and through discourse
Weick	Sensemaking in Organizations (1995)	Leading scholar on sensemaking
Lave & Wenger	Situated Learning (1991)	Describes apprenticeships in a process of legitimate peripheral participation



Wenger	Communities of Practice (1997)	Situates learning in communities of practice as part of a social learning theory
Schatzki	Social Practices (1996) & The Site of the Social (2002)	Explores the way in which social life is constituted in social practices, and details the elements of practices
Gherardi	Practice-based Theorising on Learning and Knowing in Organisations (2000)	A practice theorist with a particular interest in organisational learning and knowing, and also a feminist with an interest in gender and care as situated knowing
Langley	Strategies for Theorizing from Process Data (1999)	Practice theorist and economist, focusing on strategy and process studies of change
Maitlis	The Social Processes of Organizational Sensemaking (2005)	Created a typology of sensemaking and analysed the sensemaking processes within organisations
Whittington	Completing the Practice Turn in Strategy Research (2006)	Main focus on strategy as practice, applying practice theory to strategic management
Sandberg	Understanding Human Competence at Work (2000)	Practice theorist with a focus on competence and sensemaking (esp with Tsoukas (2015,2020) including a typology of sensemaking
Tsoukas	On Organizational Becoming (2002) Do We Really Understand Tacit Knowledge? (2005)	Practice theorist with extensive interests in organisational knowledge and learning, sensemaking and ethical decision-making. Phenomenological approach.
Nicolini	Practice Theory, Work, & Organization (2012)	A practice theorist with experience of applying practice-based approaches in

		organisations, and with an interest in action-based learning
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### 3.3.2 Situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation

The situated character of understanding, communication and learning is very evident in early years settings, where practice grounds learning, and learning itself is a practice, or a family of them (Hanks, 1991). The practice and processes of learning within organisations have been studied in many different ways, but two helpful concepts in studying the way ethical practice in nurseries might become embedded are that of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The increased awareness of the importance of the home learning environment for children (Melhuish et al., 2008) is an indication of the widespread understanding of the situated nature of learning in the early years sector, but for adults too, vocational training in early years has for many years recognised the importance of learning in work placements. The relative success of different training formats is an issue that arose many times in the research interviews, and the learning that takes place within communities of practice in nurseries provide good examples of the observation in other cases of apprenticeships, “that there is very little observable teaching; the more basic phenomenon is learning. The practice of the community creates the potential “curriculum” in the broadest sense” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 92).

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) may have clunky terminology but it captures the way in which inexperienced early years practitioners learn the knowledge, skills and attributes that make competent practitioners who also have an ethic of care. Lave and Wenger’s model describes the way in which newcomers are initially peripheral, but with “participation as a way of learning” and gradually becoming absorbed in the “culture of practice.” The way in which apprentices or newcomers learn how to become “legitimate” practitioners includes “learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants” and this is very true of discourse within early years settings, when practitioners are made aware of the impact of their words. Practitioners learn the difference between saying to a child “stop shouting” and “let’s talk quietly”, the difference between closed and open questions, and the need to allow children time to think before expecting their response, but this is done by role modelling more than

by giving neuroscientific explanations. LPP is described as being “more than just a process of learning...it is a reciprocal relation between persons and practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 116), which will make it a useful concept for analysing the way in which ethical practice is embedded, rather than taught.

### 3.3.3 Communities of practice

Communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) within the early years sector can have a direct impact on practice, and are therefore potential influences that I will evaluate in the analysis of interview data. Communities of practice which are sector-wide include those which follow a specific pedagogy or curriculum approach, such as (Montessori, 1912), Froebel (Bruce, 2021), Forest Schools (FSA, 2022) or Pikler (Tardos, 2010) but also more generally, the kind of “informal community of people” (Zeedyk, 2022) on social media of schools of thought in favour of, for example, attachment-led care (Conkbayir, 2017; Zeedyk, 2013). Communities of practice may also be created by individuals whose ethos is shared by others in the sector, such as the Play Iceland initiative (Shea, 2022). The concept of professional love is also one with a growing influence (Gerhardt, 2004; Goldstein, 1994; Page, 2017, 2018), and this is directly relevant to the ethic of care and its implementation in nurseries. The extent of influence any of these have on practice within early years settings will inevitably depend on whether the setting has adopted the ethos or approach, or whether individuals within those settings are influenced personally, but may not be able to implement the approach as fully as they might like to do.

The “learning-based theory of the social order” (Wenger, 1998, p. 15) that describes the concept of communities of practice is particularly relevant for this research, which is attempting to analyse the way in which ethical meaning may be embedded in everyday childcare practice. The placing of practice as “the source of coherence of a community” (Wenger, 1998, p. 73) resonates in a sector which has practice at its heart, particularly when there are tensions between professional perspectives about early years education and childcare, and between the relative importance of these two aspects of practice. Wenger’s concepts of engagement, imagination and alignment, as well as those of identification and negotiability, will provide useful tools for the analysis of learning within day nurseries, and his emphasis on meaning will serve as an introduction to the concept of sensemaking; “understanding in practice is the art of

choosing what to know and what to ignore in order to proceed with our lives” (Wenger, 1998, p. 41). Before discussing the concept of sensemaking, however, I will outline three other areas which will contribute to the discussion; pragmatism, embodiment, and routine dynamics.

#### 3.3.4 Pragmatism and practice theory

A focus on habits is also a key feature shared by both pragmatism and practice theory, with pragmatists recognising that habit is “much more than a mere tool in efficient and rational decision-making” and that habit has a “dispositional, rather than behavioural, orientation” (Simpson & Lorino, 2016, p. 56). Pragmatism also has an affinity with the ethics of care and with education, with Dewey noting the affinity between ‘caring’ and ‘mindful,’ and arguing that mind denotes interest in, and concern for, things; “Mind is care” (Bellacasa, 2017, p. 13). Key pragmatist theorists such as (Dewey, 1938) and (James, 2000) were also significant figures in educational theory. A discussion about James’s or Dewey’s importance in the field of pedagogy would be outside the scope of this research, but their understanding of the importance of context, the agency of children in their own learning, and the importance of play, is relevant. Dewey and James were part of the progressive movement in education that rejected the kind of “facts alone” approach portrayed in Dickens’s *Hard Times*. Their recognition of the dehumanising aspects of the Victorian educational system arose from their understanding of psychology as well as philosophy, and their pragmatist world view acknowledged both the subjectivity of ‘truth’ and also the importance of diversity, in its broadest sense.

Pragmatism is also compatible with my feminist perspective. As Hamington(2012) argues, in his discussion of performative care in hospitality, feminist-pragmatist inquiry integrates embodiment as a dimension of knowledge, and is, I think, well suited to the relational and tactile dimension of early years practice. It is also allows a more inclusive framework of identity-based experiences, focusing on women’s experiences of childcare, but extending intersectionally to everyone. Pragmatism’s emphasis on experience resonates with the experiential learning that is at the heart of early years practice, but can also be “an ideal framework for synthesising embodied care and the caring imagination into a social philosophy of care” (Hamington, 2004, p. 96).

The kind of caring hospitality described by Hamington (2012), using Addams's Hull House as an example, echoes the vision of the Children's House envisaged by (Montessori, 1912) and (Martin, 1992). Addams's work at Hull House exemplified social habits of care, illustrating the ways in which pragmatism, with its emphasis on experience, can be "an ideal framework for synthesising embodied care and the caring imagination into a social philosophy of care" (Hamington, 2004, p. 96). Addams had a relational approach to morality, believing that knowing someone opened the possibility of caring for them, and that habits of embodied care, such as active listening, were a proactive way to inculcate caring attitudes.

Montessori similarly emphasised the importance of experiential learning, believing that children learn best through sensory experiences (Hainstock, 1997). Martin drew extensively on Montessori's educational philosophy in her attempts to reclaim home-like qualities for educational settings, as well as endorsing the pragmatist approach of John Dewey and William James. Pragmatism shares assumptions about relationality and agency with routine dynamics, as will be discussed further on, but at a fundamental level, pragmatism's "problem-solving philosophy" draws attention to key moments within practices. The recognition of the interplay of "habit, emotion and cognition" (Dionysiou, 2021, p. 70) helps to explore ethical care practices, and the embodiment of caring habits is one aspect of this, with embodiment itself being a concept which needs to be explored within the context of childcare practices.

### 3.4 Embodied care

#### 3.4.1 Embodiment in care

The intersection of the ethics of care literature and practice theory is most clearly evident in the concept of embodied care, developed primarily by Hamington as a "progression from current understandings of care ethics" (Hamington, 2004, p. 5). He describes three "interrelated aspects: *caring knowledge*, *caring imagination*, and *caring habits*" (Hamington, 2004, p. 4) and these provide a useful framework for considering the application of both the ethics of care and practice theory to early years practice. Hamington makes it clear that knowledge itself is not sufficient in itself to instigate caring, but that knowledge is a pre-requisite for care, and is positively correlated with a potential for care. This echoes Tronto's four phases of the ethic of

care, whereby “caring about” identifies the needs of others, prior to the decision to “take care of” and then provide “care-giving”, concluding with “care receiving” reflexivity (Tronto, 1993). Hamington calls on the phenomenological argument of Merleau-Ponty, that “the body is not simply the vehicle for acquiring knowledge but also a participant in creating meaning” (Hamington, 2004, p. 45).

Practice theory also recognises knowledge as being “sensible” (Gherardi, 2012) and embodied, and both Hamington and Gherardi see knowledge as collective, situated and socially constructed. This has a clear affinity with the world of early years and childcare, as well as with the ethics of care. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) has been developed over recent years by developmental psychologists such as Zeedyk, who explains why infants’ fear of abandonment “is not imagined but is physiological” (Zeedyk, 2013, p. 13) and how “styles of self-regulation become knitted into our body” (Zeedyk, 2013, p. 20). The importance of cuddles for children’s levels of oxytocin is widely known by early years academics, and by many practitioners, and one of the few observational studies of care ethics in practice asserts the importance of “how” rather than “what” care is given (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Ruddick, an early proponent of care ethics, took a “practicalist” view of the “relation between mothering and thinking” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 13) and infant feeding practices provide a clear example of the importance of bodily knowledge, particularly in breastfeeding.

Ever since Harlow’s behavioural science studies into the importance of maternal contact for infant rhesus monkeys (Harlow et al., 1965), and subsequent work by child psychologists such as Bowlby, early years practice has increasingly recognised the need to provide physical comfort and cuddling while providing nourishment, and breastfeeding in particular illustrates how knowledge is sometimes more embodied than cognitive. An understanding of the mechanics of milk production, the let-down reflex and physical position of latching-on, can help new mothers learn to breastfeed, but instinctive, embodied knowledge and confidence have a more significant role to play, along with psycho-social factors such as having supportive partners or family members. As one process theorist argues “skilful knowing contains an ineffable element; it is based on an act of personal insight that is essentially inarticulable” (Tsoukas, 2002, p. 14). The oxytocin released by infants being cuddled is also a vital physiological ingredient in successful breastfeeding, and the physical comfort, bodily

confidence and, to an extent, the physical and emotional characteristics of both mother and baby are more effective than any theoretical knowledge in developing skilful breastfeeding. The importance of eye contact between child-carer and baby is illustrated by Zeedyk's Still Face Procedure (Zeedyk, 1994), and is increasingly an area of concern with the prevalence of smartphone usage, and full attentiveness is equally important in a non-domestic setting.

A recent All-Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood reported that the experience of nurturing touch for infants "is now known to be an essential requirement for social brain development and the subsequent development of secure attachment" (Clark, 2020, p. 5) and refers back to the long-term impact of the severe social deprivation of Romanian orphans in Ceausescu's era (Mackes et al., 2020). The report calls for "positive touch work" to become an established part of the school curriculum, and for a wider recognition of the importance of caring touch for children's physical, psychological and emotional growth. It recommends that training for childcare professionals should aim to establish "nurturing, touch-based, contingent and sensitively responsive interaction between infant and caregiver" (Clark, 2020, p. 30) and that for this to be effective in nurseries, "permitting circumstances" need to be in place, which widens the scope of the influencing factors beyond the individual's intentions, and refers back to the discussion about organisational factors affecting the quality of early years provision. The report's discussion about the eventual rejection of Truby King's notoriously rigid regime of infant feeding in favour of more responsive methods advocated by Benjamin Spock pinpoints an area in which maternal bodily instincts (to comfort and nurture a crying infant) were for many years suppressed in a submission to supposed expert advice, which unwittingly caused severe distress for both mothers and their infants.

#### 3.4.2 Caring imagination, empathy, and caring dispositions

Caring imagination is the second of Hamington's three aspects of embodied care, and he links this firstly to empathy, which he traces back to Adam Smith's and David Hume's sympathetic approach to moral imagination (Hamington, 2004, p. 67) – empathy itself being a term not used until the twentieth century (Slote, 2007). Other writers have also commented on the motivation for caring being dependent on the human capacity for empathy, including Slote, but his emphasis is on philosophical

issues of moral distinctions, arguing that empathy can be used as a criterion for moral evaluation. He prioritises empathy over caring relations, and, as Noddings herself commented, he perhaps “packed too much into *empathy*” and she argues instead that receptive attention is a prerequisite for empathy which then leads to “*motivational displacement*” in ethical caring situations, (as opposed to what Noddings calls “natural” caring) (Noddings, 2010a, p. 9). Hamington’s perspective on empathy is that it is crucial in extending the boundary of care beyond those with whom we are familiar, and he noted the similarity with Noddings’s distinction between natural and ethical caring, noting that “for Noddings, ethical caring involves reflection and decision.” (Hamington, 2004, p. 68). He then discusses critical reflection as a further aspect of caring imagination, using an example of a parent balancing potentially conflicting demands for a child’s protection and autonomy, which is a familiar dilemma to early years practitioners, particularly with the increased awareness of the importance of “risky play” (Gill, 2007; Sandseter, 2009).

Hamington’s third aspect of the caring imagination is the psycho-social context, and in particular the need to transcend the personal subject position without negating it. This aspect addresses the feminist concerns that care ethics are potentially complicit in supporting oppressive social systems, which also touches on the concept of emotional labour, covered earlier. It also resonates with the concept of play in early years settings, which provides opportunities for children to act out caring behaviours. Children love to mimic adults, and their role play often reflects the caring (or sometimes, sadly, uncaring) behaviours they have themselves experienced. This brings us to the third aspect of embodied care discussed by Hamington, that of caring habits, which is also, I feel, the area which has the strongest argument for care being embodied.

Hamington argues that “attending to and reinforcing the habits of care can inculcate a caring disposition” (Hamington, 2004, p. 85) and that “habit is a type of embodied knowledge” (Hamington, 2004, p. 56). This brings us back to the concept of tacit knowledge, which in the sphere of early years practice can easily be recognised in the bodily habits and skills of soothing distressed children, deft but gentle physical care routines of changing nappies, dressing, and helping to wipe noses or clean hands and faces. New parents are consciously aware of learning care techniques, and then the



methods used become habitual over a period of time, and the same applies to new early years practitioners, whose care practice habits are learned in their first few years' experience. Hamington also highlights the "intertwining of embodied and cognitive knowledge" (Hamington, 2004, p. 58) in situations where children may exhibit distress for trivial reasons (not being allowed to help themselves to sweets in a supermarket, for example). Dealing with distressed children when the distress is perceived to be unreasonable, is where childcare practice enters the field of moral dilemmas. It is also an area where poor caring habits come to light – whether or not a child's distress is acknowledged or dismissed, and whether sufficient allowance is made for a young child's inability to self-regulate their emotions. Active listening, a social habit of care that Hamington ascribes to the work of Jane Addams in particular, is a key feature of ethical early years practice.

### 3.4.3 Embodied perception and unconscious caring habits

Another feature of high-quality childcare practice that relies on tacit knowledge and caring habits is one which Hamington traces back to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, and in particular his emphasis on perception (Hamington, 2004). As Hamington argues, embodied perception can help to create unconscious caring habits. Being able to perceive subtle changes in children's behaviour or emotional state can be a key aspect of responsiveness which can help to develop a sense of others' needs, which is particularly helpful when working with children who may not be able to articulate their emotional or physical feelings. It enables complexity and subtlety in caring responses and can be a mixture of articulated knowledge as well as tacit corporeal understanding. This embodied knowledge is evident in caring interactions and can easily be seen in the way skilful practitioners will position themselves in relation to the children in their care in ways which allow tactile as well as vocal reassurance and responsiveness for unsettled or distressed children. The extent to which caring habits are conscious or tacit will probably be variable between practitioners, and is likely to be more evident in situations where there are barriers to effective caring, as in recent observations which highlighted socio-political factors as hindering the implementation of care ethics in early years settings (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

There is increasing recognition of the importance of tactile experience for very young infants (Montagu, 1971) and the need for cuddling and stroking for children's socioemotional and physical well-being beyond infancy (Field, 2010). Touch is a basic behavioural need, and when a child's need for affectionate touching is not met at home, it is even more critical that early years provisions are able to recognise and meet that need. Touch is an important aspect of ethical childcare practices, as is the need for early years practitioners to be aware of how important it is for children to feel socioemotionally secure when at nursery, and the factors that might influence that.

One final aspect of embodiment in the childcare practices in early years settings is the way in which the tactile nature of the work can be seen as providing fulfilling emotional attachments for practitioners, which can then influence the quality of the emotional environment within the nursery (Boyer et al., 2013). There is also a potential artistry to consider; caregivers have been described as "artists in terms of being aesthetically attuned to the bodies, actions, and relations of themselves and others" (Hamington, 2015) with a performative aspect which helpfully emphasises the embodied nature of care. There is, however, also a potential for exploitation through emotional labour, and the physicality and risks of close relationships with key children was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Caring actions are often routinised, and I will now move on to consider the importance of routines within childcare settings, and the relevance of the literature on routine dynamics.

### 3.5 Routine Dynamics

#### 3.5.1 The relevance of routine dynamics to childcare practices

Childcare practices can be seen as recognisable patterns of actions, and routine dynamics is therefore a useful approach to examine the ways in which they emerge, replicate and change (Feldman, Pentland, Adderio, et al., 2021). Practice theory takes practice as the unit of analysis, and routines are a particular kind of practice, being "task-oriented sequences of action that recur within a local context and where there is often an effort at reflective regulation or management" (Feldman, 2021, p. 23). While not all practices are routines, all routines are practices, and by examining the routines within childcare settings, a routine dynamics perspective helps to transcend the dualism of agency/structure and of individual/institutional influences. The intention and

awareness within a childcare routine are important factors when considering the ethical nature of a practice, and key concepts of routine dynamics are particularly relevant to this research.

The idea that routines are effortful and emergent accomplishments (Feldman, Pentland, Adderio, et al., 2021) draws attention to the agency within routines, but also the ways in which there are variations, which then lead to changes. The distinction between performative and ostensive aspects of routines is also particularly helpful, in examining the differences between the 'text-book' idealised version of a care routine (the ostensive aspect) and the reality of the way a care routine is carried out in practice (the performative aspect). The relationship between rules and practice will be explored in the empirical research. The situated nature of routines, importance of materiality and the relationality within them are all applicable to childcare practices, and the way in which practices are learned is a particularly important aspect of ethical practice, as is the embodiment of routines and practices.

### 3.5.2 The creation of childcare routines

Practice theory has helped to shift the understanding of routines away from the idea of routines as standard operating procedures that are generally static, to a greater awareness of the ways in which the performative aspect of routines has a recursive relationship with the ostensive aspect. Seeing routines as collective accomplishments raises the question of how routines are created, from a joint, situated understanding of a situation, shared goals or intentions, and social interaction between participants. Examining the ways in which childcare routines such as nappy changing, mealtimes and sleep times are organised and implemented will require an understanding of the role of individual agency within organisational policies. Routines cut across all levels of an organisation, as well as different functions, and multiple participants, (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013) and the relational aspect of routine-creation and routine dynamics will help to provide insight into this process.

### 3.5.3 Sociomateriality

There has been very little research done in terms of sociomateriality in early years settings, and in reviewing the literature, I have only focused on areas which have a direct link to ethical practice. One example of its potential importance can be seen in

the research data that sat behind Zeedyk's blog on buggies, and the difference it makes when buggies are forward or backward facing, (or, in her terminology, the latter being 'toward' the buggy pusher). Her data clearly showed a strong correlation between the type of buggy and the amount of interaction, language and laughter of both parent and child, and she speculates that the increase in the number of infants and toddlers sleeping in 'toward' facing buggies was a reflection of their reduction in stress by being able to maintain visual contact and enjoy increased attentiveness from their carer. She suggests that the increasingly popular forward facing style of buggy may inadvertently be generating stress for infants, and that it is driven by changing cultural and technical demands (foldability to go into cars) and a misunderstanding by parents both of the importance of their emotional availability for their infants and toddlers, and the assumption that very young children might benefit from looking out onto the world (Zeedyk, 2008). Her research was anticipated by a psychiatrist in 1948 observing that with "the introduction of the perambulator the need for adequate body contact is often forgotten" (Montagu, 1971, p. 96).

Other sociomaterial considerations include sleeping arrangements (cots, spread beds, or the current trend in nurseries for 'coracle' style beds) and of chairs and tables. One of the few articles to deal specifically with early years furniture considers the position of the small chair in early childhood settings, arguing that "the small chair is a contentious and ambiguous artefact" which is both taken for granted and can be problematic (Bone, 2019). Montessori is acknowledged to have introduced 'child-sized' furniture, and was quite radical in her assertion that "the principle of slavery still pervades pedagogy...I need only give one proof – the stationary desks and chairs." (Montessori, 1912, p. 16). Other potentially fruitful aspects of materiality are the artifacts within childcare practice, including boundary objects such as comforters, pacifiers, hygiene consumables, furnishings, and toys. Technology is another increasingly important area of sociomateriality within childcare settings, and there is also a wider issue of nursery design, both within buildings and externally in outdoor play areas or entrances. The impact of material aspects of childcare settings is increasingly relevant to discussions of ethical practice, recognising that the skills and capabilities of practitioners are mediated by the capabilities of the tools and instruments being used (D'Adderio, 2021), and the quality of childcare can be

influenced by the nursery environment, from nursery design (Dudek, 2013) to the use of colour and soft furnishings (Jarman, 2013).

## 3.6 Sensemaking

### 3.6.1 Sensemaking as a developing perspective

An exploration of influences on ethical practice needs to consider intentionality and inevitably includes a focus on ethical decision-making, which in its turn leads to a consideration of sensemaking, particularly when using practice theory as an overarching approach. Sensemaking is “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” and is an activity that is “central to organising” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It is relevant for this research because it offers a theoretical concept that can help to analyse the way in which ethical intentions affect practices in the early years sector. It is particularly useful for examining social processes, including those that are affected by power and emotions, and the embodied and sociomaterial nature of practices, all of which are prevalent in early years practice. Sensemaking is a perspective, or a set of heuristics, rather than a single theory, (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995) and can be applied to individuals, but also offers a way of understanding how organisational culture and behaviours develop. I am particularly interested in the way ethical behaviours are facilitated or hindered, so the kind of sensemaking I will both use and apply in my research analysis is that of ethical sensemaking. A brief overview of the literature of sensemaking will help to explain why it is appropriate for this research.

Sensemaking has the ability to “capture the lived experience of organising” (Maitlis et al., 2013). Weick is widely regarded as one of the first key scholars of sensemaking, but as he acknowledged himself, the concept has its roots with the philosophers and psychologists William James, George Herbert Mead, who was also a sociologist, and John Dewey, who was also an educationalist. Their pragmatist approach focused attention on social processes as a way of understanding the world, in a social constructionist approach which has been developed by many writers across different disciplines. I recognise the enduring value of those writers, but will here focus on more recent and current scholars of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Mills, Thurlow and Mills,

2010; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, 2020; Fachin and Langley, 2017; Dwyer, Hardy and Tsoukas, 2021). Weick, for example, insisted on the retrospective character of sensemaking, capturing this in the reiterated question “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” (Weick, 1995, p. 12) but he also viewed sensemaking as central to the social psychology of organisations, and an inherently social action which helps to preserve identity. Weick also explained that sensemaking is not synonymous with interpretation; rather, interpretation is a component of sensemaking.

Weick saw language, rather than cognition, as the locus of sensemaking, and he recognised the importance and impact of stories within organisations (Weick, 2012). His relevance for this research is also in the way in which he recognised the enactive nature of sensemaking, which was taken up by later researchers, particularly in the way sensemaking can be embodied and the influence of emotions (Maitlis, Vogus and Lawrence, 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Weick suggested that sensemaking should be of particular concern to organisations which are more “open” and influenced by environmental factors (Weick, 1995). Childcare settings deal with children and families who are directly and immediately influenced by political, social, economic and emotional factors, and successful provision has to learn to adapt to changing levels of funding, market conditions, regulations, and economic circumstances. Practitioners also have to tailor their practice to deal with a wide range of very different and individual needs of children and parents. Sensemaking is therefore a continual process for many adults within childcare settings, seeking to understand the appropriate response to situations which can change rapidly and dramatically throughout the day, and from day to day.

The debate about what triggers or initiates sensemaking has led to two typologies being developed, the first by Sally Maitlis, who identified distinct forms of organisational sensemaking according to the level of sensegiving taking place, whether by leaders or stakeholders (Maitlis, 2005). Sensegiving is taken to mean the process of attempting to influence sensemaking toward an organisation’s preferred interpretation of a situation, and which is seen as “a fundamental leadership activity within organisational sensemaking.” She concluded that high levels of sensegiving by both led to “guided organisational sensemaking” with high levels of animation and

control, and an emergent series of actions that is internally consistent. From her data, consisting of accounts from different types of orchestras, Maitlis drew further conclusions about the fragmentation of sensemaking in situations where either leaders, stakeholders, or both, had low levels of sensegiving. I found the categorisation of four forms of organisational sensemaking both insightful and limited, although the two-by-two matrix diagram perhaps oversimplifies the processes involved, and the relationships between the factors being described. It would also need applying to other sectors in order to test out the reliability of the findings.

A second typology of sensemaking was created by Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020). Their four types of sensemaking are based on the differences between the purpose of the sensemaking process and their core constituents, as well as their ontological category. The first type is “immanent” sensemaking, which is described as “absorbed coping.” This refers to the kind of routine activities which require minimal cognitive-discursive sensing, and the responses that might be considered subconscious and instinctive by experienced practitioners or agents. This, I feel, is a helpful way to frame the kind of sensemaking that takes place within childcare settings when practitioners are working out how to deal with distressed toddlers, for example. There is no rule book to follow, but more of a reliance on embodied skills and intuition. Secondly, “involved-deliberate” sensemaking is portrayed as a more conscious and probably discursive situation, where practitioners might debate the correct course of action; whether a child’s minor injury or ill-health requires external referral to parents or health professionals, for example. A third form of sensemaking is described as “detached-deliberate,” and this would apply to the kind of retrospective debate about problematic situations, and interpretations of external policies and guidance; the kind that took place in nurseries during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example. Finally, “representational” sensemaking takes the detachment a step further and would apply to the kind of situations that might involve external parties; investigations of accidents or complaints, for example. This typology provides a useful perspective for exploring the sensemaking processes within early years settings and may be further adapted to focus on the ethical aspect of sensemaking. I will use both typologies in my later analysis.

### 3.6.2 Sensemaking and practitioner agency

It has been suggested that sensemaking, in using proactive terminology rather than describing reactive responses, may exaggerate agency, and underestimate the extent of the influence of macro forces such as mass media and government agencies (Weick et al., 2005). Ethical decision-making models focus on moral reasoning, which implies a rationalist approach to ethical behaviour which has limited relevance to a sector in which decisions and actions may be more frequently instinctive, and based on habitual responses. Leader sensemaking strategies can involve integrating diverse sources of information; forecasting outcomes; reflecting on prior experience or learning, and regulating personal emotions (Thiel et al., 2012). At a practitioner level, however, there are less likely to be ethical dilemmas to deal with, than an ongoing kind of ‘absorbed coping,’ (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) which can be seen as ethical sensemaking, rather than ethical decision-making.

Sensemaking has also been described as beginning with “what typically goes unnoticed, the habits of language and action in everyday life” but which triggers investigation “where the invisible coherence becomes visible,” and particularly in breakdowns of normal organisational protocols which have resulted in accidents or incidents. There is a tendency to emphasise instrumentality in the attempts to make sense of events, and “an automatic reliance on default frames, categories and narratives that allow individuals to order and depict their circumstances” (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014, p. 537). Practitioner agency needs to be examined within the socio-material context of specific situations, and with an awareness that sense is inevitably retrospective in nature. Individuals are also influenced by their emotions, and “employees’ felt emotions have a significant effect on whether and how they engage in sensemaking” (Maitlis et al., 2013).

The process model of emotion in sensemaking proposed by Maitlis and her co-authors suggests that emotion plays an important role in both triggering and shaping the sensemaking process. The observation that negative emotions can trigger concern about a situation is one that has resonance for the early years sector. A common mantra within safeguarding training is not to think “what if I’m wrong” when a practitioner has an uneasy feeling about a child, and suspects there may be a potential safeguarding concern, but has no ‘evidence’ – the advice is to think “what if I’m right”



with the implication that to do nothing is potentially far more harmful (NSPCC, 2022). Sensemaking can be applicable to safeguarding concerns being raised, particularly as it often relies on the intuition of practitioners to identify potential issues. It is a relevant and helpful perspective to apply to the early years sector, but particularly in terms of examining the influences on ethical practice, and can be extended into a more specific concept, of ethical sensemaking.

### 3.6.3 Ethical sensemaking

Ethical sensemaking as a concept has usually focused on ethical decision-making, and the ways in which a mental model is generated in response to an ethical dilemma. Rather than the kind of measures suggested by psychologists, however, (Mumford et al., 2006), or the situational influences present in organisational dilemmas (Ness & Connelly, 2017), (Sonenshein, 2007) recognised the limited role of deliberate moral reasoning within day-to-day ethical sensemaking and instead proposed a 'sensemaking-intuition model.' The three stages of this model are potentially useful when applied to ethical sensemaking. The name of the first stage, 'issue construction' suggests a conscious process, but in fact Sonenshein emphasises the focus on how individuals create meaning from unfolding situations that are unexpected or unusual, and the way in which their perceptions are affected by their own expectations and underlying psychological processes; "individuals see what they expect to see, but they also see what they want to see" (Sonenshein, 2007, p. 1029). Mental models and social anchors also influence an individual's interpretation of a situation, and the second stage of the model then consists of 'intuitive judgement'. Intuitions are affected by individual moral codes and past experiences, but at a collective level, social pressures also have an impact. The final stage of the model is explanation and justification, and Sonenshein observes that individuals may describe their decisions in rationalist terms, even if the decision was made instinctively. Explanations may reflect normative standards, rather than being diagnostic of actual responses, which is an important consideration when analysing the research data.

## 3.7 Conclusion

I began this chapter by considering the terminology of practice, practices and practice theory, and ventured into the fields of tacit knowledge, praxis and phronesis. Each of these warrant deeper exploration, but will be used in the specific context of exploring

the research questions about the influences on ethical behaviours in the early years sector, so a comprehensive literature review on each concept would be beyond the scope of this research. Depending on their relevance to the data during analysis, I will return to, and potentially expand these areas. I focused on the areas of situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice, since each of these are relevant to the issue of how ethical practice is disseminated across organisations and the sector as a whole. Similarly, embodiment and routine dynamics will help to shed insights into the ways in which ethics of care can be embedded (and embodied) in childcare practices, which will help to provide answers to the question of how as well as whether, ethical practice can be facilitated and encouraged. Finally, I discuss sensemaking and the potential to apply an ethics of care perspective to it. In the next chapter I will describe my research methodology, and explain the rationale behind it.

## Chapter Four Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

A research focus on ethical sensemaking and the ethics of care presupposes an interest in ethics, and the philosophical stance underpinning my research methodology therefore needs to be explained. In this chapter I will explore my ontological assumptions, and the axiology and epistemological basis of my research. I then explain my personal interest and involvement in the research subject and the course of my research journey, and how this influenced my choice of methods. I discuss my research paradigm and relational methodology, and the impact of my feminist stance, which contributes to the research purpose. I then outline the research strategy and design and explain my choice of research methods, including how these changed and were adapted as the research progressed, and how I undertook the analysis. Finally, I engage with the ethical issues of the research and the importance of reflexivity, particularly about my positionality. In detailing my research journey I also explain how the concept of ethical sensemaking became a central focus.

### 4.2 My Research Philosophy

#### 4.2.1 Ontological assumptions

My ontology, which has implications for my choice of research questions and methods (Al-Amoudi & O'Mahoney, 2016), has progressed from what I now recognise as a positivist “naïve realism” (Lincoln et al., 2018) in earlier years. I increasingly recognised the socially constructed nature of truth and reality, which I suggest is a predictable trajectory associated with education. Children learn about the world through first-hand, sensory (a posteriori) experiences, and theoretical (a priori) understanding develops through education and intellectual processing. Donald Winnicott, an influential psychoanalyst and paediatrician, proposed that babies begin their lives “in a subjective or conceptual world” and that “objective perception” only becomes possible through parent-infant interaction, (Winnicott, 1971). This may be true, but as children develop, it is sensorimotor intelligence that defines their world, widening the perspective from the initial focus entirely on themselves, gradually accommodating the existence of others and wider phenomenon.

The transition from sensorimotor intelligence to conceptual thought in early childhood development (Piaget, 1955) continues to develop into adulthood, when we usually become increasingly aware of the ways in which information provided by our senses

can be misleading, and that reality is “related to knowledge and can be totally separate from or a construction of the mind.” (Howell, 2013, p. 2) The journey from accepting facts and reality at face value, to developing a more questioning and sceptical mindset then progresses into reflexivity, when our personal subjectivity itself is analysed and problematized. My ontological position is one which recognises the subjective nature of my view of the world, while also trusting my personal sensory experiences and belief in scientific evidence in the physical world. This blend of constructivism and pragmatism places my research in an interpretivist paradigm; taking the view that there is an objective, natural reality, but that social reality is interpreted through the mind, and that this can only be understood by studying the actions of individuals (Gray, 2014).

To refine this ontology further I have adopted a largely critical realist ontology, in that I recognise the social, relational and contingent nature of entities. My research journey has led me into a critical realist approach, as well as a process ontology in my interest in the “becoming” aspects of organisational change. My approach has not been to adopt an ontology to work within a particular formula, but to engage in continuous philosophical reflection throughout the research journey, in an iteration of reflection and enquiry. In doing so, I hope to develop my understanding of the way in which insights are impacted by different views of the social world (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015). In particular, I need to understand how my own philosophical commitments influence the logic behind my research methods (Cunliffe, 2011) and have come to the conclusion that the non-dualist ontology of phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, which emphasises embodiment and primacy of perception (Daly, 2019), underpins many of my feminist beliefs. It has also been argued that amoral behaviour can be explained by a failure to recognise the relational ontological structures that underpin existence, and the resulting lack of connection (Daly, 2022) and that a phenomenological view of ethics sees “attentive percipience” as a form of care, which certainly sits naturally in the world view of many workers in the early years sector. My ontology being relational is unsurprising, given the influence of Piaget, Dewey and Vygotsky in the field of early years education, and their emphasis on development being in constant dialogue and relation with the world, in place of subject-object dualism (Stetsenko, 2008).

#### 4.2.2 Axiology

My involvement in the early years sector, and the use of my network and of personal diaries as data, means that I need to recognise the influence of my personal values and beliefs. Reflecting on the development of my passion for social justice, I realise that experiencing the growing inequality within current provision influenced my desire to tackle the issue, but also heightened my awareness of feminist issues. In a female-dominated sector, and in a field where diversity and equality are encouraged in working practices, I began with a naïve optimism that gender equality was improving, and that gender stereotyping was diminishing. As I gained more experience in the world of business and finance, I became increasingly aware of the inequalities embedded both in society and in business. My early environmental activism led to a realisation of the importance of political influence, and I have been inspired by the recent reframing of traditional economic models into a doughnut-shaped model, with an inner circle depicting a social foundation of basic needs and an outer 'ecological ceiling' framing the 'safe and just space for humanity' in a 'regenerative and distributive economy' (Dekema, 2018; Raworth, 2017).

I also recognise that my values and beliefs have been influenced by my personal life as well as my career. Having my own children led me into an involvement with maternity services and the politics of breastfeeding (Palmer, 1988), and when my parents became ill, I became an observer of and participant in their care, particularly of my father in his last year. I learned, the hard way, that small things are magnified in the lives of those in need of care, and the enormous impact of caring practices being undertaken in a caring manner, or not. I had already made a connection with the similarities between childcare and elder care, and when I then discovered care ethics during the early stages of this research, it was immediately obvious to me that this provided a strong framework for an exploration of ethical practice in the early years sector.

#### 4.2.3 Epistemology

In terms of my epistemological perspective, I consider my position to be situated primarily within social constructionism, with elements of critical realism. One reason for my moving away from positivism is the desire to understand the underlying causes

of why things occur and how things might be improved, but I do not believe that reality is wholly socially constructed. In some ways, the critical realist approach offers a way to explore a more nuanced representation of social reality than either positivism or constructivism might allow. Social constructionism is a familiar paradigm in early childhood studies, emphasising the importance of societal influences on children's development within their families and communities, and an understanding of the socio-cultural context of care and education in early childhood will underpin this research, drawing on frameworks from different disciplines (Bourdieu, 1977; Garbarino et al., 2018). As well as the context of my research lending itself to a social constructionist perspective, the focus on a workforce which is 98% female (Bonetti, 2019) inevitably foregrounds gender as an issue, as well as knowledges, which is 'a dominant theme in feminist qualitative research' (Olesen, 2018, p. 152). My epistemology, then, like my ontology, leads to a relational perspective, and to a kind of methodological bricolage (Pratt et al., 2020), which embraces the interactive processes which form the subject of my research, and which are shaped by personal history, educational background, gender, class, ethnicity and personalities.

My epistemology is also influenced by feminism, given that epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and beliefs. I hesitate to frame it as a feminist epistemology, although would claim that it sits within feminist research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006) given the emphasis on challenging inequalities which disproportionately affect women. The increased awareness of intersectionality and the importance of poststructural reflexivity is not the sole preserve of feminism, but feminist researchers have challenged conventional ways of collecting data, and feminism is an influence on my epistemology and methodology, rather than a guiding premise. It may now be helpful to trace my research journey in order to establish the rationale and motivation behind it, which inevitably underpin the methodology.

#### 4.2.4 The research journey

The original ambition of this research was to explore whether and how high quality, ethical childcare could be made financially sustainable as well as accessible and affordable to all. This idealistic ambition still underpins the research questions, which are, more specifically, to discover the factors that either facilitate or hinder the provision of ethical childcare. By 'ethical' I mean provision that is of high quality, but is

also inclusive, affordable and non-exploitative. The trigger of my experience at the public accounts select committee (House of Commons, 2016) was underpinned by a growing frustration with government funding policies, and a deep unease at the marketisation of the sector; after starting an entrepreneurial journey into the sector over thirty years ago, I moved from the private sector into charitable social enterprise, and wanted to test my theory that this is a more effective business model for ethical childcare provision. On exploring the social enterprise literature, and organisation and management studies, I found very little that dealt with early years provision, and particularly the world of childcare rather than early education.

On starting my research journey in 2016, while still working full-time, I quickly realised, as a part-time student, that there was a very real risk of my research having only a transitory value if I focussed on government funding policies, which might rapidly change. I also wanted to use my network of contacts to examine the differences between organisations. The focus on ethical childcare has been a constant, as has the desire to look at factors that hinder or facilitate it, but after initially planning a meso-level study at organisational factors, I then realised that I needed to look at all levels of influence, from micro to macro. On discovering the ethics of care, I realised its relevance and validity as a research lens, and then a year later began exploring practice theory as a way of drilling down into the detail of what ethical childcare means in practice, and in particular the care routines within nurseries.

I spent fifteen months interviewing a wide range of individuals, and my interpretation and analysis of the data ranged from the macro context to granular details of practice, evaluating the influences and factors that either hinder or facilitate the provision of high quality, inclusive childcare, and what 'ethical' really means in day nurseries. After initially planning an inductive approach, my recursive explorations of the literature as I progressed through my data-gathering meant that my inductive approach became abductive. In particular, I found that sensemaking concepts helped to explain some of the findings, as well as reflecting my own research journey. I hope that my research will help to fill a gap between the studies in the sector, which are usually situated in education, and the field of organisation and business management. I also found insights from the increasingly multi-disciplinary nature of my further reading, as I ventured into philosophy, sociology, neuroscience, and psychology.

## 4.3 Research Paradigm and Methodology

### 4.3.1 Social constructionism

The “user’s knowledge” approach (Floridi, 2011) of my social constructionist epistemology sits comfortably with the early years sector, which focuses on practical and interactive knowledge. The methodology for this research is therefore underpinned by the understanding that organisational knowledge resources are created, shared and developed collectively, and discursive practice is a key feature of this embedded and distributed knowledge (Tsoukas, 1996). Professional identity is socially constructed (J. Shotter, 2013; Somers, 1994), as are practices such as Forest Schools (Leather, 2018).

### 4.3.2 Relationality and personal involvement

In taking a relational approach, I am acutely aware of my personal proximity to the research subject but argue that my involvement in the sector and in one of the organisations included in the research, has enabled me to access a wider range of individuals, ask more relevant questions, and elicit more honest and detailed responses than would normally be possible, by more successfully building on my sector connections. My pre-existing understanding of the issues faced by practitioners and leaders within the sector helped me to establish a rapport with interviewees, and to develop, as (Jones and Bartunek, 2021) argued, a greater insight into the dynamics and tensions reflected in the data by talking to, and spending time with, people in the research context.

The relationship and involvement I had with each research participant varied from not knowing them at all beforehand to knowing them well as a colleague. As I did not work directly in any of the settings, I feel that I fit the “ideal” criteria of a field researcher in being “deeply familiar with the context but not fully bound by its traditions...operating at the group’s margins” (Anteby, 2013, p. 10). I felt able to maintain a professional distance, despite being personally involved with some of the research contexts, and my professional role left me free of pressure or influence from participants. I was very aware of power distance in interviews with colleagues from my own organisation, and tailored my questions accordingly, to ensure that participants were only asked about areas within their sphere of knowledge and influence. As CEO, I am now mainly office-



based, and rarely more than an observer of practice on my regular visits to nurseries. I therefore encouraged practitioners to talk about their superior, current, hands-on expertise. Having had a lot of practical experience in the past, however, I was able to empathise with the challenges of their roles, and hopefully avoided coming across as patronising. Knowing the responsibilities of different roles within childcare settings was very helpful in that respect, and being able to use the correct terminology, or even jargon, for aspects of practice helped to build rapport with interviewees I hadn't previously met.

I was, throughout my research, aware of my positionality, as someone with a senior status within the sector, and with many years of experience of working within early years settings and in training practitioners. I felt the advantages of my immersion in the sector to be greater than the potential drawbacks of having my own beliefs and experiences and I found that the counselling training I had undergone many years earlier, when I became a breastfeeding counsellor, enabled me to actively listen to my interviewees' stories and opinions without my own thoughts intruding. I also found myself affectively attuned (Gherardi, 2019) in several interviews, where interviewees described experiences that had affected them emotionally, and when I sensed that the act of narrating them seemed to be almost therapeutic, or an unburdening. I had anticipated that interviewees might voice opinions that clashed with my own, but this rarely happened, and I will discuss that further later.

#### 4.3.3 The influence of feminism on my methodology

My avowedly feminist perspective has undoubtedly influenced my methodology, although the research itself is not wholly feminist, if one accepts the view that feminist research puts "the social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry" (Lather, 1988, p. 571). The feminist influence in terms of methodology is in the way I hopefully adopted a process that was "a change-enhancing, reciprocally educative encounter" treating "research as praxis." It also has the three features identified by (Harding, 1987) in that it takes women's experiences as a starting point, aims to benefit women, and as the researcher, my subjective beliefs and involvement are part of the empirical evidence. (DeVault, 1996) suggests that the distinctiveness of feminist methodology is located in a shared commitment to a focus on the locations and perspectives of women, a determination to minimise harm and control in the research process, and to

support change that will improve women's lives, or challenge systems or social organisation that control women. Most of my research participants are women, and the sector is predicated on the need to support women's return to the workplace after having children. The focus on the experiences of early years practitioners gives a voice and attention to women's experiences in the sector, but I also need to be aware that a woman's own testimony may simply reflect societal biases, and that my position as a researcher carries a status which may influence the responses of my interviewees.

A feminist approach to methodology also helps to draw attention to the issue of knowledges; whose knowledge, and how it is obtained and for what purposes is a key issue to explore in seeking to understand the influences on ethical practices, and how practices are disseminated and embedded in organisations. It also recognises the situated nature of knowledge production, and the importance of reflexivity, and of questioning what constitutes voice. (Olesen, 2018). With care ethics being at the heart of this research, a feminist focus on relational ethics resonates with my concern to be mindful of the ethical issue of relationships in my research interviews. I will now consider how this influenced my research strategy and design before describing the research methods used.

#### 4.4 Research strategy & methods

##### 4.4.1 Strategy for enrolling research participants

My strategy for enrolling research participants, influenced by practicalities, was to investigate a planned cross-section of different types of early years provision, geographically, socio-demographically, and in terms of size and type of provision. Targeted interviewees and organisations were supplemented by volunteer participants that responded to a request made as part of a talk I gave at a sector conference (Ceeda, 2020). I then monitored the range of settings and subsequently targeted specific types of organisation or interviewees to balance the data range. In external organisations, I unashamedly told my peers within the sector that I would love to interview them, and probably used flattery (genuine admiration in some cases) as part of my persuasion strategy, but although I recognise that some only agreed as a favour to me, there was no power imbalance with those individuals. With practitioners, I was very aware that some might agree out of a sense of duty or obligation, particularly

within my own organisation, so I relied primarily on third parties to suggest potential volunteers, which had some success. The purposive sampling was achieved by targeting practitioners and leaders who expressed an interest in ethical issues, and/or who had a range of experience at different early years organisations. I was aware of the need to avoid relying too heavily on those interviewees that I could more readily access, and on those with whom I shared values (Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012) so I sought out interviewees whose views I did not know, and organisations that I was unfamiliar with. In all cases I ensured that interviewees were fully aware of the voluntary nature of their participation, as I will explain later.

The number of interviews was also influenced by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, but I exceeded the minimum of 30 interviews, corresponding with a typical range for this kind of study (Mason, 2010). Appendix 2.1 lists the interviews and categorises interviewees according to their role (from practitioner to director); their type of setting (size and whether for-profit or not-for-profit), approximate age, and gender. On conducting the interviews I realised that I also needed to include their prior experience, as several of the interviewees relied more on previous experiences for their examples, than their current setting, for reasons I will explore later.

#### 4.4.2 Interview contexts

I began with the view that multiple case studies would offer a richer exploration than just interviews, enabling a full contextual understanding, seeing case studies as “not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2003, p. 134). My original intention, then was to focus on a few case studies, but once I began the interviews, I realised the data related as much to external organisations as to interviewees’ current settings, so I abandoned the case study approach and over a 16 month period, spread my net more widely, although I also collated a range of background data for each nursery setting visited. I interviewed between one and four individuals from twelve separate organisations situated in a range of locations across England, in addition to three independent of any organisation, and 19 from my own organisation, including five parents. In total I conducted 37 interviews, with 42 individuals, plus 11 participants in two focus groups. The recording times totalled over 31 hours. I included three large providers in the research, each of which was a different organisational type. One was a private limited company, one was employee-owned,

and one was a charitable company. Turnover ranged from £14m to over £60m pa, and the number of nurseries from 30 to 75. There were five nursery groups that would be classed as small to medium in size, with between two and ten nurseries, and all of these except one were run as private companies. Similarly, three out of the four single site nurseries were privately owned and managed.

As a general rule, private nurseries were larger in size, and those groups with pre-schools included, either private or charitable, tended to have lower average sizes. One of the smaller groups was subsequently taken over by a large provider, and several of the interviewees had experience of working in other types and sizes of provision, and these experiences featured in their interview responses. Of the private nurseries, nine were still owned and managed by the founders, and five of these saw themselves as 'family-run', with other family members being employed and involved. It soon became apparent that while directors and owners were happy to be interviewed, and nursery managers could also easily be freed up to be interviewed, I initially only succeeded in interviewing two non-managerial practitioners. This limitation was partially overcome by including a wider range of interviewees from my own organisation, to ensure that the practitioner perspective could be included, but in fact I found that many of the managers still had current hands-on experience within their role and were able to reflect on aspects of practice and articulate them more effectively than most practitioners. In the discussion below, interviewees are external to my own organisation (Acorn) unless stated otherwise.

One organisation which was not intentionally included nevertheless cropped up several times in interviews, particularly in examples of unethical practice. I therefore included this as a pseudonymously named organisation, the Right Start nursery group, in order to collate the interview data which referred to it, and also because I was familiar with the organisation, having met the owner and previously employed practitioners from there. I was aware of the risk of my negative perception of that nursery group surfacing during interviews and will discuss how I dealt with this later. I was able to ensure anonymity for the interviewees who were ex-employees, as well as for the organisation itself, since the range of references came from a wide geographical spread and were from individuals from several different organisations.

Of the three nursery chains, all were situated in England; one was nationwide, with around 75 settings, one had around 40 settings across several regions, and one had around 30 places in one region. The smaller groups of nurseries varied in size between two and nine settings, and were in a range of locations, and with different demographics. The single sites ranged in size from 36 places up to 120, and were similarly spread across a range of urban and rural areas. The exact number of settings, places or locations have been omitted or changed, to ensure confidentiality, but some details have been included where I felt they were relevant to my analysis.

The characteristics of the settings were in fact less important than I had anticipated, since the examples of practice that were described in the interviews often ranged across an interviewee's personal career history. It also meant that the Acorn interviewees' data was drawn from a wide range of non-Acorn settings, so I was able to collate data according to the practice described rather than categorising it according to the type of setting. In some cases there were direct correlations with the setting type, but in others individual examples of practice did not seem to have been influenced by setting type.

#### 4.4.3 Interviews

The personal interview, as (Liedtka, 1992) argued, is particularly appropriate for exploratory research into ethical decision-making, and the interview method that I felt most aligned with my ontological and epistemological assumptions was the "reflexive pragmatics" approach advocated by (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012), especially as I was very aware that there is always a risk of overemphasising the voices of interviewees that shared my personal values and prejudices. For this reason, I ensured that my interviewees included leaders that I knew had different values and priorities to myself, to ensure a representative range, and also that I undertook "careful, critical and self-conscious epistemological reflection" (ibid) on the data from each interview, which I found easier to do when reviewing interview transcripts at a later date, when less clouded by my immediate impressions of the interviewees and their nurseries.

My interviewees included two founders of large nursery chains, one ex-CEO of a large nursery chain, and the CEO of the largest membership organisation in the early years

sector, which also operates a large number of preschools and nurseries. A total of twelve interviewees were director-level, and seven were owners (or part-owners) of their nursery businesses. Five were nursery managers, and only two external interviewees were practitioners, although most of the managers of smaller settings were involved in hands-on practice for some of their time, and all except for three interviewees were also qualified practitioners who had spent a significant amount of time working as practitioners prior to their current role. Of the 41 interviewees, only seven were male, and all of these were in leadership roles (including three of the four interviewees that had not had practitioner experience). Two interviewees were trainers and consultants, independent of any setting, and one of the nursery parents had had previous childcare experience. I did not ask for details of ages or ethnicities, but appearances suggest that all except two were white British, and ages ranged from a few of the practitioners in their 20's or 30's with the majority in their 40's or 50's, and a handful over 60. I also included interviews with five parents, who were currently Acorn parents, but who had all had previous experience of using other nurseries. The data set for parents was too small to be at all conclusive, but as their previous settings included nurseries that had been referred to by practitioners in other interviews, they served as a useful triangulation of evidence.

With several individuals, who were clearly influential across both organisations and the wider early years sector, I reviewed their interview data to check that it aligned with their contributions to social media, conferences and other media in the sector. In most cases this provided verification of statements made in interviews, but in a few, it raised questions about the authenticity of their espoused beliefs and priorities.

My interview style was semi-structured, following a similar pattern of questions for most of them, but allowing interviewees to expand on areas they were keen to talk about. I was keen to explore the “knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues” of semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) and to be able to follow up on interview responses in a more natural way than following a script. The natural opening for each interview was to ask each person how they came to be in their current role, both from the perspective of career progression and why they chose to work in the early years sector. This allowed interviewees to be as brief or as detailed as they chose, and often led to further exploration of their previous experience, particularly when they described

decisions to leave settings. I then focussed on what they considered to be ethical childcare practice, and sometimes this led to descriptions of what they considered to be non-ethical. I also asked interviewees about what they felt were the important influences on their practice, ranging from policies, personalities, personal background, training and development. I also asked them to describe their perfect nursery, and what they would change about the sector if they had the power. Depending on my prior relationship with the practitioner, the interviews occasionally became very conversational, which was a deliberate ploy on my part, in that I found the more relaxed tone of discussion often led to more candid and insightful reflections. There were also occasions where there were elements of “emergent interviewing” (Adams et al., 2017) where structured question-and-answer sessions arose out of informal interactions that took place during the tours that preceded the planned interviews on my in-person visits to nurseries. My background of working within the sector enabled me to share the lifeworld of early years practice.

In addition to the questions in table five below, I also, with some participants, used the “interview to the double” technique (Nicolini, 2009a). The intention of this, whereby a practitioner described their childcare practices in such a way that I’d (in theory) be able to imitate their movements and manner exactly, was to focus on the granular detail of care practices and the personal influence on the way in which practices were carried out. I found this worked more effectively with practitioners outside of Acorn, who did not know me, and could therefore perhaps more easily imagine that I’d need to have every physical detail described, but I also needed to probe with questions about whether I should say anything while carrying out a care routine. I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

Table 5 Examples of Interview Questions

Area of questioning	Sample questions
Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you give me a potted history of your career so far, but starting with why and how you decided to work in early years?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supplementary questions to clarify motivations and details of career history, particularly in reasons for changes of setting</li> </ul>
Ethical & high quality practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think is 'ethical practice' in day nurseries?</li> <li>• Supplementary prompts of 'what wouldn't be ethical?'</li> <li>• How can you tell if someone is a really good practitioner? What practices would you observe to find out?</li> <li>• Can you describe an example of something that can be done well or badly, and describe to me how it should be done? [in some cases framed as an interview to the double]</li> </ul>
Nature or nurture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you think people are naturally caring, or is it something that can be taught?</li> <li>• Does it make a difference if a practitioner is also a parent?</li> </ul>
Training & qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How important are qualifications?</li> <li>• How important is training?</li> <li>• Can you describe an example of really effective training, or an inspirational colleague that you have learned from?</li> </ul>
Care and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you think care and education are valued the same, and is one more important than the other?</li> <li>• Are they separate, or always combined?</li> </ul>
Influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who has the most influence on the practice in a nursery – the manager, the room leader or the practitioner?</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does it make a difference what kind of organisation owns/runs the nursery?</li> <li>• Does the size of a nursery make a difference? Can you explain how?</li> </ul>
Resources & environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How important are the resources and equipment?</li> <li>• Can you describe your perfect nursery?</li> </ul>
Best and worst experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have been your best and worst experiences of working in nurseries?</li> </ul>
Dilemmas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever experienced an ethical dilemma, or a situation where you have disagreed about the right thing to do, either with a colleague or a child's parent? What happened?</li> </ul>
Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If Boris was to ask you "[name], what should I do to improve things for nurseries?" what would you tell him?</li> </ul>
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences of working in childcare?</li> </ul>

#### 4.4.4 Focus groups

Focus groups were not part of the original research plan, but an opportunity arose to include a focus group as an option on an Acorn training day, and a second took place a few months later. Both sessions took place online, because of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, and, because practitioners were given a choice of sessions, I was confident of participation being a genuine choice. My intention was to use the focus groups as triangulation of interview data, to see if responses varied when participants were in a group situation rather than individual interviews. It was also an opportunity to capture the views of practitioners who were not in senior positions, who

had proved very difficult to recruit as interviewees. Focus groups are also considered by many to be compatible with the ethics and politics of feminism (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Because I did not select the participants, the groups were not necessarily a representative cross-section of practitioners, and I was aware that only confident practitioners were likely to participate, and those with an interest in ethical practice, although there may have been other motivations. The first focus group, after some last minute absences, had only four participants, all of whom were qualified and experienced, which was a lower number than is usually recommended for focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Finch et al., 2014). The second group, with seven participants, also had mainly qualified and experienced practitioners, but included a couple who were very reserved and reluctant to participate. Being on Zoom was not conducive to the usual ice-breaker techniques, and I think inhibited free discussion between participants. The categorisation of focus groups into figured worlds on an ontological/epistemological continuum (Kamberelis et al., 2018) suggests that these two focus groups fell mainly into Figured World 2, “practicing modernism within the interpretive turn” but my reflection was that if the focus groups had comprised more senior roles, such as some of my interviewees, the figured world would have been in the next category of “enacting skepticism and praxis.” This reflects the focus of practitioners being more on questions of practice rather than leaders’ concerns often encompassing political influences on practice, and questioning those. My focus groups were only a supplementary part of the research project, but they nevertheless raised some insightful points, echoed comments and views expressed in the interviews, and had the incidental benefit of encouraging ethical debates between Acorn practitioners.

#### 4.4.5 Field notes and diaries

During the visits made to five nurseries I was given a guided tour of each, and I made reflective notes afterwards on my impressions. These observations and reflections on my perceptions and experiences at each setting naturally arose from my ongoing involvement in the practice world of early years, and I acknowledged and reflected on my subjectivity in exploring the “relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences” of the sector culture (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275). I was able to note the quality of the environments, resources, staffing levels and practices, including sense-making, although I was aware that on each of these occasions I had been

expected. I had previously trained as a trainer for the Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal et al., 1997), which used the Leuven Involvement Scales (F Laevers, 1994; Ferre Laevers, 1994) and I used these in my evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning environments and adult-child interaction as I toured the nurseries, whilst being very conscious of the unreliability of snapshot judgements based on short observations.

My field notes (listed in Appendix 2.5) were handwritten in my research journal, and varied in length from two to six pages for each visit, and in some cases included comments made by interviewees outside of the scheduled and recorded interviews, and were therefore less reliable as verbatim evidence, as in most cases I completed the notes after my journey home. In four of the visits, I did not get the impression that anything was being done differently because of my presence, but one felt slightly more 'prepared' than a genuine insight into a normal day. Because of the length of time spent in the setting, being able to view parts of the nursery before and after the interview, and in some cases being able to see/hear nursery activities from the office, I was able to gauge the veracity of some of the interview statements. In particular, the working relationship between the manager and the practitioners in the setting was sometimes evident from brief conversations and exchanges during the visit. In one nursery, I was genuinely overwhelmed with admiration at the evidence of high quality, child-centred, respectful care, which completely matched the subsequent descriptions detailed in the manager and practitioner interviews. In another, the owner's rhetoric was completely undermined by the way she spoke to her staff team, and their body language in response. Unsurprisingly, the owner of that nursery then decided that it was inconvenient for me to interview one of the practitioners, as had originally been planned.

The diaries that I used to supplement the primary data were my own personal diaries, some of which predated the research, but which captured my impressions of other nurseries that I visited over the years, incidents that I experienced, details of conversations with others in the sector, and of changes in policies and practice, where these had made an impression on me at the time. I used these to verify my memories, and in a few cases, discovered details that I had since forgotten. During the research period, I followed key figures and organisations in the sector on social media, and

when policy changes or issues arose, followed the reaction on Twitter™, for example. I am very aware of my personal ‘bubble’ in that I tend to follow those with whom I agree, but I also tracked how different news stories were covered in a variety of media, not just my own preferred sources. I did not have a systematic process for this, and did not use those social media posts as primary data for this research, but found them helpful for my ongoing scanning of the early years sector, which informed my reflections on the different discussions, considering whether my findings were representative of ongoing sector debates, and whether the statements made by my interviewees were consistent with their public posts on social media. Those referenced in the thesis are listed in Appendix 2.5.

I am always aware of the potential unreliability of observational data, having seen differences in behaviour when I have observed practitioners that are aware of my presence, compared to occasions when I have been able to witness more ‘natural behaviour’ when my presence has not been noticed. This does not apply to all practitioners, but I have also been told by colleagues that they have observed the same differences, and that it is more evident when I am present, probably because of my seniority in the organisation. I am, therefore, fully aware that the incidental observations made on my visits to nurseries for interviews are more likely to be self-conscious ‘best behaviour’ on the part of the practitioners, just as they would be for other nursery visitors. Conversations that I have had on several occasions with Ofsted inspectors have confirmed that they are also aware of the impact of their presence on behaviour, with one inspector commenting “I can tell when things are put on for my benefit, the children give it away every time!” (Diary 09/05/22)

#### 4.4.6 Supplementary data

Other sources that I used, for triangulation rather than as a primary source, were company accounts and annual reports, company websites and the use of social media by both organisations and individuals, listed in Appendix 2.5. I also read or listened to podcasts, interviews, profiles of individuals, and participated in several sector conferences or discussions. These included the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Childcare and Early Education (which included some of my interviewees) and the Ofsted Big Conversation, which are regional meetings of providers with Ofsted, to discuss current issues, usually about inspections and government guidance. Again,

these were helpful to gauge the range of opinions and to ascertain whether my interview data were representative, and whether different opinions were associated with types of organisation.

In exploring publicly available data on the different organisations featured in this research, there are limitations about how much financial detail is available. Companies House holds basic accounts information, but these reveal very little for small single site nurseries, if anything at all, and as the Nuffield research into a range of childcare organisations shows, the large chains “often have complex and opaque financial structures” (Simon et al., 2020a). Financial information revealing levels of profitability and levels of spending on different areas provides indicators of an organisation’s priorities. The trend towards acquisitions and mergers is also useful background information, since the process of a change of ownership inevitably has implications for practice and employee wellbeing. The process of financialisation, as described in the Nuffield report, is not in itself the subject of this research, but the effects of financialisation are relevant, and may offer avenues for potential further research.

In addition to financial information, the size of organisations in terms of how many nurseries, and the sizes, locations, and Ofsted ratings of nurseries are relatively easy to find, through sector magazines such as the Nursery World annual supplement on Nursery Chains, (Gaunt, 2021) and on the Ofsted website (Ofsted, 2022b). The information gleaned from websites, blogs and a wide variety of publications was not systematically evaluated but was used to provide background information that in some cases corroborated interview data and in other cases may have contradicted or obscured the evidence. Degrees of transparency varied a great deal, and word-of-mouth communication was occasionally useful to elucidate the activities of organisations that were not actively publicised.

In using notes about meetings and conversations, incidental observations from the setting visits, and reflective diaries as supplementary data, I found myself agreeing with the view that significant experiences depend more on their resonance than their generalisability (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). The experiences I had recorded in any detail were usually those which had made an impact on me, or which I was aware had challenged my thinking on an issue or practice. The diary notes included in the

research data are referred to by date, and were used to validate memories of incidents and observations.

## 4.5 Research plans and adaptations

### 4.5.1 Changes to the plans

The first interviews took place in November 2019, and in mid-March, after visiting six organisations, and interviewing sixteen people, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented further face-to-face meetings and visits. I was then able to add a further four interviews by Zoom and one socially distanced interview in person in July. In the Autumn of 2020 I gained ethical approval to use interviews within my own organisation, and I then completed a further ten, in addition to the two focus group sessions with Acorn practitioners. At the point where I had to stop conducting visits and face-to-face interviews, I had interviewed my planned number of sector and setting leaders, but only two practitioners external to Acorn. Even before the pandemic, I had discovered that nurseries and organisations were very reluctant or unable to free up practitioners to talk to me, and when the lockdowns added considerable staffing pressure to the whole early years sector, I found that requests to interview practitioners risked adding additional stress to a very stressed-out workforce.

Methods I used to try and find further research participants included asking my existing contacts to publicise my research request, and by distributing a flyer to contacts within the sector who offered to post it on local facebook pages and to students on university courses who were also practitioners. Several of my contacts were very confident of success, but would-be interviewees were asked to email or call me for further information or to express an interest, and none came forward. Two of my original set of interviewees had come forward after I had mentioned the research in a presentation at a sector conference in January 2020, and I had intended continuing to use conferences as a networking tool to find potential interviewees. The two problems with this were that it is usually only nursery managers that attend sector conferences, and all conferences and sector events moved online from the end of March in 2020.

From January 2021 it became increasingly apparent that nurseries were struggling to stay open due to staffing difficulties, and I realised that it would be unethical to do anything to add further pressure, and that further requests risked jeopardising my good

relationships with sector colleagues. I knew that there were many practitioners within my own organisation who had a variety of perspectives in terms of their backgrounds and career history, and that it would be much easier to free them up for interviewees, as most of the nurseries had stayed open throughout the pandemic lockdown period. I was relieved to gain ethical approval for a further change to my methods, having already gained approval for the switch to online interviews.

The two final interviewees came about more by accident than design, after an email exchange about training with a consultant who was not attached to any early years setting, but who worked with a wide range of nurseries and practitioners. She was happy to be interviewed, and I felt confident that there were no ethical issues or power concerns, particularly as we didn't at any point discuss Acorn settings. Having interviewed her, and finding it a very fruitful exercise, I then approached another independent trainer and consultant, and concluded my data-gathering phase of my research in April 2021. The online interviews which formed the second half of the process, resulted in an unexpected benefit. As I was able to record the video of Zoom and Teams calls, rather than just audio, this enabled me to retrospectively observe and reflect on my interviewees' body language and facial expressions.

#### 4.5.2 Changes to interview methods

My original intention in conducting interviews was to have a semi-structured format, but it became apparent very quickly that it would not be possible to stick to a list of questions that would remain the same for each interviewee, who varied enormously in confidence and range of experience, and I also found that interviewees were more relaxed and open if I maintained a friendly and informal tone, that was more natural to my personality. As well as knowing, to varying degrees, each Acorn practitioner that I interviewed, I realised on concluding my data-gathering that I also already knew or had met 13 out of the 23 external interviewees. Most of these were only through attendance at early years conferences and sector meetings but I had known some for many years, and the tone of those conversations clearly reflected those relationships. Even with those I hadn't met prior to the interview, there didn't seem to be any difficulty establishing a rapport, partly, I think, because it was quickly apparent to them that I knew and understood the sector well enough for them not to need to explain any of

the early years jargon. Almost all the interviews included laughter at some point, as well as wry comments about the parlous state of early years funding.

Embarrassingly, I also realised, during the laborious transcription process, that I had sometimes interrupted interviewees, possibly due to an over-eagerness to empathise and agree with comments being made, and sometimes to engage in a discussion, which in a few cases led away from the research questions. In some instances I would defend the interruptions as being a natural and integral part of a professional discussion which elicited some insightful and reflective observations, but I do feel that my interview technique improved during the course of the 16 month period. Whether interviewees stayed on topic was often variable, and some digressed into areas which were less relevant for my research, but I was very pleased that all interviewees appeared to enjoy the experience.

#### 4.5.3 The inclusion of parent interviews

Although not in the original research plan, an opportunity arose to interview some nursery parents, and I felt that this would provide an opportunity to triangulate the data gathered from practitioners and managers. The five parents that participated, in four interviews, were current Acorn parents, but in my request for volunteers I had asked for parents who had used other nurseries prior to their experience at Acorn. I also made it clear at the start of each interview that the focus of my research was the influences on practice that made a difference, rather than any judgements about particular nurseries. Three of the families had transferred their children to Acorn from large corporate nurseries, and the fourth interviewee was keen to talk about the difference in the parental experience between his daughter's nursery experience and his previous experience with his son at a different setting.

#### 4.6 Ethical issues and reflexivity

##### 4.6.1 Informed consent, power relations and confidentiality

Participation in this research was completely voluntary, and all participants were provided with both a verbal and written explanation of the research subject, my details and those of my university supervisors in case of any concerns arising. Within Acorn, I have described how I ensured that power relations did not result in any interviewees



feeling obliged to participate or in feeling that could only provide one kind of response that would be complimentary of Acorn. I particularly encouraged participants who had a range of experience, and discouraged them from talking about their current setting.

The main ethical risk to participants, I felt, would be a breach of confidentiality. Although several interviewees expressed a willingness to be named, I decided that a blanket confidentiality would be easier to work with, and so all organisations and individuals have been given pseudonyms. I was particularly concerned to ensure that the descriptions of poor practice could not be traced back to individuals or settings, and the disparate nature of my pool of interviewees and their previous backgrounds has made that more straightforward than I expected, since many practitioners had moved geographically as well as between nurseries. In one case, it would be relatively easy for someone in the sector to identify a participant, so I have ensured that none of his quotations relate to personal issues, and all of the statements used in the research are in line with his public statements in other circumstances. Specific details in interviews that might compromise confidentiality have either been obscured into generalisations or omitted.

Within Acorn, I was very aware that some interviewees might tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, perhaps intending to please or impress me, but in only two cases did I sense that this might be happening. I listened back to those interviews and decided not to use them, simply because they seemed inauthentic to me, praising Acorn in suspiciously blanket terms, for example.

#### 4.6.2 Emotional impact

The personal nature of some of the interview questions carried the risk of triggering painful memories, although the research material was not usually sensitive or likely to elicit strong emotions. It became clear on several occasions that some experiences had resulted in an emotional impact at the time, and by reliving them within the interview, some interviewees became tearful. In most cases the emotion was a reaction to descriptions of very difficult circumstances for children and reflects the emotional sensitivity that is characteristic of early years practitioners. I always ensured that I gave interviewees sympathy and time to recover from any emotional narrative, and ensured that the conclusion of each interview was more light-hearted in tone. The

risk of emotional upset was also managed by ensuring that the interviewee retained full control over what they told me, and I felt confident that I was able to recognise and empathise with difficult situations that interviewees had encountered. The context of the conversation was also often about the value and impact of their role, and I felt I maintained a warm and empathetic persona. My impression was that the interviewees who exhibited an emotional response to their accounts of situations or events were glad of the opportunity to have a voice and to receive an acknowledgement and recognition of their work, “affirming valued identities” (Sinding & Aronson, 2003).

#### 4.6.3 Reflexivity

I was very conscious of trying to create “a conversational space of rapport and mutual understanding” (Pezalla et al., 2012), particularly with practitioners who didn’t know anything of my background in early years, and I was aware that I adapted my vocabulary and manner of speaking depending on who I was interviewing. I avoided using any academic or technical terminology, for example, unless I had established their familiarity with those terms, and wherever possible, in the face-to-face interviews, I found things to praise from my show-round of the nursery prior to interview. Using a constructionist approach to the interviews (Roulston, 2010), I re-read and often listened to the recordings in order to pick up the tonal variations and emphases, and in particular the expressions of laughter or other emotions to ensure that my interpretation of interviewee responses was as accurate as possible. The Zoom recordings were particularly helpful in that I could observe the body language of interviewees more closely, including eye movements and facial expressions.

I was particularly struck by the number of times interviewees themselves exhibited reflexivity, commenting, for example, that “I haven’t thought about that before” and the pauses where interviewees were clearly pondering their response, in thoughtful silences that did not feel awkward. I was also struck by the number of occasions when interviewees referred back to a previous question and added to their initial response, suggesting ongoing thought and reflection as well as sensemaking practices in some of the interviews. I was not able to follow up with participants from other organisations, but within later conversations with some of my interviewees from Acorn, there were several comments made that indicated the interview had highlighted an issue to them

that they had then reflected on further. My own reflexivity involved a heightened sensitivity to my perceptions of authenticity, and reflections on my positionality.

My own reflexivity will hopefully become apparent in subsequent chapters, and I was pleased to have some of my own assumptions and beliefs challenged during the research process. In particular I became even more aware of the difficulties of relying on my own observations and discussions with practitioners, and sensitive to situations where I suspected that I was being told what interviewees thought I wanted to hear. On reading back through my thesis prior to submission, I tried to evaluate areas which might need further explanation for readers not familiar with the early years sector, in order to add explanatory detail. I also realised, on re-reading interview transcripts, that there were many instances of assumed common knowledge and understanding, and of assumed agreement about the shortcomings of government policies and government funding. In an account in 7.4.2, for example, Amy, a senior practitioner, makes disparaging references to 'Duplo drop' and 'bog-standard' toys. I understood what she meant, as the provision of a selection of toys for children to play with is widely considered to be insufficient in terms of good practice. Practitioners are expected to provide stimulating experiences and opportunities for exploration and self-directed learning, with Ofsted requiring practitioners to understand their intention, implementation and impact (Ofsted, 2019a). In the interests of conciseness, I have not explained the detail of early years practices in implementing a curriculum, unless they have directly related to influences on high quality, inclusive, provision.

## 4.7 Abductive thematic analysis

### 4.7.1 From an inductive to an abductive approach

My original intention had been to adopt a wholly inductive approach, allowing the data to drive the analysis. In practice, as I transcribed my interview recordings, and familiarised myself with the data, I found myself drawn back to the literature, particularly as I began developing themes. I used NVivo to do the initial coding, which I began developing at the halfway stage of my data-gathering, and Appendix 2.2 illustrates the kind of material which I allocated to each theme. As interviews progressed, I refined the coding, gradually narrowing down the number of different themes and noting which areas were proving to be most prolific, in terms of repeated issues, or of particular interest in the richness of data. The inductive approach meant

that each interview was re-read several times, and the transcription process also necessitated repeated listening to each interview in order to edit the automatic transcription, which proved to be very limited in both accuracy and the ability to recognise early years terminology. Revisiting the data often led to further reading of relevant academic papers, particularly those relating to practice theory, and my strategy then became abductive, in revisiting data in the light of further reading.

The approach I adopted was primarily thematic analysis, using the Framework tool (Ritchie et al., 2003) within NVivo. This allowed me to index the themes in a series of matrices, with each participant allocated a row, and each column a separate subtheme. The advantage of this was that I could then create an overview of all the interwoven themes and concepts which were emerging. NVivo also proved to be an invaluable tool for locating specific parts of interviews when I then needed to return to analyse individual comments in more detail. The process itself was quite painstaking, as many comments could easily fit into several themes, and I had to refine the categories several times. NVivo provided a helpful overview of which subthemes had the most content. Larger numbers of extracts could then be separated into further subthemes, and small numbers rationalised and combined. Quantity did not, of course, automatically equate with depth of content, but the ability to colour-code within NVivo helped to highlight extracts that were of particular interest.

Initially, I used NVivo to code the interesting sections of interviews thematically, and created codes as I went along, every time I identified an extract which may yield insights into an aspect of the research focus. Once this was completed, I then realised that the coding had resulted in a range of themes, but that these needed organising into a clearer structure, and that there were overlaps and repetitions that needed addressing. The sequence of questions in the interviews followed a similar pattern in each, although as they were semi-structured interviews, I also allowed interviewees to cover issues as they arose naturally from their narrative of their experiences. I generally began with asking everyone about their background, training and career history. Details of experience from previous early years settings was helpful to trace personal influences, and one consistent question in each interview was for the interviewee's opinion about the relative influence of nature versus nurture, particularly as this is a familiar debating point within early years.

In drilling down to discover influencing factors, I attempted to separate out the levels of engagement, and I used these to code the data, from individual influences, either from personal backgrounds or at room level within the settings, to organisational influences and then sector and societal influences. I used five primary nodes within NVivo, the first of which I called 'Ethical Issues', which I used to gather the specific examples of ethical dilemmas, or examples of ethical or unethical practice. I also gathered responses about individual definitions of what is ethical practice, and of how it is influenced by values and vision (which could span different levels). Secondly, I had a node for 'High Quality Practice' although this inevitably overlapped with ethical practice. I then drilled down for specific instances relating to aspects of early years practice such as attachment and the key person approach, child-centred practice and respectful care, and settling-in and transitions. This is the node which was most specific to early years practice issues, and which was most likely to include sector-specific jargon.

The next four nodes were labelled respectively 'Individual,' 'Organisation,' 'Sector' and 'Socio-Political,' and the number of references in each category give an indication of which level generated the most examples. Organisation had over 200 references, around 140 were individual, and both sector-level and socio-political factors trailed with around 50 and 45 respectively. Some references were duplicated, or were moved during the analysis, but one of the most useful aspects of the NVivo thematic coding was the ability to create sub-divisions, so that I could create folders for very specific examples, and to breakdown the influence of training, for example, or collate examples from practitioners who were also nursery parents. Inevitably there was a tendency during coding for the number of nodes to proliferate, but it provided a useful framework to use for the process of analysing the data.

As I developed my analysis in the thesis, however, particularly on exploring the concept of sensemaking in practice, I began to question the rationale behind coding for this research. In particular I became concerned that coding pre-judges what is already known, by the process of categorisation, and that it shifts attention away from the texture and detail of the research data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2017). Fortunately, the multiple iterations of my use of the research material had generated a familiarity with the interview data that allowed me to locate specific instances that I wished to use

without limiting myself to working from the NVivo coded themes. It was undoubtedly a useful tool to use in the early stages of the research, but I increasingly used it more as a reference tool than as an analytical tool. Table six, below, sets out the stages in my abductive research process.

Table 6 The Abductive Research Process

<b>Research Stage</b>	<b>Activities and Outcomes</b>
Preliminary reading	Developed ideas about theoretical perspectives to use in exploration of issues within Early Years sector
Development of research purpose, research questions and methodology	Research questions, plan for methodology and research strategy
Arranged and carried out research interviews, with visits and background research on organisations and individuals	Notes and reflections on observations, interview dynamics, and incidental conversations
Transcription of interviews	This involved listening to or watching interviews, repeating sections several times, and reflecting on choice of words, tone of voice and body language
Development of interview techniques	Reflections on early interviews led to a development of interview techniques
Further reading	Reflections on content of early interviews led to further reading on sensemaking and embodied care
NVivo coding	Thematic coding, identifying four levels of analysis, from micro to macro (with two levels of meso), plus quality and ethical issues
Further breakdown of coding to specific scenarios, issues, organisational features and practices	Review of each theme, with further sub-divisions where necessary, led to reflection on which issues and subjects generated the most interview data.
Review of each theme to select interview data for analysis, and use of NVivo as a search tool for key	Analysis of NVivo sections in isolation, to focus on the words used, and then within the context of each interview, rereading transcripts, with further

words within the interview data	reflections on the role and experiences of each interviewee.
Analysis of interview data	Abstraction of key issues raised in interviews and selection of vignettes that provide accounts of experiences for analysis.
Review and analysis of vignettes, diaries and field notes	Revisited vignettes after initial analysis to evaluate contextual issues and to develop theoretical conclusions.
Review of supplementary data	Review of contextual data to ascertain whether confirmatory, contradictory or irrelevant to the primary interview data.
Reflection on analysis	Reflection on the analysis in the light of further reading, and review of data not selected (the reasons for non-selection). Reflexivity on the influence of my personal perceptions of individual interviewees on my analysis, and of contextual supplementary data.

#### 4.7.2 Use of vignettes

Once I had coded the interview data, I began the process of analysis, but found that in many cases I needed to return to the primary data of the transcripts in order to reflect on the context for comments that had been made, or of accounts of experiences. In moving from the macro level down to the micro level of individual agency, I found that influencing factors were more easily identified and analysed within larger sections of data, and in particular in focused descriptions of significant moments, or vignettes (Robson & Martin, 2019). By considering the words of interviewees within the sociomaterial context of the interview, and with an understanding of the interviewee's role and responsibility, including in some cases the relationships with colleagues, I was able to focus on the practices that facilitated or hindered the provision of ethical childcare. My interpretation of the data took account of the contextual features of each vignette, and I was able to select key narratives to illustrate the combination of both embodied care and sensemaking, as they emerged from the data.

The examples of two vignettes, in appendix 2.3, and the list in appendix 2.4, illustrate the range of accounts, and also show that their use in the analysis was not limited to the original thematic area, as in many cases their relevance spanned more than one aspect. There were further vignettes that did not get quoted, but which contributed to the analysis, and I have indicated the existence of further evidence by making it clear

that the quotations being used are simply examples of a range of similar responses. Inevitably, I found that some interviewees were more articulate and with a wider range of experiences and reflections than others, so although I have tried to include a representative sample of my interviewees, I have selected vignettes on the richness of the data and the contextual detail which I felt helped to confirm their authenticity.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out my research philosophy and methodology, and explained how it evolved as the research progressed, from an inductive approach to an abductive approach. I have described how I adapted to the practical difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic and discovered the unexpected benefits of online interviews. The research methods became more diverse than my initial intentions, and I have described the range of my interviews and other data. The result was a great deal of rich description and narrative, and in the next chapter I will describe the range and content of this data and examples of key vignettes of practice which I will then analyse in subsequent chapters.



## Chapter Five Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the content of the research data, from both interviews and supplementary data. I begin by detailing the micro level of responses by individuals about their personal experiences and thoughts, and then move on to the meso level of organisations and the sector, before concluding with data that span the macro level of society and government policies, in terms of interviewee perceptions. The data are categorised thematically, with some examples of key vignettes given in detail, to convey the richness of the data. In doing so, I also cover the range of interviewees and organisations, which will then provide the basis for the analysis in subsequent chapters.

The primary data are the transcripts of interviews, supplemented by two focus groups, online material, notes from sector conferences and discussions, field notes of observations, and diary entries. The sector conferences and discussions, largely those that took place online, were used to triangulate the interview data, to test whether opinions of interviewees are representative of the sector. The table in Appendix 2.1 lists the interviewees, with roles and personal characteristics (ages are approximations), and their current setting, plus range of previous experience. Qualification levels are included where known. To maintain the narrative flow, anonymised names are used, and as it is often relevant to know the level of qualifications held by interviewees, unqualified practitioners are referred to as assistants, 'practitioners' means that they are qualified to at least a level three, and if interviewees are referred to as graduates, this means that they have an early years degree, (not a degree in an unrelated area). Gender will be indicated by pronouns used (no participants expressed a preference for gender-neutral pronouns), and age or ethnicity will be mentioned where I consider it helpful to provide useful context. I have usually stated the current role of the interviewee, and the type of setting referred to in their interview data.

Only Acorn, my own organisation, is named, but one nursery group has been given a pseudonym, to enable multiple references to be connected more easily; the Right Start nurseries are a medium for-profit group of settings that became an unintended focus,

due to the multiplicity of mentions by interviewees in examples of what was considered by them to be unethical practice.

## 5.2 Micro level – Individuals

### 5.2.1 Personal background and career choices

I began each interview with an exploration of individual backstories, and the question of ‘why’ rather than just ‘how’ the choice of sector was made elicited some detailed accounts of early childhood experiences. A typical story is exemplified by Emily, a manager with an early years degree, who described how she identified early on as “a caring person, and always loved looking after people.” After a spell of hairdressing, she realised that it wasn’t what she wanted to do, and “I thought, you know what, I love children. I absolutely love children, always have, since I was little” so she researched jobs with children, trained up and progressed from there. Tara, another graduate manager, recalled “when I was young, very young, I remember, specifically remember, being at a party, um, a family party, and ... the children just gravitated towards me ... and I think from then, I realised that I really liked working, like, being around children.”

Several interviewees described the influence of parents, particularly when mothers were also working in childcare roles. Mothers were mentioned by senior figures too; when asked about the origin of his personal ethic, Peter, a director of a large nursery chain, replied “probably from my mother.” John, director of a sector organisation, described the lasting influence of his childhood as being one of the reasons he moved from a successful career in the financial sector to lead a charitable organisation. “I hate injustice. I hate bullies...that comes from my childhood, from my father...I can’t stand back and watch somebody neglected or abusing somebody else...it still sort of stays with me.” Tim, the head of a similar charitable organisation, described a similarly “purely by accident” route to his current position, but on further probing, admitted that he was motivated not by money, but “that working hard, generating a lot of money that we can put back into doing good. Just seeing what comes out of that, that’s what drives me. That’s what motivates me.”

Only one interviewee mentioned the family-friendly aspect of early years as a career choice; Clare, an experienced leader and trainer, commented that “I planned ahead. I

thought, OK, I do want to have children because I am very family orientated. So I need to start my career path where it's not going to cause complications later on." Two interviewees described how their own parenting experience led them into early years, starting as volunteer helpers at their local pre-school, and both commented on how they were encouraged to train by the setting. Paula, a director in a sector organisation, began her career in a pre-school, where she was told "Oh, you're really good. You've got a really nurturing nature about you. Would you like to train? Would you like a job?" A "natural instinct" for working with children was also mentioned as a factor for a career change into early years work by Theresa a mature but unqualified nursery assistant, who doesn't have children of her own "And I think that, that's missing in my life. So I want to also be able to give something back. And yeah, I, I feel quite fulfilled now." The motivating factor of wanting to make a difference to children's lives was cited by several interviewees working in the third sector organisations included in the research.

In contrast, several of the owner-managers and chief executives of private nursery groups, were more likely to mention entrepreneurial business opportunities as their initial motivation, or not being able to find childcare that suited their needs. Sharon, a graduate director of a large nursery chain, described the expansion from having just one nursery to a large group of nurseries as enabling her to "make a difference here in this community. I can provide a day nursery, the opening hours that people need", then "just got onto a roll, then I started building a team and just kept getting more nurseries. Some were new builds, a few were buying existing nurseries that were failing." Interestingly, although the nursery group was a private company, Sharon was also adamant that she would never sell out to venture capitalists "who'll just try and take as much money out of the sector as they can" citing the need for them to provide a return "which means there's going to be a lack of investment at some point".

### 5.2.2 Personal values and views on ethical practice

From discussing personal backgrounds and career histories, I then asked interviewees about their views on childcare and their perceptions of what they would consider 'ethical' practice. Interviewee responses were generally consistent with my definition, (of high quality, inclusive and affordable childcare) although differing in emphasis. These differences tended to reflect the roles of the interviewees. Practitioners emphasised 'putting children first' and 'doing the right thing' but those in more senior

roles reflected on ethical dilemmas of balancing finances and quality/accessibility. The 'right' way for caring for children was more clearly expressed through the accounts of care practices and was relatively consistent. Clare, a graduate leader and trainer, described "understanding...what is right and wrong. Um, what behaviours are acceptable, what behaviours are not acceptable, um, the way that people interact, whether it is sensitive or not sensitive...you know, is it going to be a meaningful experience." Amber, a graduate senior practitioner similarly said "Ethical is sort of ... the right way" and nursery assistant Rachel's "I interpret that to be like how you work. Like say for me that's like, I don't know how to put it into words. I always try my best. I'm there for the children". Paula, a practitioner, commented on it being about treating children "with love and attention and nurturing" and that "I want every child to be treated how I expect my children to be treated."

There was a good level of consistency in practitioners and managers seeing ethical practice as putting children's needs first, with comments such as "I believe looking after children should be done with respect for the child" (Jean, qualified director in sector organisation). Other words that were used to describe ethical practice were 'inclusive', 'nurture', 'emphasising children's well-being', 'putting our children first'. A more contextual version of ethical consideration was given by Lucy, a graduate leader:

*I think in terms of ethics it's that the impact on the children and the impact on the families has been a key part of the decision. And I think it has to be balanced in terms of the decisions that are sustainable about the business, because sometimes you could make a decision for a specific child or children that would cripple the business. And you can't necessarily do that, but they have to be part of that decision and ... just finding that balance between what can we do that is the right thing for the business and the right thing for children and the team and the parents. And it doesn't impact any of these people too negatively... it's just trying to come to the best kind of middle fit where you balance all of those things equally.*

Lucy's accommodation of business priorities reflected her current role being at director level, but she had spent many years working as a practitioner and was still very much involved in monitoring the quality of practice.

At an organisational level, ethical practice was described by those in not-for-profit organisations in terms of inclusion, ensuring all children were able to access high quality provision, rather than the balancing act described by Lucy, who worked in a private group. Ros gave a clear example, from her experience of working as a consultant to private childcare providers, of what she felt was unethical decision-making. She described listening to the owners discussing purchasing a site for a nursery that had no garden, “but we’ll make the staff go around the corner to the park. And I’m sitting there thinking from a quality perspective and an ethical perspective that is not the right way to be looking at it.” This was a contrast from Lucy’s experience, who had worked for two companies with very high standards in terms of quality, but inevitably accompanied by very high fees: “So it is then an ethical place for those children, but it isn’t ethical for all the children than can’t possibly access it.”

### 5.2.3 Embodied practice and emotional investment

During several of the interviews, the discussion around personal motivation and the drivers for working in the early years sector led to heightened emotions. I will explore instinctive, bodily reactions within early years practice later, but the emotional investment of individuals in their work was very apparent in several cases. Hannah, for example, a qualified leader of an early years team in a community-based charity, described the high deprivation of the area she worked in, the beginning of food banks, and her belief that “if you can make a difference in a very small way, it goes a long way.” She choked up, saying “I’m emotional, because it really affects me, because, you know, our job in early years is to have a voice for these young families.”

Another interviewee, Lyn, a manager of a private nursery in a low-income area, described an example of a two-year-old child who came to nursery in her pyjamas with a distressed mother, after an upsetting domestic incident. Lyn was explaining that learning wasn’t the top priority for that child on that day, and her colleague, Kate, the owner of that group of nurseries, became tearful when Lyn said “more importantly, she was loved that day. And I don’t know if she would have been at home. And that’s really sad to say.” Lyn patted Kate’s arm, and as this was one of the face-to-face interviews, I was able to see from the body language between them that there were mutually caring relationships between colleagues. Lyn, for example, who was comforting Kate by patting her arm with a sympathetic ‘Aaah’ was not Kate’s line

manager – Kate was hers. In the same interview, their colleague, Helen a graduate manager in the same nursery group, described a similarly heart-rending story, of children who may not learn to write during their time at nursery “but they’re not panicking every time someone makes a loud noise. They could go to an adult and have a hug and be okay. Or that parent is no longer in a relationship that wasn’t very good anymore. We get there, we get there in the end...” and at this point became tearful. Later in the interview, Lyn mentioned that she is “proud of the way we nurture the children and the adults”, and it was very clear that her compassion and caring nature was encouraged and supported by her line managers, the owners of the nursery group.

At the micro level of childcare practice, practitioners were very clear about what constituted good quality care, and the most common descriptor was of it being child-centred, putting the child’s needs first, and treating children with respect. The ethical nature of childcare practice arose most naturally in accounts of poor practice, but before discussing those, I will summarise the kind of practice described by a range of interviewees as being high quality, child-centred, and by implication, therefore ethical. When asked if there is a right and a wrong way of changing a child’s nappy, Tara, a graduate manager at Acorn, had no hesitation in replying “The wrong way would be to do it like a conveyor belt. So a nappy takes five seconds per nappy and you get all your nappies done within half an hour, that would be the wrong way. It’s personalized care. Giving a bottle, and a nappy, is so personalized... it’s that time, especially for a baby, for nurturing, isn’t it?” Nappy changing, feeding and sleeping were key care practices that interviewees used as examples, and I was struck by how many times practitioners in particular used changing tone of voice and gestures to illustrate the differences between ethical and non-ethical practice. One detailed account of caring practice at sleep time was described by Lauren, a baby room practitioner at Acorn:

*Sometimes you have to rock them. Sometimes you have to stand with them. Sometimes you kind of have to cuddle them and then, like, put them down gently, kind of gradually go with them so they feel like you're still there. Um, and, yeah, not just the whole, I've seen it before in some nurseries, not here, luckily, but I've worked in previously where children, especially a bit, the older ones, aren't going to sleep, and it's kind of just like forcing them down, like*

*pushing them down, pushing their head down, like, come on, you will go to sleep, kind of, because then people want to use that time as like their chill time, or their time to catch up on paperwork and stuff. And, you know, that's, that's awful. That's not caring.*

The embodied nature of a care routine was implicit in most interviewee's accounts, often shown with a gesture, inclined head, and soft tone of voice. Amy, a level three senior practitioner in a private nursery, accompanied this description with cradling gestures:

*A care routine between two people...should make that person feel like a warm bath. You know that feeling when you get into a warm bath? That is what that child should feel when they are spending that time with you. So that is my goal. It's, you know, every time I'm having that one to one time, you know, you want that child to be relaxed and, you know, I, I get that that feeling as well.*

Amber, another senior practitioner, currently working towards her degree, described how she does bottle feeding in the nursery;

*So I would take the child and go and sit in the rocking chair that we have in the room. Make sure you're comfortable and make sure the baby's comfortable. And then depending on the child, you may have to hold the bottle and you sort of talk to them a little bit while they're drinking or some babies are able to hold the bottle themselves, and they prefer to do that. And they just sit on you comfortably and ... we do try to give as much comfort to them as possible and speak to them really soothingly as they drink their milk*

The importance of the general 'feel' of a nursery was mentioned by several interviewees, and Maria, one of the parents who was interviewed, made a direct comparison with her workplace, a hospital ward:

*It's a bit like for me, it's a bit like in nursing... no matter who comes on that ward, it's about the, the feeling on that ward. And it does come down to the individual, its group and it comes down to the leadership as well, about how it makes you feel. The hundred steps when you come onto a ward, you can tell how that, how that ward is going to run by just walking on and getting that feel about it.*

Karen, another parent, described the unease she felt with an unfriendly manager “it just, you just pick up these vibes” and she and her partner Rebecca were also concerned about low staff morale which Karen said “you could just sense it in the room. And, and, yeah, there was just stuff going on that you could kind of pick up on that, that staff weren’t happy” and they worried that it would affect the children. The feeling of being kept at a distance and the lack of “chitchat” and “no personal kind of one to one” in the settling in process was commented on by Maria, who contrasted that with the warmth of feeling and empathy she felt from the practitioners at the nursery to which she then transferred her daughter. Another parent, who mentioned that she had had previous experience of working in a nursery herself, described how she judged the quality of a nursery by looking “at kids’ faces and noses...I just think, I know children get dirty, but if they’ve got their faces covered in food, those sort of things were really important to me that I actually thought, no, people are actually really paying attention...you can just tell, you know.”

Cleanliness was a common theme in many of the interviews, but a clear distinction was made between the need for careful and thorough cleaning in the context of care routines, but the need for children to be allowed to engage in messy play, and it seemed to be widely accepted, by both parents and practitioners, that it was not just acceptable, but a sign of a good day at nursery, if children went home with evidence of mud, paint, sand or playdough in their clothes and hair.

Another aspect of embodied care was shown in the awareness of practitioners of their posture and bodily positioning with children, at mealtimes, for example. Being at a child’s level was frequently cited as being an indicator of good practice in the interviews, and this was also an area where no interviewees felt the need to explain why that was important, reflecting the widespread recognition in the sector of it being good practice. Reflecting on a nursery that she worked at several years earlier, Anne, a graduate manager at Acorn, mentioned that “it always sticks in my head. It was like at mealtimes, you know, they didn't used to sit down with the children, they'd be standing up chatting and talking.”

Helen, another graduate manager, at a private nursery, made a similar point in talking about recruitment: “we'll get someone in on an interview and they could write beautifully, they could write a beautiful observation. They can't get down on the floor,



play with a child and care, it isn't going to work.” Two of the other nursery managers interviewed made similar comments about making a judgment about the quality of practice by looking at physical positioning of practitioners. Firstly, Jordan an Acorn manager (level seven) described how

*you can tell a lot, um, about the environment and the practitioners, by like how many of them are at the children's level. And rather than being sort of stood, you know, supervising, having conversations with each other, you know, if you've got the majority of your practitioners down on the level with the children where everything's happening, then you're getting that kind of sustained, shared thinking. And you can instantly tell that these are the practitioners that are here for the children.*

Kim, another Acorn manager (level six), echoed similar sentiments, but added in the level of absorption in their activities as a defining measure of quality:

*First thing, and it's the same thing I look for if I'm sneakily looking in a room. How many adults are playing with the children in that moment? I do that as soon as I walk into a room, I do a snapshot. If you've got four members of staff in there and four of them up are up here [gesticulates], that's not good to me. That tells me that you're not doing your job because your job is to play... if I walk in and everybody's down at the children's level and they don't even notice that I've come in, because they were too busy reading *The Gruffalo's Child*, brilliant. Massive tick.*

This latter point reflects the levels of involvement that are widely used in early years settings to assess children's engagement with learning experiences (F Laevers, 1994) but applying them to adults – in this case the practitioners demonstrating a high level of involvement, as evidenced by them not noticing the presence of the manager entering the room.

Other interviewees, like Sandra and Val, manager and deputy (both level three) at a not-for-profit nursery, talked about being “on the children's wavelength” and looking at things “on their level,” and added that practitioners have “got to be able to think like a child” and to be “child-like in yourself, really” with Sandra adding a warning that this

stance might need defending; “You've also got to be prepared to fight for that....and there is a fight for that.”

Physical reassurance in the form of hugs was also mentioned by practitioners, and an awareness of a child's physical reaction being an indicator of their level of emotional wellbeing was shown by Cara, a graduate manager in a private nursery, describing a reflection in practice; “Is that child still on my leg with a need to refuel from me as an adult a lot? Are they venturing off and exploring?” Paula, a mature practitioner at Acorn, described a similar kind of attentiveness and instinctive tuning into a child's emotional needs, making a direct comparison between a practitioner's and a parent's intuition:

*I think when you've been a mum, you know when they're not right, and you have that instinct. I think when you become a mum, you then change and see things differently...it's like you're more tuned-in to the children. So you look out for when they're hungry, they're thirsty, like, they need that little bit of extra attention. And, yeah, your senses become more heightened, I think.*

#### 5.2.4 Sociomateriality

In some cases the quality of resources available to the children had an ethical dimension, featuring particularly in the accounts of interviewees with extensive and varied experience. Clare, a graduate leader and trainer, described her frustration with nurseries “where children have been asked to sit around a table for a period of time, the table hasn't been a correct height, chairs have been at different levels, they are expected to eat with like, plastic cutlery.” The importance of comfortable seating for adults working in nurseries was commented on by Liz, a graduate trainer and consultant, who had visited many nurseries and had witnessed practitioners having to sit on child sized chairs, or

*kind of propped up by cushions on the floor to do it. So you'll go in somewhere they've got nothing ... or somewhere they've got a lovely chair, and ... that has an impact then on the attachment. It comes back to that understanding of the development theory as well, doesn't it?*

The resources in a nursery often reflect the pedagogy in place. Cara, a graduate manager of a private nursery, explained that the approach in her nursery was to have “real things, respectfully things from other people’s worlds, things that make them curious, interested.” She described how a potential candidate for a practitioner position at the nursery ruled herself out of the job when she expressed her surprise that the sand and water trays were placed next to each other and said that in her nursery she puts them at opposite ends of the room, to avoid the potential for messy combinations. Cara knew that I shared her understanding of the creative potential of messy activities, so she did not need to elaborate further.

An example of the importance of appropriate material resources was described in a narration by leader and trainer Clare, and her observation of “an adult-directed activity with some scissors” with a practitioner who was herself observing and making notes about four children who were cutting along prescribed lines. After the activity, Clare asked the practitioner how she felt the activity had gone and her response was that she was impressed with the three girls’ ability to cut the paper along the lines. On enquiring about the other child, the response was that he “can’t use a pair of scissors” and Clare noted that the child was in earshot at this point “which really upset me.” Clare then recounted her actions (she was in a consultancy role at the time) in modelling to the practitioner a more successful supportive role, explaining afterwards to the practitioner that she had changed the scissors;

*“the biggest mistake that you have made today is ... you have just given a left-handed child right-handed scissors. That child was failing from the beginning. And you need to be mindful of that.” And that child was excluded from that time when she didn't recognize that.*

Clare noted other incidents where sociomateriality was an issue in whether practice was inclusive; where chairs were not the correct height for the table or for a child, when children were given ineffective cutlery, inappropriate clothing for outdoor play, or a lack of thought given to diversity in resources, particularly in home corners. Amber, a graduate practitioner at Acorn, commented on a nursery she had worked in where there were plentiful resources, but not enough staff to be able to use them effectively, and Paula, a practitioner, described the problem of parental mobile phones:

*in my previous setting, parents used to come ... and pick their children up, on their phone, and there would be no interaction at all... it just became upsetting for us, and for the child. It was no, like, how was your day? They'd just literally take them and take them out to their car.*

Accounts of unethical practice were sometimes illustrated by the sociomateriality in the play environment. Consultant Liz had been engaged by the owner of a nursery to support a new manager.

*...it was under-resourced, that was the first thing and it was, it was a mess as well. Now that doesn't mean that a mess is a bad thing, because children create that kind of, sort of, don't they? But there's a mess and there's a mess, if you know what I mean...it was unpurposeful mess, and it was under-resourced, and the staff were very kind of disengaged*

I had often observed the same distinction in nursery environments, where, to me, it is very clear whether a busy, messy range of activities in a nursery is attractive and engaging to children, or whether it is simply cluttered and lacking purpose. Nursery décor can also influence children's wellbeing. Maya, an experienced graduate manager, described a nursery that had been decorated in very bold primary colours, and how one child became very upset every time she was taken into the yellow room, and calmed down in every other room. Maya asserted "I will never forget that for as long as I live" and described how she tried to persuade the director to redecorate in more neutral colours, but because "it was all about costings", it couldn't be done, so she had to move the child into the next age group to solve the problem.

### 5.3 Meso level – Organisations

#### 5.3.1 Directors and Owners

At all organisation levels, from practitioners to owners and directors, there was a consensus amongst interviewees that the culture, ethos and values of a nursery were strongly influenced, if not created, by those at the top. Peter, a director at a large chain of nurseries, demonstrated his leadership style in his insistence that his company's success was down to the people within it, and similarly, John, a director of a sector organisation, described maintaining "a moral compass" as one of the most challenging

but important aspects of his role. Both men were similarly critical of government policy, but had different perceptions of care. Peter insisted that “care drives the outcomes financially,” whereas John felt that “care has been the downfall,” arguing that care implies private funding, in contrast to public funding for education.

The two statements address different aspects of the word ‘care’ – Peter recognising that the quality of care (of employees as well as of children) is the single biggest determinant of financial success, as that depends on parental and staff satisfaction, and John, coming from the voluntary sector which relies more heavily on government funding, alluding to the perception of childcare being equated with a kind of babysitting service rather than a profession. Their two companies were the most praised by interviewees, with John’s large voluntary organisation described as being “willing to listen” and Peter’s employee-owned company being praised for its “listening lunches” where groups of employees were given the opportunity to voice any concerns to a senior director.

One of my interviewees, Dan, a director of a small group of nurseries, who has worked in the sector for over forty years, in a variety of roles, expressed a jaundiced view of fellow nursery owners, and referred out to a social media group of nursery owners. He commented on the way in which the participants complain vociferously about the inadequacies of government funding, but “who then turn around and say, oh, I’m off to the Bahamas for six weeks.” He expressed a belief that government funding should come with strings attached, so that settings were incentivised, for example, to employ more highly qualified practitioners, and that there were clear milestones to achieve.

### 5.3.2 Nursery sizes

One area that I sought to explore in the interviews was the views of participants on the ideal size of early years settings. My questions were framed by asking interviewees about their ideal nursery size and was interested to know if the views of directors and practitioners within the same organisations would be different. Peter, as CEO of a large nursery chain, insisted “There’s no point doing one less than 75, 80” and citing 126 as “probably” the optimum size. Other directors made similar comments; “the bigger the setting the better” and that 90 places is “a good size”. Another expanded on his comment on a nursery being 120 places:

*and did it feel like there were 120 children there at any one time? And the answer's no. But that's because I had an exceptional manager... it's about the attitude, and style of management, rather than the size... the imperative is about the human side of it rather than the number side of it.*

Nursery managers, including those within the larger chains, did not necessarily share the desire for larger sites; Sinead, a level three manager in a large chain of nurseries, felt that the 64 place size of her nursery is “perfect, our room sizes are perfect, you know, you have so many children that you can supervise, look after, and provide that care and well-being ...funnily enough we have got an application for a loft conversion. As much as I'm like, yeah, because we've got the demand, you know, the demand is there to have it there, but part of me's like [sucks air through teeth] And to put an upstairs, you don't want to segregate people then either.”

Caroline, an owner-manager with a Montessori qualification, similarly expressed a preference for the size of her 36-place nursery, saying that she worried about the impact on quality with larger nurseries. “I don't think that you can have the same quality control when you have 20 members of staff coming and going...I don't think I'd want to get a lot bigger. I don't, I would rather have a second small nursery...than make this any bigger.” She also commented on it being easier for her nursery to adapt the settling-in process to the needs of individual families, mentioning that staff members had also observed the difference: “They've come from several chains and they've never seen that before, where an owner will work with the parents on settling in sessions that work for the child and the parent.”

The voluntary nurseries had more smaller settings, with the smallest being just 26 places, which would not usually be considered a viable size financially. This capacity was dictated by the limited size of the building, but the trustee interviewee commented that “if it was a commercial nursery using that space, probably they would build into quite a lot of the garden space because that would allow them to carry more kids” explaining that the green space was particularly important to them, as they were situated in a city where “lots of the parents who are living locally are in flats so they don't have immediate access to outside space, so a real opportunity for the kids to be out a lot”.

### 5.3.3 Profit as a key performance indicator

Several examples of the impact of for-profit drivers were described in the interviews. Jordan, a level seven manager at Acorn, for example, described her experience in a large corporate nursery, where they were discouraged from taking funded children, but were told “never turn down a full-time place, even if you’ve got 18 children booked in for September for your 9 place baby room... and you weren’t allowed to challenge anything, otherwise they fired you.”

Helen, the graduate manager of a private nursery in an area of social deprivation, was adamant about the importance of putting children above profit:

*If I had a child and they were genuinely struggling to pay...I'd just let that child come in, because I know that that would be the agreement. We keep children safe. That's what we do. I left my prior setting because it was KPIs, it was business plans ... some nurseries genuinely go into it because they think it's quick cash and they will talk about business plans and improvements, but they don't, they don't care. And those nurseries are generally in very middle class areas, 'cause that's where they make money... it doesn't feel right.*

She was also scathing about her previous nursery’s approach to staff welfare

*also, I think because there was no care, their approach to staffing was different. And that showed in their horrendous staff turnover. It was not a nice place to be for the children because people were stressed, because it was always this room's got to be full. This business plan needs to be implemented. It was never, we focus on are the children happy? If the children are happy, the staff are happy, everybody's happy.*

Concern about profit as a strategic objective was also voiced at senior levels, for example by John, from his experience of working with large corporate providers in sector-wide discussions; “all the conversations seem to focus around return on capital investment, return to shareholders, return to investors where there is no balance about what is my role in supporting children and families.” He also commented that he recognised the challenge for many providers about “not being ashamed that they get a return on their investment,” differentiating small independent providers from the

larger corporate chains. Peter similarly expressed regret that his company had taken on external investors, commenting that it resulted in “rewarding people not in the business, for making no contribution, in a significant way.”

#### 5.3.4 An unintended case study – unethical care in practice

Although my original intention was to focus on positive examples of practice, it was probably inevitable that several interviewees were keen to describe incidents and examples of poor practice, in which the common ingredient was a lack of care. What I didn't expect was that several of the examples related to the same early years provider, which happened to be one that I was already familiar with, and was already prejudiced against, as I disliked the philosophy of the nurseries, which was for formal learning at a very early age. In every instance I did not know beforehand that the interviewee had previously worked for that provider, and I feel confident that I said nothing prior to their revelations or during the interviews that would have encouraged them in their criticism, although those from Acorn would be aware that the pedagogy being described was very different from our own.

The first interviewee to describe the unethical practice at that provider, which I will call the Right Start nursery, was Rachel, an Acorn nursery assistant, who described how her previous nursery, which was attached to a Preparatory School, “didn't like to take children that needed additional help” which she felt the extra support needed “eats into their profit”. She felt that the school “was more for the parents, because the parents pay, the parents got more or less what they wanted.” On being asked for examples of how that might not be in the best interests of the children, she described how a child who had uncharacteristically fallen asleep and was found to have a high temperature, was given infant paracetamol rather than taken home, even when he got progressively worse, because “the parents needed to be at work.” In other settings Rachel had worked in, poorly children would have been sent home, and she felt that keeping the child at nursery was wrong.

Rachel then described the frustration of going on a training course which encouraged her to introduce ‘risky play’ in the nursery, but then when children scraped their knees jumping from a low bridge, “we'd have matron moaning at us because she's getting too many accidents.” Risky play was then banned, despite the practitioners being



convinced of its benefits, and she felt it was seen as not complying with the “very structured” teaching environment. Rachel also described an accident at the nursery where despite being knocked unconscious by a falling wooden parasol, she was given an ice pack and told to finish her shift. Because she had cried with the pain, she was told to put sunglasses on to hide her red eyes, and on going to the hospital after her shift she discovered that she had fractured her shoulder and damaged the ligaments. When the physiotherapist told her to wear a sling, to protect it from knocks, “I was told I was not allowed to wear my sling at work because it would look bad for the parents.” She described feeling worthless and panicky whenever she had to speak to matron about anything, and that she only stayed there afterwards, because of “money. I’m not going to lie.”

Less extreme, but further accounts of unethical practice at the same setting came from Sinead, Emily, Peta and Kim. Sinead, a nursery manager in a large nursery chain, described the frustrations of being a practitioner with a very controlling and prescriptive culture (at one of the other nurseries in the group) where practitioners were not allowed to organise room moves for children without approval, when it became clear that the criteria was about efficiency of occupancy rather than the needs of the child. She described it as “quite regimented. You know, you had to conform, and, you know, you heard stories if you didn’t, and you knew what would happen.” She gave an example of the owner ripping down a display she didn’t like. Both Peta and Kim (graduate leaders now at Acorn) described their dislike of the no-trousers rule, and although she was very vague about the details of what she didn’t like (other than the uniform), Peta used the phrase “I felt very uncomfortable” several times. Kim’s concerns began with the recruitment process: “they barely interviewed me, Zoe. I basically went in there and they’d already given me the job.” Her recollection of the interview was that “I was sat there waiting, I’d prepped myself, got this all ready, and she was like, ‘So, this is the uniform, this is this’. And basically went, ‘So, are you happy?’ ... knowing what I know now, actually it was ridiculously unprofessional.”

She then commented that she’d only been there two days before she was “already ruffling feathers” because she was challenging the need to send children home pristine, because she wanted to organise messy activities and “have fun.” “It was very prescribed. It was like, right, we’ll put puzzles out, we put this out, we put that out.

There wasn't a lot of engagement." Kim also objected to the small size of the rooms, "they're all tiny and they're trying to get as many children as they can into those eight rooms. It's all about money." She said that her manager said to her within a couple of days "I think you're going to outgrow this place...there's not a lot you can change. And I sort of sat with her, and said this is wrong. This is wrong. This is wrong." On my asking "what sort of things were wrong?" Kim's reply was "Well even with regards to putting the children first. It wasn't putting children first. The amount of times I saw people holding children by the wrists..." After then describing the lack of a protocol for safeguarding issues, and a concern that safeguarding concerns weren't properly recorded, she then widened her descriptions:

*Just their general, Zoe, you know, like, 'come on, we're doing a nappy' [mimes], hoik you up, onto a nappy mat, there was no love and care, it's not like, [different tone of voice] 'OK, am I alright to check your nappy?' you know, they just go around and pull nappies out, [mimes pulling open back of a nappy to see if dirty] not talk to the children. The general care and wellbeing was not OK.*

She then reflects that she's glad she went there,

*because actually I helped, again, I had two other members of staff in my room, who, by the end of my six months there, were actually starting, they were developing in a way that it was nicer, d'you know what I mean? They knew, as me as the room senior, I wouldn't stand for that in my room. They could do whatever they liked around the rest of the nursery, but I wasn't having it.*

I then asked her if it would have been different if she hadn't gone there straight from a position in a very well-run local authority nursery. If she'd gone as a newly qualified practitioner, for example... "I'd have turned out like, sorry, that sounds awful, I need to remain professional. I may have been accustomed to the way they did things and think that that was OK." She then reflects that some aspects of care would not have been affected in terms of her personal approach: "I think I still know what is right and wrong." She gives the example of not wiping a child's nose from behind, without warning, and said "I think you have that little bit of empathy and it's like, imagine if it was your child. I wouldn't want anybody doing that to my child." I then asked Kim whether it was down

to the manager or the type of ownership and her response was that it came from the owner, as “it was all about money.”

Finally, in relation to the Right Start nurseries, Emily, now an Acorn deputy manager (level six) worked at a different nursery within the same group, and made similar observations as Peta, repeating that “it wasn’t for me” and that she didn’t last long there. On being pressed about what she meant by it not being for her, she laughed nervously and said

*So... they didn't really follow the children's interests, at all. It was kind of, very structured, the day went exactly how it was planned, um, which, you know, isn't, isn't great at all. All children are different, all children have different needs and things. Some children don't enjoy activities that other children are doing. Um, just the way it was ran... the place wasn't very nurturing. We weren't, if there was a child that was crying, the staff would say, it was kind of like, no, they're fine. They don't need picking up and things. It just went, it just, you know, it was how can I put it? Um. It's not what I believe in. It's not how a practitioner should be...everything was telling me, you know, this isn't right.*

I then asked her the same question that I’d asked Kim, about whether she’d have been able to identify that as poor practice if it had been her first nursery, rather than going there, similarly to Kim, after being at a nursery with high standards of care. Her response was strikingly similar:

*Well, no, I don't think I do, because I believe you, you know, you lead by example... You need to see people doing it to then learn. And so I think also another part of me was, like... well, hold on a second. If it was my child and they were left to cry, how would I feel about that? Um, so, yeah, I think mainly because I'd been in a different nursery, and seen. But yeah, some of it was to do with how I felt about the situation as well.*

Similarly, on being quizzed about who or what was responsible for the quality of care, Emily’s response echoed Kim’s. She said that the practitioners would decide whether or not to go outside, but that

*they weren't allowed to get messy, Zoe, they weren't allowed to play, you know, they had to be perfectly presented all the time. These children are babies and, you know, they want to explore their food. And they weren't allowed. We had to spoon feed them. They weren't allowed to put their hand in and explore.*

Emily then described how big red boxes of plastic toys were placed on the table...

*And then if, obviously, if a child sees a box, it's full of toys, what they're going to do? They're going to tip it up. So, you know, straightaway they tipped it up, on the floor, and then they would get told off! For tipping up the box. So, yeah, things like that. It wasn't right.... it upset me actually, working there, after, after working for [previous nursery] and seeing how it should be done. Yeah... I didn't listen to them. I cuddled them children and I done the best I could for them children when I was there, so [nods].*

There was a common theme in these accounts that the individuals themselves tried to maintain high-quality practice, but as practitioners were unable to change the nursery's working practices and methods. Unlike some of the other groups of nurseries that were mentioned in interviewees, where experiences varied widely, none of the six that spoke about the Right Start nurseries expressed anything positive about the organisation. In examining their company accounts, their website, and other literature in the public domain, I noted that the dividends that were paid out to directors were vastly disproportionate to those in other early years organisations of a similar size. It would be a risk to confidentiality if I were to include details here. The dividends were also disproportionate to the net profit in the accounts, and there were a significant number of related party transactions, and payments to and from subsidiaries. Such grey data has only been used as supplementary to the primary interview data, but confirms the impression gained by employees that financial gain by the small number of directors was a key driver for the organisation.

Key performance indicators and management practices at other for-profit nurseries were criticised in much less severe ways. Maya, an experienced graduate manager, described how it was "quite a shocker for me" when she first went to work for a large nursery chain, which she described as "very corporate, all about FTEs, marketing, meeting targets." Maya also described the very different attitudes of parents, with

some demanding a service “I pay you a fee. I want this service” and others “oh, I’m really sorry to bother you, but...” Graduate manager Lucy’s experience of a similarly large chain was critical about insufficient management resource. As a quality and standards officer there, she described how “I didn’t really feel I was making any kind of difference with it being two of us over 80 nurseries.”

Maya also described how she went from the very large chain to a smaller chain that was growing rapidly and had just taken over a smaller group of nurseries, which is often a favoured route for expansion. In this case, she said it “was like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire” and described how the original small group was excellent, but were now struggling with the transition, with unhappy parents and staff. She described a grim ordeal of being sent by the CEO to host a meeting with a group of angry parents, despite being about to fly off to Barbados to see her dying father. “I went in and thought, one, my headspace is not ready for this, but I’ve got to do it.” The parents were further annoyed by having been sent an area manager instead of the CEO or a director, and one of the parents’ main complaints was that they “didn’t want the staff to move from the nursery, because they were literally taking staff members out of one nursery, shifting them to another nursery. It was painful.” The last straw for Maya was having to support nursery managers who were unable to meet the mandatory staffing ratios, but who had been told just “to manage it” and not to use agency staff. “So how can you manage it?” She described how “I’m sitting in a parent meeting telling them how great the nursery was. And I’m thinking, my conscience isn’t clear. I can’t do this. I really can’t do this. I need to be honest, I need to be open. So I called it a day” (with that nursery chain).

### 5.3.5 Challenging poor practice – practitioner agency

Unethical practice was sometimes ascribed to ignorance by owners of nurseries. The ability to identify the quality of nursery activities and the environment was clearly evident in graduate consultant Ros’s accounts, and particularly in terms of the owner’s lack of understanding of what constituted good practice:

*So I went into this beautiful nursery... all the children were in different corners, so they must have been put into small groups after lunch... And I watched them ... member of staff was just sat there [mimes bored position, head resting on*

*hand]. And, and I just thought, God, that's terrible. So I said this to [owner's name]. She said, 'oh, I thought it all looked really like the children were all being well behaved.' I said, well, it might have looked that they're being well behaved, because they weren't doing anything. They weren't happy .... And so they thought being quiet was well behaved, not recognising that what was taking place was really mediocre.*

On another occasion, Ros challenged the practitioners directly, and in her interview expressed her frustration that the practitioners didn't recognise the poor quality of the care being provided at the end of a morning session

*when some children went home and some went for lunch. It was, [closes eyes and shakes her head] ... Nobody was doing anything. I said shouldn't one of you read a story or something? And they were all sitting there and every so often a child would leave or somebody else would go and wash their hands. And after they'd all gone, I said, can you explain to me what was going on? And they said, oh, well, some of those children go home for lunch and some stay. I said, well ... I'm watching this poor little girl. She stayed longer than the others... sitting there for ages watching all the other children going for lunch*

An alternative to direct challenges was the approach taken by Tara, a graduate manager at Acorn, which was similar to the 'not in my room' attitude of Kim, described earlier. Tara was in a senior role within her previous nursery, and felt confident enough to directly disobey the instructions from the owner:

*The two-year funding, we weren't allowed to take regardless... with the special educational needs, for example, we were told no, you're not allowed to take them, but we took them anyway, because for me, that's... you just can't exclude a child just because they've got Downs syndrome or because they've got severe autism. You have to support that child and you have to help them prepare to get to school. And you have to ultimately, as well, support the family because they're struggling, and that child coming to nursery gives them a bit of a break and also helps them provide for the family financially. So we, we just went above, we just went over her head and took them anyway.*

In instances like this, Tara's confidence was bolstered by knowing that her ethical

instincts were aligned to the guidance from Ofsted and the local authority, and that therefore the owner would have no grounds for an official sanction. She said that the owner's rationale was "it was too much paperwork involved, too much time involved...We took the children anyway, but we, we got a lot of stick for it."

In other instances, like that described by Amber, an Acorn senior practitioner, who was taken on as a practitioner in a brand new nursery, the only solution was to leave. She described the way in which more and more children were taken on, but without any increase in staffing, so "quite often I would have to be left on my own with several different age range children while the manager went off to cook...I only stayed for a couple of months...it was a good job I did leave because I think a month after, they had Ofsted and they failed. So I'm quite glad I got out of there." She noted that the children seemed happy, "but they weren't getting the best out of their experiences because there just wasn't enough of us to be able to provide that." On asking Amber what she thought the reasons for the lack of compliance were, she said

*it was a husband and wife and they'd not run any nurseries before, they just bought into this franchise... I don't really think they knew exactly what they were doing. They'd spent out a lot of money on resources, like the nursery was really kitted out with some really good stuff. But because they'd spent so much on that, they then couldn't provide training or staff or anything like that. So it just, the resources were almost pointless because the children couldn't access them because there wasn't enough staff.*

In several examples, the culture of a nursery was given as an example of unethical practice, as in Acorn graduate manager Anne's description:

*I didn't like the way they behaved towards the children. They wasn't good role models ... and yet they seemed to be able to get away with it. And, um, it always sticks in my head. It was like at mealtimes... they didn't used to sit down with the children, they'd be standing up chatting and talking and then if the children misbehaved then they'd sort of tell them ... don't do this, or I'll do this. And I remember one member of staff said if you don't stop messing about I'm just going to eat your pudding, and ate the pudding in front of the child!*

When I asked Anne what could have prevented that from happening, she said

*I think actually it was probably the culture of the nursery. I think it did seem like the manager there, the managers of the council nurseries were always office based and then they had a deputy which was sometimes office based as well... there was a cliquy environment... I don't think anybody then would want to say anything because you know they'd probably feel they'd get in trouble with the manager or the manager wouldn't like it or turn a blind eye*

Kim, another graduate manager, was also critical of a lack of presence from the owner/manager of the first nursery she worked at, who she said “was in and out, but she wasn't really there... things weren't properly run.”

Tara, an experienced graduate manager, described how, as a new manager, she challenged poor practice which had become embedded in a nursery

*I cannot stand it when people lay a baby on the floor and just give it a bottle and let them feed it themselves...When I first started here, those bottles were being fed that way. Children were being put to sleep with their shoes on, their bibs on. Children were, you know, even just last week, we've got a new baby who's breastfed. And he was sat in the highchair screaming because he didn't want the food. And I said, look, come on, why is he not eating? 'Oh he's new, and his mum's the comfort'. And I said, 'no, no, no. Get him out, sit him on your lap, feed him with the spoon, feed him his food on your lap.' 'Are we allowed to do that?' And I said 'you do whatever's right for the child. If that child's sitting in the highchair crying, because he's really scared and he doesn't know anybody, you need to sit him on your lap, get him used to you, feed the bottle, you know, feed him sitting on your lap' and it's small steps.*

The questioning from a practitioner, of the manager, “are we allowed to do that?” suggests that there was a general lack of understanding of the ‘rules’ applying to mealtimes in that nursery, and a lack of confidence in challenging usual practice in order to improve the experience for individual children.

Interviewees were understandably keen to disassociate themselves from examples of poor practice, usually by making it clear that it was a factor in their decision to leave that particular nursery, or, in a few cases, by challenging it. Jordan, an Acorn manager (level seven) for example, described her experience as a student at a nursery where



she felt the room leader was prejudiced against the children from lower income families:

*there was this one little boy that she really had it out for, and she dragged him one day out of the bathroom with his pants round his ankles and sat him down at the lunch table. Oh it was horrible... they used to make them sit down and watch a movie for an hour and a half every day after they'd um, after they'd had dinner, so they could tidy up, like, proper old school, and they'd lay on their sleep mats and they'd get shouted at if they moved.*

Jordan reported that her tutors had said “if there’s anything that you’re not happy about, you know, you come to us and we’ll sort it out” but that after she told her tutor about the appalling practice at the nursery, the tutor visited “and completely brushed it all under the carpet.” Improvements were finally made when the manager offered Jordan a summer job and she declined. “And she said, well, why? And I told her, like, some of the things that I’d seen. And she actually addressed it and did something about it” and Jordan reflected that “from that day on, I was like, OK, you’ve just got to report it to the top person.” Jordan then accepted a job at another nursery operated by the same organisation, and had a completely different experience, with a manager who was “proper nurturing” and another experience where the nursery “looked horrible. But like, it was a really, really nice vibe. Like, and everybody was, like, full on with the children.”

Other challenges to unethical practices were made at a more senior level, by Clare, Liz and Ros, all of whom were visiting nurseries in the capacity of tutors or consultants, and therefore had a more detached perspective, but also confidence in their own judgements of what was acceptable in early years practice. Clare, a graduate leader and trainer, described how she would challenge practice directly with practitioners “where I don’t think it’s very ethical, like babies being propped up in a car seat with a bottle and a blanket underneath, for example. So it’s having conversations about safety, but also what they’re missing out from the bonding process, you know” but that there would be times when she would have to speak to the manager of the setting.

### 5.3.6 Confronting poor practice – parental views

The sample size of parents was too small to make any generalisations from the interview data, but the accounts did provide an insight into parental perceptions of nursery practice. One parent, Tamsin, had encountered poor practice with her third child, and in a comment that perhaps reflects that prior experience, noted “It sounds really funny, he came home very clean. And I feel like a sign of a good day is when they come out sandy.” Other perceptions included Haruki’s comment that his son’s nursery “felt very much more like a simple commercial enterprise rather than serious considering, you know, the child’s day...there was a distance, I suppose, would be the most polite way of putting it.” Others described the practice they witnessed at different nurseries, and the behaviour of managers, with two of the parents blaming the nursery management for low staff morale, high staff turnover and a reliance on agency staff at their previous nurseries. Rebecca expressed a concern that the emphasis was on building up the occupancy than ensuring that staffing levels were adequate, “rather than employing the staff first and then increasing the children, they did it the other way round.”

When care falls short of expectations, parents will often make their unhappiness known, and Tamsin described a particularly upsetting episode when her son was attending for his second day at nursery:

*it's a little bit of a walk, to his room. And I could hear him crying, but I, I needed the loo, so I went to the loo. I came out and he was still crying. I walked into the room and he was in the middle of the room, stood at a piece of equipment on his own. He had a snotty nose. He was bright red. He was not just a little bit sad, [he was] distressed. Not one person was near him. And I was early picking him up. I was about half an hour early. I didn't tell them, I just turned up, and there were four ladies in the room and he was just left. And you could see one of them took one look at me and went straight over to pick him up, picked him up, and obviously I took him, and normally, Ethan's a bit of a, well he's a lot of a Mummy's boy, so as soon as I pick him up, he would settle. It took him ages. And then when I said, well, where's his dummy? They couldn't find it. Made no attempt whatsoever. There's four of you in the room and you've made no attempt whatsoever to offer him any comfort. I don't mind that he's crying, you*

*know, it's his second day, but no-one was trying to comfort him. I also thought I should have been called. If he's this distressed, I should have been called.*

After discussing the incident with the manager at the nursery, the deployment of staff in the room was investigated and apparently Ethan's key person was busy cleaning the floor after the children had had their tea. The lack of response to a distressed child was clearly a lack of care, and the reaction on Tamsin's entrance also demonstrated the practitioners' awareness of the unacceptability of his being left to cry. Tamsin soon removed her son from that nursery, as even though she had previously sent her older child there and had been happy with her care, this incident destroyed her trust in the staff team's ability to respond to her child's needs in a sufficiently caring way.

## 5.4 Macro level – Society, Government Policies, and Funding

### 5.4.1 Leaders' views

The macro issues of concern aired by directors, owners and managers, to a large extent reflected their type of setting or group, and also the demographics of their location. As well as having firm views on the need for better funding for the sector, several interviewees also commented on society's lack of understanding about the complexities of early years practice. Sandra, a level three manager in a not-for-profit nursery, expressed a common view when she said "I think people tend to value the education side when in actual fact...the education comes through the care." Another "gripe," described by Ros, a graduate consultant and trainer, that "every time there's a change of government or a shuffle, somebody that is in education gets changed" and wipes out previous work and wastes a lot of money "regurgitating the same thing" in a different format. Another graduate consultant, Liz, expressed frustration at the DfE's lack of understanding about early years and voiced a concern about school starting age. She also suggested that there needs to be incentives from the government for providers to put nurseries in areas of deprivation but added that the organisations operating those nurseries needed to understand the needs of the local community, and that it would never work with any of the "big corporate chains."

Sam, a trustee and director of a small not-for-profit nursery, had a similar concern about a common interpretation of school readiness being "not about that confident child that's inquisitive and asks questions and is able to go out and explore and make

sense of the world. It's about being about to sit at a desk and write letters." Sam blamed "the way in which settings may be judged and evaluated and partly the push from parents" for an over-emphasis on early writing skills and described how her setting prioritised "learning through play and valuing play and teaching parents the value of play for their children."

The need to prioritise a child's physical and emotional wellbeing was expressed by Tim, the director a small group of not-for-profit nurseries; "I believe that a child can't really get much of an education unless their basic needs are met. So you've absolutely still got to make sure they're fed and watered and rested, but also bonded to somebody. And then if they're happy, then you can obviously provide them with loads of education opportunities" and he highlighted the way baby room practitioners are undervalued, commenting that "if you're looking after a six-month-old baby you're just as much a teacher as if you're looking after, you know, a 17 year old...I think it's wicked that we don't value our early years teachers in this country."

#### 5.4.2 Practitioners' views

Practitioners were less vocal about government policies and seemed less concerned about funding issues, which is unsurprising, given their limited involvement in finances within their setting. They did, however, echo the concern of interviewees like Tim in the example above, about the lack of recognition for the early years sector. Ashley, an Acorn practitioner, commented: "I think a lot of people think that we come to a nursery to play with the children all day and we don't. There's a lot more involved. And I think that is unfortunate that our role is so overlooked."

### 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has described the range of experiences and views of the interviewees in this research, including the detail of narrations in some vignettes of practice. Beginning with the personal motivation and career history of individuals, I explored their views on ethical practice, and their personal experiences at different nurseries and organisations. The accounts range from the granular level of specific childcare practices to views on the sector and society's perception of childcare. In the following chapters of analysis I will begin with the macro level, and gradually zoom in to the

micro level, in order to evaluate the influences that determine whether childcare practices are ethical, in being both high quality and inclusive.

## Chapter Six      Macro Analysis: Ethical Intentions and the Purpose of Childcare

### 6.1      Introduction

Having given an insight into the content and range of interview data in the previous chapter, I will now begin the analysis, beginning at the macro level. In exploring the influences that either facilitate or pose barriers to the provision of ethical childcare practice, a logical starting point is the initial intention and purpose of the parties involved, and the influences on those involved in policy setting at macro and meso levels. Beginning with the perceptions of the childcare workforce, and parents, on how childcare is viewed by society, I will consider how societal drivers, including gendered perceptions of childcare, affect the political drivers that sit behind government early years policy. I will then examine the impact of the sector's marketisation on organisations in the childcare sector, and in turn, whether organisations' auspices and purpose affect the degree to which childcare provision is enabled or prevented from being ethical in its implementation.

### 6.2      Perceptions of childcare

#### 6.2.1      Perceptions of the workforce

Graduate consultant and trainer Ros commented that “early years have always been the poor relation,” reflecting the consistently expressed frustration of interviewees at the low status of childcare and early years education. Kate, the owner of a private nursery group, described how it “does make us angry... that our girls have to work for a pittance...I don't know what we can do about it, unless society changes and what we see as important changes,” and she blamed both a lack of investment in the sector by governments, and a lack of appreciation of the work done by early years professionals. The attempt at rebranding childcare with the changing terminology of job roles described in chapter one (1.3.4) is ongoing and is reflected in Tim's (director of a small group of not-for-profit nurseries) comment about staff working with infants being “just as much a teacher” as those working with teenagers (5.4.1). The perception of interviewees that childcare is an undervalued profession confirms the reports about the parlous state of the early years workforce as “forgotten key workers” (Social Mobility Commission, 2020, p. 3).

The indignation of Sharon, a director of a large nursery chain, is clear in the following comment:

*I think the British public, and therefore a lot of parents also think, you know, the cheapest childcare we can get the better, because actually all they do is babysitting, whereas you pay £10 an hour to have your dog walked, and you expect to get childcare for less than £4 an hour, it's outrageous.*

Sharon argued that although she felt the government are complicit in the undervaluing and underfunding, it is also a problem with the perception of the British public. A recent article in a broadsheet newspaper about the most recent proposal to water down staff ratios captured a societal misconception about early years settings by referring to staff “watching over” children, demonstrating a lack of understanding about how children are supported to learn through play, or the extent of the care demands of infants and young children (Riley-Smith, 2021). Interviewees expressed frustration with the simplistic understanding of caring that such comments suggest, which “obscures the complexity and the intellectual challenge of work with young children” (Goldstein, 1998). These views echoed my own perception of the persistent undervaluing of the early years workforce.

### 6.2.2 Perceptions about the expectations of parents

Societal views are also reflected in parental expectations, and interviewees described a variety of parental attitudes and assumptions. Rachel, a nursery assistant, commented that at the private nursery she’d worked at “the parents pay, so the parents got more or less what they wanted. So they were seen as the customer.” High levels of empathy for parental worries and anxiety were shown by several, but as the experienced consultant and trainer Liz observed, “We spend so much time thinking about settling the children that we do forget about the parents and the parent anxiety.”

There were also several accounts of practitioners dealing with parents who are struggling with parenting. Cara, a graduate manager, described

*a particularly tricky parent..who can't manage her own self-regulation of emotions. So for example she came in and the person she was hoping to see wasn't there, she was sick. So she created quite a hullabaloo for the child. So*

*we phoned her about 9:00 and just said, you know, 'how are you feeling?' And she said 'Oh I'm so sorry I'm so embarrassed... So I think we've got to understand that parents, you know, sometimes parents haven't gone through this process themselves.*

Helen, another graduate manager, similarly described parents who “were on child protection plans themselves” and the challenging situations that arose with some parents, including disclosures of domestic abuse and a variety of safeguarding issues. She commented that the nursery practitioners were seen as a “safe middle ground” between their friends, family and social services. Helen explained how her nursery had a reputation for being willing to support very needy families to the point where they became “almost hurt by your own success,” receiving a lot of referrals from health professionals. Interviewees from nurseries in areas of deprivation were more likely to describe providing help and support to parents, and those in more affluent areas were more likely to describe consumer behaviour in parental expectations.

Sam, the trustee director of a small not-for-profit nursery that encouraged active parental involvement, described how the trigger for starting the nursery was a frustration with the way many early years settings lack parental involvement, and how reality often contradicted the communications, with the talk of parent partnerships undermined by the reality that as a parent “I feel like I’m not allowed in, you know, I’m talked of as a parent, as a partner, but I’m not allowed through the gates, there’s no flexibility in me coming and kind of sitting down. I feel like everyone’s just waiting for me to leave.” The concept of parent partnership is key to high quality early years care, but it is often an espoused theory of practice rather than a theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

Her comment about practitioner resistance to parental involvement was illustrated in a debate that arose post-Covid-19 in the desire of many practitioners and parents to retain the socially distanced pandemic routine of handing over children at the threshold to nurseries rather than parents spending time collecting their child from inside. Their observations that handovers appear to be quicker and smoother was challenged by those who were concerned about less visible emotional upset, and a webinar about the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the early years sector, in February 2022, included the following exchanges in the chat:



Participant A: *We have found that children have settled in really well without parents coming into the setting...*

Participant B: *Easier but not better...children not having the ability to be settled might appear to be settle but those feelings do not go away and can be seen manifest in other behaviours. The settling in process is really important. It may have been 'easier'for adults but it will have impacted on the children - even if you are not aware of how it will manifest...*

Participant C: *Agree whole heartedly @[Participant B] this is a much more complex issue. A 'clean break' may have been more manageable for parents and practitioners when dropping off children but we have seen significantly increased numbers of children presenting emotional dysregulation within EYs settings.*

This tension between convenience for parents and practitioners and the emotional needs of children is an ongoing issue in sector debates, and the conflicting pressures to maintain social distancing but also to allow children to engage in settling-in practices led to episodes of sensemaking within nursery teams, as routines were adapted during and post-Covid, and these will be explored further later on. Practitioners may not share parental views about childcare practices, which can lead to ethical dilemmas, when they are trying to balance parental wishes with their own beliefs about what is best for a child, and interviewees described moments of tension when practitioners themselves did not agree about a course of action, as in the online debate described above.

Societal perceptions of childcare and early years education, then, are not a direct influence on whether childcare practice is delivered in an ethical way, but the interview data illustrate several relevant issues: the undervaluing of care, particularly in contrast to education; the effect of neoliberal policies encouraging the perception of parents as customers; and the complexity of issues around parental involvement and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview data and the evidence from online sector discussions expose the ongoing tensions between ideal high-quality practice which prioritises the emotional wellbeing of children, and the convenience for parents of swift transitions when dropping off and collecting children from nursery. These were exacerbated and highlighted by the pandemic restrictions, but are characteristic of

ongoing ethical dilemmas for early years settings. The interviewees' views once again were fairly consistent, and echoed my experiences and perceptions.

## 6.3 Societal drivers

### 6.3.1 Gendered perceptions of childcare

As I discussed in the literature review, the perception that women are more naturally suited to childcare has been perpetuated for many years, despite increasing evidence that such gender stereotyping is socially constructed (Rippon, 2019). Evidence from male practitioners (Graham, 2018) suggests that there is still a sizeable minority of parents who feel uncomfortable about male practitioners in early years settings, particularly in terms of caring for infants or in engaging in intimate care practices such as nappy changing. This reflects my own experience of employing male practitioners and was confirmed in the interviews. Cara, a very experienced graduate manager narrated the following exchange with a parent who had heard that 'Clive' was going to be their daughter's key person. The parent said

*'that's really good. But he won't change her nappy, will he?' 'Well, yeah, because he's her key worker.' 'Oh, but he's a bloke.' 'Yeah.' So I said 'What is it ... that's worrying you about that?' And he said 'Well, you know, he's a man, he shouldn't be changing my daughter's nappy.' 'Oh, so do you not change your daughter's nappy, then, as a man?' 'Well I do, but I'm her dad.' So, so, so we had to have quite a lot of work with that family, who ended up being Clive's biggest fan.*

Cara came across in her interview as a skilful, confident communicator, so it was perhaps not surprising that she reached a successful resolution with that family. It probably also helped that Clive was a mature practitioner with a family of his own. A recent experience in one of our own nurseries resulted in a family removing their child on hearing that a male practitioner had been appointed, without even meeting him. The interview and research data confirmed my own perceptions of ongoing gender prejudice.

The persistence of such prejudice against men in early years settings is perhaps one reason why the numerous initiatives to recruit more men into the childcare workforce

have made very slow progress. As is clear from the Twitter™ feed of @LetToysBeToys, the perpetuation of stereotypical roles for children in children's clothing and toys is still ongoing. The early years sector has had a long-standing commitment to gender-neutrality, (Peeters, 2013) but, as several neuroscientists have shown, (Fine, 2010, 2017; Rippon, 2019; Saini, 2017) the prevalence of unconscious bias is much harder to tackle, both with the general public and with the early years workforce. The sector's reputation for low pay is probably also a factor in the struggle to recruit men, as illustrated by graduate manager Jordan's wry comment: "why haven't we got more men in early years? Because of the stigma? Because of the money, probably."

The recent pandemic, and the need for many families to 'home-school' their children during lockdown, revealed the extent to which there is still a gender bias in many homes in the division of labour in terms of childcare (Sevilla & Smith, 2020). Early years software applications used by nurseries have adapted their forms to accommodate diversity in family structures (Connect Childcare, 2021; Family, 2021). That caring roles should not be gendered is widely accepted in theory, but equally challenging is the perception of caring, and of childcare, as a 'natural' skill or low-skilled profession, even amongst the early years workforce, with several interviewees citing their lack of academic prowess, or accidental route into childcare, which arise out of domestic caring duties being assigned to female family members, such as practitioners like Jasmine who said "I first got into childcare by looking after my little cousins."

The perception of childcare as simply babysitting is inextricably linked to the gendering of the profession. Sharon, a director of a large nursery chain, blamed the undervaluing of early years work on the history of Victorian women having to keep children safe while they did other work and was clear that the neuroscientific evidence of the importance of early learning from babyhood is still not sufficiently understood. An awareness of the gendered perceptions of childcare by society was shown by several of the interviewees, mainly those in senior roles, whereas those at the practitioner level rarely mentioned it, perhaps reflecting a more unquestioning acceptance of the status quo by more junior employees.

### 6.3.2 Societal expectations of childcare

The valorisation of education over care, discussed in chapter two, was commented on by several interviewees, but there was also an awareness that many parents are themselves aware of the imbalance and are keen to allow their child to have a less pressurised start in life. Parental views are not necessarily representative of society, but they do have an impact on the ways in which nurseries operate, particularly when parents are perceived as consumers. As Anne, a graduate manager, described,

*...we do have parents that want them to be educated more than probably cared for, but we also have parents that like them to be cared for and just learn along the way... and I tell you how I know that, is when the children from the prep nursery reach two, they will bring them over to our nursery because they don't want them to go into that formal education too soon ....or it's also happened the other way...they might miss the last year in the [pre-school room] because they feel that they need to get ready for [school]*

Sandra, a manager of a not-for-profit nursery, echoed a similar point with her comment that “I think people tend to value the education side when in actual fact, d’you know what? The education comes through the care.” She explained that over 90 per cent of their children spoke English as an additional language, and she spoke movingly about how “hair-raising and scary” it must be for those children when they start nursery so that it’s not surprising that they then revert back to their mother tongue for a while. She also showed an awareness of the importance of non-verbal communication “a child does not need to be verbally able to talk to you, a child does not need to be able to understand you, but you do need to give the time and the effort to show the care, and the support to make a child feel secure – a smile, that hand on the shoulder.” She then expanded on the importance of a child’s emotional and physical wellbeing and commented that “for a child to be able to learn and develop effectively through play, they’ve got to want to play, and they’re not going to want to play if they’re petrified.”

The interviewees who commented on societal expectations of the importance of early learning almost all followed up their comments with a defence on the importance of care. The only one that described an approach of adapting the nursery’s approach to the specific preference of parents, rather than having a clear ethos that is

communicated to parents, was Michelle, the owner of a private nursery, who identified a “two-fold service need” of distinct preferences. She described “a clear divide between those parents that want their children to be educated...they’re the ones that pick and say ‘what have you learned today’...you’ve then got the other side...they’re less interested in what they’ve learned, they want them to be cared for, and loved” which she identified as particularly characteristic of working parents; “there’s a massive thing around parental guilt, especially maternal guilt.”

The parents included in the research interviews also acknowledged (unprompted) feelings of guilt, from Maria commenting that “I work four long days a week, and I sometimes feel guilty that she’s in there” but then describing how much her daughter loves nursery, to the anguish described by parents when they experienced poor quality provision, as in Rebecca’s description of a particularly difficult day “I left in tears...I’m not someone that cries very easily, and I was riddled with guilt.” The latter situation referred to a day when the nursery appeared to be chaotic, and the children unhappy, and was given as a contrast to her satisfaction with her son’s new nursery, which has succeeded in “putting us at ease, because it’s not easy sending him to nursery every day.”

In conclusion, the evidence from the interviews about societal expectations was that there was a consistent expression of an awareness of childcare practice being less valued than education by many in society, including some parents, but these are the views of those within the early years sector, including myself, so are inevitably influenced by that experience. Whether that perception was framed in the interviews as a challenge to educate parents about the importance of care, or whether it was seen as a consumer preference to be met, appeared to be influenced by individual motivations, experience and confidence, as well as by an organisation’s purpose. The influence of the marketisation of the sector, with childcare commodified as a service to be paid for, was apparent in the way professional identity of childcare professionals was consistency perceived as being less valued than the professional identity of educators of older children within the maintained sector. The proactive approach and determination of graduate manager Cara, for example, to educate parents and practitioners about the importance of childcare, seemed to be very much driven by her personal ethical stance of adopting a ‘respectful care’ approach. In contrast, Michelle,

a private nursery owner, framed her responses in the interview in a way that matched her desire to be seen as a successful businesswoman, responding to customer choice. Societal expectations also influence politicians who are keen to satisfy public opinion, so I will now consider the influence of government policy on early years settings, and the other drivers behind government policy.

## 6.4 Political factors – the triple drivers behind government policy

### 6.4.1 Recognition of the importance of ECCE for social mobility

The data from the interviews with sector and organisation leaders needs to be examined within the context of current government policy, which itself includes several legacy areas from previous administrations. The benefits of high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) have been recognised for many years (OECD, 2006; Allen, 2011a; Tickell, 2011; Mathers et al., 2014), and the UK government has duly responded with increased public spending and a significant rise in policy attention. The two primary objectives have been to improve child development in order to improve later outcomes, and to increase maternal employment, which could be seen as education and childcare initiatives respectively. They have also been described as part of a triple policy rationale of social mobility, economic (Lloyd & Potter, 2014), justice (Lloyd & Potter, 2014), and I will consider each of these in terms of how those drivers are reflected in the views of my research participants, starting with social mobility.

The rationale for ECCE as an aid to social mobility is that by supporting children's socio-emotional and intellectual development, better employment prospects may result from the foundation for better educational outcomes. There are three main problems with the current method, which aims to provide free early education for all three- and four-year-olds; firstly the inequality of access to high quality provision, secondly the limited effectiveness of fifteen hours a week for 38 weeks of the year within the context of increasing poverty and inequality, and finally, the inadequacy of the funding levels in relation to the cost of delivery. Two of my interviewees were individuals who would widely be regarded as leaders within the sector as well as of large organisations. Both have led sector membership organisations, been spokespeople and speakers at conferences, won awards, and been involved in policy developments at a national level. Their comments were equally scathing about the

current situation. John, the CEO of a large not-for-profit provider, cited the Heckman equation (Heckman, 2011), and described his ideas for a more effective funding model, arguing that “there's a bigger return on investment” when funding early years education. He suggested scrapping the free entitlement and targeting families who needed to get back into work, instead of high earners; “I would distribute it in a different way.”

John argued for retaining a demand-side funding model, because of a lack of trust in the way funding might be used, if it went directly to providers, and he expressed frustration at current government policy in the UK, compared to other countries, describing the way UK “policy-formers firefight” in contrast to Scandinavian countries where it “is embedded into their culture. They recognize the value, and they do have professionals, and it is a career to go into, and it isn't the bottom of the pile.” The Scandinavian comparison has been made by many others (Moss, 2014, 2019) and reflects a fundamental difference in governmental approaches to the universal problem of how best to provide access to early years provision.

Peter, another sector leader, and director of a large for-profit organisation, made similar reflections on the inadequacy of government funding initiatives, and described how four out of six nurseries that were built with funding from the neighbourhood nurseries initiative were “absolute beacons of what should be achieved in the poorest communities” but ultimately failed when their funding was withdrawn. Peter’s organisation took them over from the National Day Nurseries Association, turned around the main nursery, but with the funded-only section, they “stopped the partnership with the local community because all those things weren't being paid for, you know, English as a second language and all that stuff. We sat down with the council and said well, you've got to pay for this. So they didn't have any money so we just stopped it. Which is a real shame.”

This narrative goes to the heart of the problem. It is highly unusual for Peter’s large and very profitable chain of nurseries to take on a nursery in an area of deprivation. His solution was to have a separate funded-only group, and then combine it with a more typical day nursery, and not to continue with any of the additional services, because there was no funding to cover their costs. The lack of any integration between the funded sessions and the main nursery creates a two-tier provision, embedding

inequality in the organisation's structure and physical layout. Large chains depend on profitability to meet the demands of their shareholders and are less likely than those in the voluntary or not-for-profit sector to subsidise places for low-income families, and are more likely to restrict the availability of the funded hours. At the meso and micro level, I will examine how individual owners, managers and practitioners support, work around, or challenge the profitability requirement for nurseries. Early care and education is widely recognised as a driver for social mobility, but the interview data endorse my contention that this is only possible if it can be made available to all families with young children, and, as the current government funding policy deters nursery providers from operating in areas of deprivation, I suggest that the current policy is one of the barriers to the provision of ethical childcare. Lyn, a nursery manager in a deprived area, succinctly described it as "an underfunded mess...we can't do what is needed for children."

The challenge of formulating a funding policy that would be a facilitator of ethical practice, by encouraging inclusion and an uptake of childcare places by low-income families, is illustrated by the narrative of Dan, who had worked as an advisor to the government in the early 2000's, after leading a large for-profit chain of nurseries for several years. He described how his experience with the then Chancellor of the Exchequer led to his creating "a sample model, of how to set up a sustainable nursery...[that] was accessible, affordable, high quality ... and people started to realize it wasn't actually sustainable, even then." His model with "realistic and appropriate numbers... didn't do too badly. It wasn't stunning in terms of profitability, but it was sustainable" but that the Treasury then asked him to reduce the costs by reducing the salaries, and suggested that "perhaps if you could come up with a model A ...the one that you've done, and a model B, for more deprived areas... I said, would you send your child to a model B nursery rather than a model A nursery? And everyone round the table said no."

This anecdotal account of how government policy was being formulated illustrates a kind of sensemaking in process, whereby "Treasury wallahs" to use Dan's terminology, attempted to create a financial model for childcare provision, using expertise from operators in the sector, but then suggesting a modification which Dan immediately rejected as non-ethical, as it embedded inequality in a two-tier model. The problem of



how to create financially sustainable nurseries in areas of deprivation has persisted since then, and the Sutton Trust, believing that low-income families are being disadvantaged by the current funding model, are campaigning for an extension of the 30 hours funding to be more universally available (The Sutton Trust, 2021). Research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has concluded that “inequalities and disadvantage have been exacerbated through the pandemic – those families and children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who are most likely to benefit from ECEC support were least likely to be able to access or use formal ECEC” (Hardy et al., 2022). The conclusion was that more funding is urgently needed, but also that the funding model itself needs to change.

One final point is that the funding mechanism is unnecessarily bureaucratic and administratively time-consuming, and it varies between local authorities. I spoke to one very frustrated nursery administrator, who told me that their local authority had conducted an audit and then rejected a claim, nearly two years after a two-year-old had been accessing funded hours. The parent was eligible, as she was on disability living allowance, but because the local authority claimed that they had not received the relevant documentation (the administrator was sure it had been submitted but couldn't prove it), the nursery had to refund £3000, despite the local authority acknowledging that the child was and had been eligible. The attainment gap between more and less advantaged children shows no signs of narrowing, and the research evidence, confirmed by my own experience and the views of my interviewees paints a depressing picture of a failure of the current policies in terms of facilitating social mobility through the provision of free early years education and childcare.

#### 6.4.2 Desire to increase maternal employment – economic wellbeing

The majority of interviewees did not explicitly mention the issue of childcare being used in order to enable mothers to return to work, but it was implicit in several of the conversations, as a kind of taken-for-granted reason for children to be in nursery. John, a leader of a large not-for-profit provider and sector organisation, said that he felt very conflicted that women were being “forced to go back to work” by their economic situation, and that he thought the majority would have preferred more time at home with their children, a view which was echoed in a recent report (Centre for Social Justice, 2022). As mentioned in the introductory chapter, I endorse the premise

that the provision of childcare is a necessity for many families, but unlike John, I believe that a majority of women are happy to continue their careers after having children, with the very large proviso that this depends on them being able to find affordable, high-quality provision that they perceive as a benefit to their child's all-round development. John's comment was a heartfelt concern after he read the research conducted for a large supermarket chain which suggested that a majority of their female employees would prefer to work less hours and that the primary driver for them working was economic necessity. I suggest that a survey of supermarket employees is not representative of all working women, just as my perception is possibly skewed by dealing with many nursery parents who have professional careers. I have, however, also encountered many women in economically deprived areas who welcome the opportunity to work, and to give their children opportunities, including access to environments and resources that many would struggle to provide in poor housing situations.

The desire to increase maternal employment is undoubtedly a driver behind government early years policies, and this is seen as a route out of poverty for many families. The cost of childcare is still seen as the biggest single barrier to work for parents of young children (SavetheChildren, 2018) and a recent survey suggested that women's worries about childcare costs were a significant factor in their decisions to have abortions (PregnantThenScrewed, 2022). Childcare for the very youngest infants is more expensive to provide than for older children, due to the higher staff ratios required, but also because the government funding that is directed through the Department for Education is focused on early education rather than childcare. Financial support for childcare in the first two years is limited to the tax-free childcare scheme, and tax credits for low-income families.

The increase of funding for three- and four-year-olds from 15 to 30 hours was billed as a way of supporting working families, but the messaging from government was very confusing and misleading. 30 hours a week turned out to mean 30 hours term-time only, ignoring the fact that most workplaces operate all year round. The unintended consequence of the policy resulted in a 'Matthew effect' (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018), whereby medium and high earning families gained a generous subsidy, and many low-income families were unable to access the additional funding. (Johnes & Hutchinson,

2016). Zero hours contracts, for example, could mean that parents were unable to demonstrate the regularity of their working hours, and the system of revalidating claims, with the onus on parents, led to some losing their entitlement. I witnessed several examples of our nursery administrators having to 'chase' parents to revalidate their claims, in order to prevent that happening, even though the guidance is clear that it is not the nursery's responsibility.

A return to employment after maternity leave is now more normalised in society, but responsibility for childcare is still not equally shared in many families, with several reports during the Covid-19 pandemic (Hardy et al., 2022) finding that more women than men were shouldering the burden of home-schooling and childcare when schools and nurseries were closed, or limited to key worker families and vulnerable children. The parents who came forward to be interviewed for this research were mothers apart from one father, and a longitudinal action research project that is underway at Acorn has so far shown that although 'dropping-off' and 'picking-up' children from nursery is fairly balanced between parents, mothers are still more involved in day-to-day communications and involvement with the nurseries, and more likely to be the ones taking time off to look after children when they are unwell. This second driver behind government policy, then, to promote economic wellbeing by supporting maternal employment, is not yet translating into effective financial support for working mothers, and societal expectations are mixed, with a greater acceptance of maternal work not matched by equal parental responsibilities in many families.

#### 6.4.3 Social justice – the persistence of inequality

The third of the government's drivers for their funding policies, which is intertwined with the economic driver, is based on the premise that greater access to early years care and education will help to narrow the achievement gap in schools and therefore help to reduce inequality. Inequality of access to early years provision is clearly one of the barriers to ethical childcare practice, and was explicitly mentioned in some interviews, but only by those managers and practitioners working in economically deprived areas. Several of those articulated a very caring attitude to the families they worked with and gave examples of attentive and caring behaviours that illustrated the practical application of an ethic of care, but inadequate funding was frequently given as a reason for other providers to be less able to accept children with additional needs

or from low-income families. The issue of accessibility for all is more fundamental than simply the amount of funding or the funding mechanism and is influenced by the prevailing neoliberal hegemony in government.

As one commentator described it, “equitable access to childcare in the UK is largely choreographed by a dominant pay-as-you-go private market” (Blackburn, 2013, p. 43), and this reliance on market mechanisms is identified by others as a source of concern (Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2021; Penn, 2011; M. Sims, 2017). Interviewees’ comments about some private providers limiting access to children perceived as requiring more staffing resources illustrates these concerns. The proponents of privatisation and marketisation argue that private providers are “more efficient, more capable of mobilizing finance, more innovative...better able to capitalize on economies of scale and minimize running costs” and that the private sector can “generate strong profits, ensure better quality, provide enhance maintenance, be more flexible and avoid the rigidities and inefficiencies of government-type bureaucracy” (Alston, 2018, p. 4). The success of large for-profit chains, such as the one headed by Peter, certainly meets some of these criteria, but only by overlooking, or not being concerned by, the issue of inequality of access.

Directors and leaders in the not-for-profit sector expressed frustration in their interviews about the lack of support for the levels of poverty and deprivation that impacted their ability to provide high quality provision – Jean, a director of a large not-for-profit provider, described how time-consuming the safeguarding referrals and case conferences could be for pre-school managers in areas of deprivation, “the additional needs and the drama that sometimes occur from those settings is quite high level when it’s intensive.” She was vocal about the inadequate levels of funding which particularly affected settings with few working parents, and the way her organisation subsidised a setting which struggled to be financially sustainable, “because it’s just too important to the community to lose” and expressed frustration that their own lack of financial resources limited the number of similar settings that they could support. A lack of support for children with additional needs was also a concern raised by interviewees, particularly in relation to the reluctance of some nurseries to accept them, as in the example described by Tara, whose previous employer had instructed her not to accept two-year funded places.

The underfunding of the so-called 'free' places for all three- and four-year-olds has received widespread coverage and is an ongoing debate between sector organisations and the government. The extended entitlement of 30 hours, which was intended to ease the financial pressure for parents, "may be contributing to the recent widening in the attainment gap, by doubly advantaging the better off with additional hours" according to the Sutton Trust (The Sutton Trust, 2021, p. 5). The poorest children are given greater access to funded places at the age of two, but if their parents do not work sufficient hours, or at all, they have less funded hours at the age of three. Tying the entitlement to working hours is arguably preventing parents of two-year-olds from accessing work, training, or volunteering opportunities.

This third driver behind government policy, then, is one which seems to be failing the most, but this is perhaps inevitable. Many of the interviewees, including both sector leaders interviewed, strongly believe that the answer is in more government investment in the early years sector. There is, however, an underlying tension between these three drivers, which was spelled out in a Radio 4 Analysis programme, (BBC, 2020) in which Christine Farquharson from the Institute of Fiscal Studies suggested that "if you want a childcare programme that's going to bring a lot of mothers back into the workforce, you're going to want something with long days, pretty flexible, wraparound care and generally pretty cheap, so that it's affordable for families. By contrast, if what you care about is improving child development, evidence suggests that you want much shorter days in a very high-quality setting." The consensus from my interview data, the online research data, both of which echoed my own experience, was that maintaining the quality of childcare to ensure the best outcomes for children is incompatible with low-cost. Investment on the scale seen in Scandinavian countries is unlikely to happen within the current neoliberal government agenda but more government investment is essential if high quality provision is not to be limited to high-earning families.

#### 6.4.4 The shrinking role of local authorities

Local authorities were generally seen as the enforcers of equitable access to early years provision, but several of the interviewees commented on the way in which the role of local authorities has changed to a more limited focus on sufficiency and the distribution of government funding. The reduction of the advisory role of local authority

officers means that their role is now limited to overseeing safeguarding compliance, administering funding in line with national guidance, including for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Local inclusion officers sometimes provide guidance and support, but research interviewees were consistent in voicing concerns that there is increasing need and decreasing levels of support. The impact of this is seen in the interview comments about for-profit providers who turned away children with additional needs and discouraged low-income families who relied on the funded hours. The policies affected, therefore, are not the implementation of the official guidance, but the operating practices that are verbally enforced by owners and directors, as in the case described by Lucy, a director of a for-profit group of nurseries about the large nursery group she previously worked at, who had a policy of accommodating “a couple of children in each nursery” (with additional needs) but then turning away further children.

Kim, an Acorn manager, described an extreme example, relating to a child with challenging behaviour in the ‘unethical case study’, of the Right Start nurseries which interviewees consistently described as breaching all guidelines about inclusivity. “There’s no such thing as special needs at [RS]...they’d probably go down that route of expulsion and it’d probably be something that he’d done...you know, his behaviour.” This matched Rachel’s description of the same nursery; “they didn’t like to take children that needed additional help.” Local authorities have been known to threaten the withdrawal of funding for nurseries that have rejected children on unethical grounds, but the admissions process for nurseries is more opaque than that for schools, who have a common point of entry. Children begin attending nursery at different ages and times of the year, so it can be very easy for nursery owners and managers to cite a lack of availability, as it would be hard for parents to prove otherwise. A case of discriminatory practice was recently successfully challenged in Scotland (BBC, 2021), but this was the first successful case I’d heard of in over 30 years in the sector.

Local authorities, then, now have limited influence on nursery policies and practice, and the demise of the network of Sure Start children’s centres has increased pressure on early years settings, particularly where children’s centres have been closed. Several of the interview accounts clearly illustrate the work that now goes on in many

day nurseries that would previously have been funded and supported in children's centres. This additional work is almost wholly centred on areas of deprivation, exactly where early years settings are least able to fund it, as described by Hannah in section 5.2.3, who described the emotional impact of the closure of her children's centre.

Kate, the owner of a group of for-profit nurseries, also works in areas of deprivation, and she also commented on the impact of children's centre closures, describing how her organisation had taken on some of the settings, but that now "we can't take them all" as many are not financially self-sustaining and also that commented that "if there are local authority terms and conditions we can't touch them." Our own experience at Acorn has been that two nurseries that we recently took over from the local authority had been operating at a loss of c£180,000 per annum (Sims, 2022). The nurseries were situated in areas of severe deprivation and therefore depended heavily on the free entitlement, which proved increasingly insufficient to cover the nurseries' overheads. Unsurprisingly, no large nursery chains were interested in taking on the two nurseries, and a recent business outlook report concluded that a two tier market is emerging (Christie & Co, 2022) in which "prices achieved for the most sought-after childcare and education business have been eye-watering" while at the same time there was a net loss of 442 nurseries and pre-schools in England between April 2020 and March 2021, "the greatest number of which were in deprived areas." The numbers demonstrate the dangers of relying on the market to provide an equitable sufficiency of childcare places, which raises the question of whether organisational auspices can influence their ability to provide accessible, affordable childcare.

Political factors, then, illustrate a disconnect between intention and implementation, with current funding policies failing to ensure equitable access to high quality provision. The factors that have a potentially negative influence on inclusion and on quality include the diminishing role of local authorities, reflecting the neoliberal approach of the current government, and the encouragement of users of childcare provision to be perceived as consumers. This policy shift to governance by the market is likely to affect user behaviours and identities, (Fotaki, 2011) and the reality for many families is that the empowerment of being a consumer with choices in the childcare market is in fact an illusion, given the limitations of affordability and availability for any family on modest

or low incomes. I will now consider how these social and political factors also influence organisational purposes.

## 6.5 Organisational purpose

### 6.5.1 Organisational auspices and the profit driver

A central part of this research is the exploration of whether profit as a driving force behind an organisation's purpose has a negative influence on the ability of a nursery to offer ethical early years care and education. As explained in chapter two, there is a wealth of literature covering the damaging impact of neoliberalism and marketisation on the childcare sector (Lloyd & Penn, 2013; Moss & Roberts-Holmes, 2021; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Simon et al., 2020a) and in my research journals I noted several instances in my own experience of employees making comments about previous nurseries being more about making money than caring for children. Those comments reinforced my concerns about the growth of commercial childcare companies, and with a few exceptions, these concerns were also voiced by my research interviewees.

Empirical data from a Nuffield research project (Simon et al., 2020a) included forensic accounting data which uncovered some worrying trends in terms of the financial models underpinning some of the large nursery chains, and my research complements those findings by providing an insight into the perspectives of employees and directors of a range of organisations. The for-profit organisations in this study comprised one large group, four small and medium groups, four family-run single site nurseries, and there were numerous references and narrative accounts of experiences in a wide range of other for-profit provision, including several about the same organisation which I have described as the unplanned case study. It should be noted that none of the for-profit nurseries and groups in this study described themselves as being "about" profit-making, but the owners of two of the groups have since sold their nurseries, and at least two of them described the importance to them of growth, for financial reasons. It was also very interesting that the only for-profit group in the research to have a significant number of settings in areas of deprivation has since been transferred to a charitable social enterprise. The owners, on retiring, wanted to find an organisation that would maintain their ethos and values, which was a concern also voiced by



Sharon, a director of a large for-profit nursery chain. The for-profit company structure itself is not necessarily a barrier to ethical practice, and as well as Sharon, Adam and Kate, also owners of a group of for-profit nurseries, showed a keen awareness of their personal influence, and gave examples of pro-actively inclusive and ethical practice in their nurseries, which was confirmed in the interviews with managers in that group.

As explained in the literature review, early years education is generally seen as an extension of, or preparation for, education in schools, with provision for children under the age of three, usually perceived as being childcare, to enable parents to continue working. As such, it is widely accepted, in the UK, that parents should be expected to pay for all or most of the cost of such provision. The childcare sector is now commonly perceived to be a market, with individual nurseries as businesses, and this means that parents and carers are usually seen as the primary customer in the childcare industry. The problematic implications of this are illustrated by the interviews with both practitioners and parents.

As Vandebroek has argued, in a foreword, “the neoliberal turn has a profound influence on the daily practices in early childhood education” (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xii) and the first way in which this can be seen is in market’s dependence on consumer choice to create competition, and how parental preferences influence early years provision. The idea that this might simply be empowering parents to choose the type of childcare they feel best suits their child, or to be able to choose the highest quality is deeply problematic. Given the clear correlation between quality and levels of qualifications of practitioners, and of the benefits of access to high quality resources and outdoor environments, there is inevitably a correlation between quality and cost, and this has been recognised by Ofsted in an analysis of their inspection results, which confirmed that nurseries in areas of social deprivation were less likely to achieve Good or Outstanding judgements (Ofsted, 2016). Marketisation inevitably increases inequality of provision, with affluent nurseries charging higher fees having much larger budgets, both to attract a high calibre workforce, but also to provide the extracurricular activities, such as forest schools or those reliant on peripatetic teachers.

Parents’ ability to judge the quality of a nursery may also be affected by marketing materials and persuasive sales techniques, rather than by a real insight into the quality

of childcare practice. Websites such as [www.daynurseries.co.uk](http://www.daynurseries.co.uk) have proven to be an effective marketing tool which also depends on genuine reviews from existing parents, but the “emotional stickiness” of parents (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021) is a factor which was illustrated by the parents interviewed in this research, who commented that it is often extremely difficult to know whether a child’s unhappiness is related to the quality of care in a nursery, and described their dilemmas about whether it is worth the risk of causing further upset by moving to a different one. Maria, for example, said “I didn’t know whether I was, like, overanalyzing [her daughter’s apparent unhappiness at her original nursery, and whether to switch to another]...it was a big decision.”

Finally, one of the more insidious elements in the reliance on market forces in the childcare sector is the way in which this has added to the pressure on parents of small children to work long hours and increased the likelihood of children spending long days in nurseries without consistent caregivers. Thirty years ago, 8.00am to 6.00pm was considered a long day, and very few nurseries offered longer hours, other than a few attached to hospitals or similar institutions. The opening hours of day nurseries now are rarely shorter than that ten-hour day, with many offering the option of significantly longer days. There has also been a noticeable increase in part-time booking patterns, due largely to the demand for flexible working by parents returning to the workplace. The latter is undoubtedly a positive move for both children and their parents, and reflects the feedback cited by sector leader John in his interview, when he described the current trend as “not allowing parents to be parents” and citing the parents in a previous survey he was involved expressing regret that they had not been able to work fewer hours, because they felt they were missing out on key points in their children’s lives, but that they felt pressured to work longer hours because of economic circumstances.

This was an example of an interviewee’s evidence contradicting my own experience, as the dialogue that I have had with parents over the last thirty years suggests that a majority are keen to continue with their careers, providing they can find affordable, high-quality childcare. Reflecting on the disparity of our perspectives, I realised that we both agreed on the need for working hours to be more family-friendly than many currently are, and that perhaps the desire to spend more time caring for children at home rather than working may also reflect levels of job satisfaction, and whether a

parent views their work as a career or simply a job to provide an adequate income. An exploration of parental motives for using childcare provision is beyond the scope of this research, and whether parents see childcare as a beneficial experience for their child, or more of an economic necessity, will inevitably be influenced by the feedback they receive (from the child as well as the nursery) about their child's wellbeing, development and enjoyment of nursery.

As will be covered in the next chapter, it is very much not a case of for-profit bad/not-for-profit good, but I hope to demonstrate that the evidence suggests that organisational auspices do have a role to play, and the marketisation of the sector undoubtedly encourages childcare providers to regard themselves as businesses. Perhaps the most extreme case of profit-driven commercial interest that ignores all the evidence about the importance of continuity of care for children and carefully managed transitions, as discussed in chapter two, is the provision of emergency childcare as an add-on service for one of the largest childcare chains (Bright Horizons, 2022), in which nurseries are encouraged to provide short-notice sessions for children who have never been to that nursery before. This, I would argue, is unethical in that it puts unfair pressure on parents, and risks emotional damage to children, by encouraging the use of alternative, unfamiliar childcare in the event of a breakdown in the family's usual arrangements.

### 6.5.2 Pro-social motivators - not for profit?

Separating nurseries into for-profit and not-for-profit categories simplifies the issues to an extent which can be very misleading. One of the most successful large groups is employee-owned, and the view of the leader of this organisation was very clear in his interview that the success of the group has been enhanced by the move to becoming fully employee-owned. It began as a business with a very clear profit driver, but as the organisation matured and became financially rewarding, the lead director and majority shareholder became convinced of the value of sharing the rewards more directly with the workforce, recognising that they were the reason for the group's success. Beginning with a profit-share scheme, this later developed into a fully employee-owned model, and Peter, the chair, described his pride and satisfaction at the way this had further improved their standing; "since we became employee-owned...the changes in this business are extraordinary."

In terms of ethical practice, this group provides high quality childcare and early years education but is also clear that its business model relies on siting its nurseries in the 'right' demographic locations, and for each of these to be of a minimum size, as described in chapter four. Their foray into taking on nurseries in areas of social deprivation was less successful, as described in the previous chapter, and affordability is considered only in terms of price sensitivity in each location, hence the preference for situating nurseries in affluent areas. The drivers within each nursery are very much profit-focused, the difference between this group and one of the other large chains is that the profit is shared directly with the workforce. It could be argued that profit is even more important for this group, since the profit driver is shared with the workforce rather than imposed upon them.

A similar argument could be used of the co-operative model of nursery provision, since they are also run with an intention to be profitable, but with the profits distributed between the members of the co-operative organisation. Even those nursery groups described as social enterprises are primarily concerned with being financially sustainable, with Tim, for example, describing the driver for his not-for-profit entity being "to become financially self-sufficient or sustainable." There was also evidence in the interviews of a perception by practitioners in those nurseries of a difference in practice as a result of the financial focus being on sustainability rather than on extracting profit; one example of nursery taking a non-commercial view, bending normal terms and conditions in order to support a parent during the pandemic was described by Acorn manager Kim about a parent in the second lockdown:

*she said 'Kim, I'm working week to week. I don't know what's going to happen with my job.' And I said, 'OK, what we'll do is, we'll do it on a two weekly basis' so that she didn't feel that pressure. And if she got made redundant in a week's time, she didn't have three weeks' worth of nursery that she's paid for.*

### 6.5.3 Community-run settings

The research data include a large group of charitable settings, a single community-run setting, and a small group operated as part of a larger charity. In the latter case, there was a clear focus on ethical childcare provision, but a similar organisation mentioned by one of the interviewees illustrated the potential conflict of interests in such an

organisation. Emily, a graduate Acorn practitioner described the way in which her previous not-for-profit nursery in fact diverted the profits from the nursery to the wider social purpose of the organisation, which was tackling homelessness. The data from Ofsted about nursery closures has not differentiated the types of provision that have closed due to financial difficulties, but there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence from social media and the news about community-run nurseries being particularly vulnerable financially. There is also a well-recognised temporality problem in such settings of the short-term nature of committees and boards of non-executive trustees, as well as the precarity of relying on volunteers as part of the staff teams.

#### 6.5.4 Family businesses – mixed motivators

Two of the for-profit groups were keen to describe themselves as being family businesses, and three of the single site nurseries were operated by owner-managers with family involvement. There was, however, a discernible difference in the working practices and perspectives of the owners and practitioners in those settings. Some of the organisations were self-styled family businesses, but had grown to a significant size, and profit was clearly a prime motivator, whereas others, often smaller businesses, stressed the importance of their particular ethos or pedagogy. Providing an income and employment for other family members was mentioned by several of the family-run organisations, but usually as a secondary driver. It would be wrong to generalise about the motivation of the family businesses as the impression I gained was that those with strong ethical values were influenced by the individuals rather than by any wider organisational purpose, although as groups expanded and took on management teams that shared the founder's values, this clearly embedded the ethos more firmly within nursery practice. I will examine the mechanisms for that embedding in the following chapter.

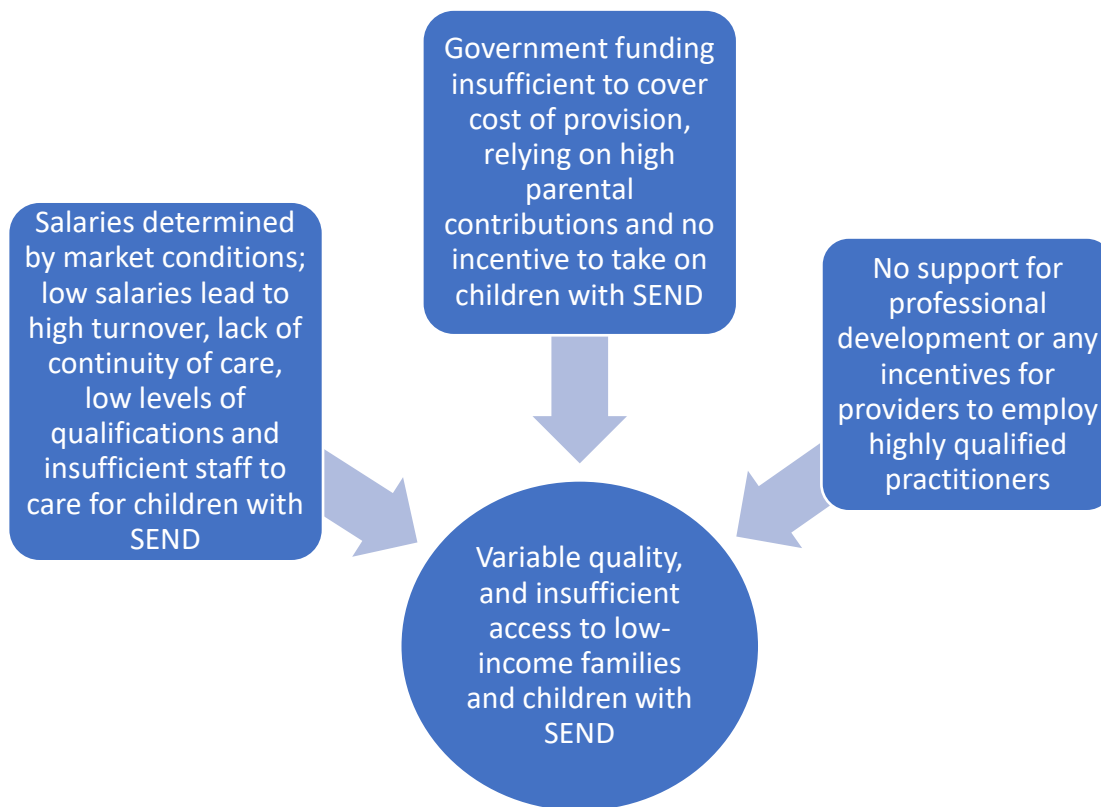
## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the drivers that sit behind government policy, and the influence of societal perceptions of the early years sector, including the perceptions of interviewees about both the workforce and the expectations of parents. I argue that viewing parents as consumers can unwittingly discourage ethical practice, when perceived parental needs are prioritised over the needs of children. I outlined the triple drivers of improving social mobility through high quality early years education;

improving economic wellbeing, by encouraging mothers into work; and promoting social justice by narrowing the attainment gap with more inclusive access to early years care and education. The limited success of each of these was reflected in the interview data, and I then considered the way in which changes in government policy were perceived by interviewees, particularly in terms of marketisation and funding cuts, but also in how policy discussions by governmental departments constituted a kind of sensemaking. I then considered the impact of organisational purposes and how profit-driven companies operate differently to not-for-profit or other types of organisation.

My conclusion is that although there is not a proven causality between for-profit drivers and unethical practice, it is clear that neoliberal marketisation and profit-driven KPIs make ethical practice more difficult. Figure two, below, summarises some of the macro influences on the provision of ethical childcare. The research question for the macro level was “What impact do government policies have on the ability of early years organisations to provide ethical childcare?” The answer is that there are two key areas in which governments can have a positive or negative impact on the provision of ethical childcare; finances and workforce support. Current funding policies are insufficiently targeted to support low-income families, or to incentivise providers to accept children with additional needs, and there is minimal support for the professional development of the early years workforce. Both areas have a direct impact on the quality, inclusivity and accessibility of childcare, and although some of the economic issues are influenced by national and global economic conditions, there is abundant evidence that effectively targeted and communicated support financially could make a real difference to the lives of many working families. My belief that more government funding is badly needed was confirmed by all of the interviewees in their accounts, but it is, I suggest, not just a funding issue in terms of needing more money, but also an issue of policymakers having a better understanding of the impact of funding mechanisms. The next chapters will now drill down into the implementation of those policies at the sector and organisation level, and within early years settings.

## Negative macro influences



## Positive macro influences

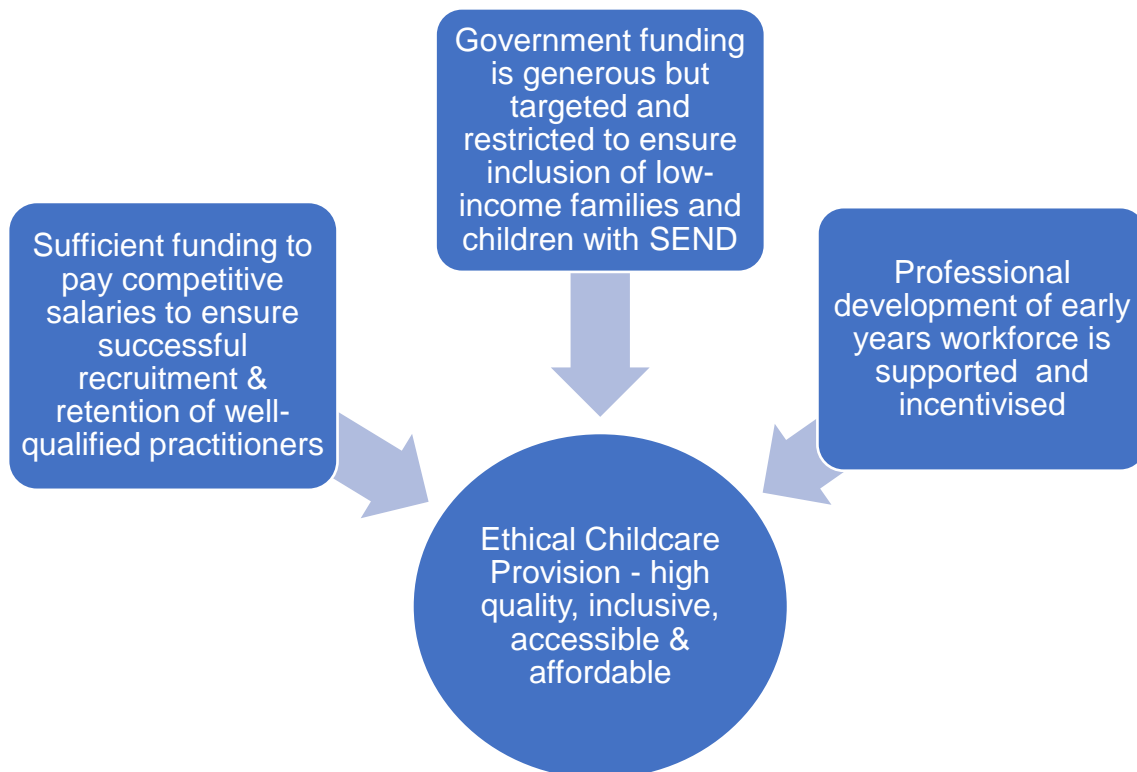


Figure 2 Macro influences on ethical childcare provision

## Chapter Seven – Meso Analysis: From Purpose to Policy

### 7.1 Introduction

The generation of policies from organisational purposes is the subject of this chapter, with a focus on the sector and organisational level of decision-making, and how this influences the development of ethical practices, or inhibits them. I will first consider the influences of organisational purpose on policy-making, and how this was framed and understood by the research participants. I will then examine the role of board leadership and explore the extent of agency and autonomy within management teams in different organisations, and the ethical compromises that are made in the interpretation of government policies and guidance. I will then assess sector influences in terms of official bodies and other organisations, from Ofsted, sector organisations, and communities of practice, and will also examine the impact of training and qualifications on policy-making within the sector. I consider how policies are made within organisations, using practice theory, and examine the influence of key performance indicators, and the perspectives of practitioners and parents. I will then look at how strategy can be collectively influenced within and by sector organisations, and will conclude the chapter by looking at the work of values articulation.

### 7.2 From organisational purpose to policy

#### 7.2.1 Organisational purposes

The purpose of an organisation will inevitably influence the way it operates, and in the early years sector, purposes may vary from being primarily profit-focused, to being driven by social impact, or a lifestyle choice of an owner-manager. Purposes may also evolve, depending on the ownership or executive team of an organisation, and although a simplistic expectation might be that not-for-profit entities would have more ethical, child-focused practice, the evidence from the interviews is more nuanced and complex. Although the examples of unethical practice were all situated in privately-run nurseries (apart from one local authority nursery), the vignettes that described care routines making children feel like a warm bath, for example (5.2.3) or the caring interactions between colleagues describing the care given to a child in distressing circumstances (5.2.3) were both from private nurseries. Consistently high standards of quality, however, may depend on an income stream which is only possible for nurseries charging higher fee rates, whereas those in areas of deprivation, with



smaller budgets, are associated with lower gradings by Ofsted (Maughan et al., 2016; Ofsted, 2016).

High fee rates do not guarantee high quality, however, if the payment of dividends, for example, takes priority over reinvestment, and my research suggests that a nursery's ethical stance and inclusivity is more evident in nurseries situated in areas of deprivation, which are usually deemed unattractive locations for those seeking a financial return as a primary organisational purpose. The degree to which an organisation is honest about its purpose is likely to vary and could be described as 'purpose espoused' versus 'purpose in use,' to adapt (Argyris and Schon, 1974) phrase. Organisational purpose is similarly not a guarantee of effective implementation of ethical practice. A clear social mission can result in unforeseen negative consequences, just as a for-profit purpose does not preclude social impact in practice. The concept of normative ambivalence (Zeyen & Beckmann, 2019) highlights the importance of situational factors, and the need to assess the impact of organisational purpose on a case-by-case basis; whether and how an organisation's social mission can support ethical practice, and the relative influence of for-profit drivers.

The focus in this chapter is on the process of organisational decision-making and influences, rather than of organisations themselves. Complying with mandatory staff:children ratios is, for example, a macro influence on quality, but whether a nursery employs ancillary staff in addition to practitioners is an organisation-level decision which has a direct impact on the quality of practice, and the wellbeing of the staff team. This was illustrated by Lucy, a director of a small for-profit group, who reflected on her experience at different childcare chains, noting approvingly the provision of administrators for nurseries in one organisation (which was employee-owned) and the impact on quality: "although they did nothing in their day-to-day role with anything to do with quality, it had an immediate impact on the quality of provision...freeing up people to be able to focus on those things. So I think sometimes it's other bits within the structure that have the impact." In contrast, she described her frustrations at a different chain where she was one of only two people responsible for quality assurance across 80 nurseries, and business development was given a higher priority.

### 7.2.2 How organisations frame their purpose

None of the for-profit nurseries that were included or mentioned in the interviews name financial return as their primary purpose, with their websites being more likely to describe their espoused values and selling points in very similar ways. Two of the large for-profits included in the research mention their origins being the founders' inability to find suitable childcare when their own children were young, which is a common theme among the owner-managed nurseries and those calling themselves family businesses. The entrepreneurial origins of companies often then evolve into marketing material. Busy Bees, for example, the largest for-profit chain in the UK, is now a global corporation currently owned by a pension fund, and was expected to be sold for over £3 billion (Powell, 2021). On the website, the original nursery is described as a "blueprint" for the hundreds of nurseries that followed, (BusyBees, 2022).

Many nurseries are set up to solve a personal childcare problem, or, as Michelle, an owner of a for-profit nursery, described hers, as a "hobby business," and they often then expand into a small group and are typically sold when the owners retire or move on, usually to a larger group. Nursery chains actively seek acquisitions, and usually have the necessary financial backing in place (Christie & Co, 2022). When single nurseries grow into groups or are purchased by larger entities, a process of financialisation becomes more prevalent, with an increasing role for financial motives (Simon et al., 2020a). While none of the for-profit organisation owners or directors described their organisational purpose in financial terms, practitioners and particularly ex-employees of those companies, cited money as being the prime motivator and driving force behind the organisations. These statements, for example, from different interviewees, all relate to the same large nursery chain:

Tara, an Acorn manager, described "working at [name of chain] and it was just a pound sign. You would be overrun with children because they just wanted the room full for the money. They weren't interested in the stress, the pressure, the quality, anything of the children." Similarly, Jordan, another Acorn manager, said "the bigger companies ... need to stand by those margins, don't they, because otherwise, you know, their shareholders are going to lose... so, like the bigger it gets, the more there is on the line." When asked why she thought the previous owners of the nursery, a large chain, didn't offer training days for their employees, Amber, a senior practitioner at Acorn, said

*I think it was more of like a financial perspective, like they didn't want to close the nursery... a lot of it had to be done in your own time. So I think it was more of a probably a financial thing if I'm honest*

Within the for-profit sector, there was also a recognition and concern about the profit motive of some nursery operators. Sharon, the founder and CEO of a large nursery group, called it a “family business” and she explained why she would be opposed to her group being sold to any of the large chains, saying that it was because “they are driven by having to make a return for the shareholders, so they have to provide a return, which means there's going to be a lack of investment at some point in the nursery. And I don't want to be limited like that.”

Lucy, a director of a group of for-profit nurseries, had worked at a variety of nursery operators, and she commented that although they all had similarly financial goals, their strategies varied, and she was particularly critical of one large group where the emphasis was “about individual site performance...they were under such pressure to deliver financially...the only way that they could do that was really to cut staff costs which then have a knock on impact.” She was scathing about the removal of administrative support at one large chain, as a cost-saving measure, which she felt had a direct impact on quality, as managers were then office-bound instead of being able to spend time within nursery rooms. One of the bluntest assessments came from Helen, a nursery manager at a nursery in a for-profit group, describing observations from her previous experience:

*some nurseries genuinely go into it because they think it's quick cash and they will talk about business plans and improvements, but they don't, they don't care. And those nurseries are generally in very middle-class areas, 'cause that's where they make money...but it doesn't, it doesn't feel right.*

Organisational purpose, then, is framed with the audience in mind. Company websites are generally aimed at the parents as customers and are therefore less likely to focus on financial aims, although that of Busy Bees states, in their ‘Our Values’ page that their management behaviours include “We know our numbers and keep improving them” and “We are challenging and will take difficult decisions but always show respect.” Such statements may be aimed more for their shareholders, suppliers and investors. The four key values listed are Care, Quality, Service and Value, and the

Mission is to “deliver high quality childcare and exciting opportunities for learning that give every child a head start as they prepare for school.” Under “Care” the statement is that “We take care of the children entrusted to us and our dedicated staff. All are appreciated and diversity is valued.” (Busy Bees, 2022) The statements are clear, and perhaps uncontroversial, but there is a clear difference in tone between it and that of Paint Pots, a smaller regional provider, who sums their ethos up with a ‘Love, Laughter and Learning’ pyramid (with the largest level at the base being love, and the smallest at the top being learning) (Paint Pots, 2022). Nurseries operated by the Early Years Alliance describe their purpose as being to provide “flexible, affordable and quality childcare” (Early Years Alliance, 2022) and Childbase stresses its status as a fully employee-owned partnership, and its commitment to “continuously redefine excellence in every area of operation.” (Childbase, 2022)

Financial motives were not limited to the for-profit sector, however. Emily, an Acorn deputy manager, previously worked at a nursery that was not-for-profit in that it was operated by a charity, but she described how the profits from the nursery were redirected to the charity’s primary charitable purpose, the homeless. “The resources weren’t fantastic...money didn’t really come back into ourselves. It kind of got put into the homeless shelters...so we basically made a lot of money and it got put into different areas, not back into the nursery”. Conversations with directors at college or university-based nurseries also confirmed that any profits generated by the nurseries were commonly fed back into the host’s accounts, rather than being reinvested in the nursery facilities. Liz, a trainer and consultant, who had worked with a large number of different types of settings, commented on the difference between owner-managed nurseries that were operated by practitioners who were keen to run their own nursery in the way they felt was best, and others where she felt it was obvious that “they’re looking at it as a business opportunity.”

The rhetoric employed on websites is not necessarily an indication of the way in which stated missions or aims are implemented, but the transition from stated purpose to implementation was evident in some of the interviewees’ accounts, including Lucy, a director of a for-profit group who confirmed that when she had worked at the group led by Peter, the expectations (in Ofsted terminology) were that “a Good wasn’t considered good enough and only Outstanding was considered good enough.” This illustrated an effective transmission of a set of standards throughout an organisation, whereas in other areas, as will become evident, and explored in more detail, company rhetoric and practice often echo the difference between espoused theory and theory

in practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). One factor that influences the implementation of consistent standards and values is the degree of autonomy given to managers and practitioners, and I will start the discussion of this at board level.

### 7.2.3 Levels of autonomy in the field of early years

The question raised in chapter two about whether different organisational forms, and specifically bureaucratic structures, facilitate or prevent ethical practices, was not resolved by the analysis of interview data. Levels of autonomy, however, did influence ethical practice, but in both directions; high levels of autonomy, usually found in the smaller settings, enabled ethical practice by ethical individuals, but a lack of bureaucratic controls could also result in ethical failings. The early years sector is highly regulated, with a range of mandatory welfare requirements, including staff ratios, space ratios and safeguarding procedures, but this does not guarantee uniformly high-quality, or ethical, practice. Curriculum guidance is non-statutory, so there is a lot of scope for organisations to shape the kind of provision they want to offer, and physical environments vary enormously, from ‘pack-away’ settings in community spaces, to extensive and well-resourced buildings, and a small but increasing number of settings operating completely outdoors. There is now less oversight than in the past from local authorities, but government funding is conditional on Ofsted registration, with an inspection framework to ensure that “minimum standards of education, skills and childcare” are met, and that effective arrangements for safeguarding are in place. (Ofsted, 2019b). Within the statutory requirements, however, there is the potential for the interpretation of these to have significant influence on quality and inclusivity. Minimum staff ratios can consist of only half a staff team having relevant qualifications, and there is no obligation for nurseries to provide ancillary support for administration, housekeeping duties or time out for the professional development of practitioners.

As the Ofsted report on multiple providers showed, (Ofsted, 2021b) the degree of autonomy for nurseries within larger organisations is very variable. The accounts in the interviews reflect this, as Ros, a consultant and trainer who had worked with a wide range of settings, explains:

*I think what you often find with the big, big corporate chains is that it's a business. And so it's got to run as a business, and so the most cost effective way for business to run is for everything to be the same within each setting and also to make sure that there are certain restrictions in place because we don't want accidents, or we don't want this happening. So therefore, then what happens is that then that brings into question the quality of the experience for the children, but equally, perhaps more importantly, it brings into question what's that then doing to the workforce within those situations, because I know that there, that people sometimes come from those big chains to work in say a smaller chain or to work in a stand-alone, and they actually find the transition quite difficult because they've got much more independence and much more autonomy in what happens.*

Apart from two single site, owner-managed, nurseries, and one of the groups, all the organisations in my research had either a board of directors or a board of trustees. The extent to which the boards influenced practice in the nurseries undoubtedly varied, from being closely involved with operational decisions, to monitoring key performance indicators (KPIs) at a distance. Ofsted themselves have now recognised the influence of large multiple providers, with their research in 2021 concluding that “multiple providers generally set the intent for the curriculum that all their nurseries deliver” and that they have “a significant influence over the curriculum delivered, staff practice, and the quality of care, teaching and learning across their nurseries” (Ofsted, 2021b).

The focus of the report was to improve Ofsted’s understanding of the way multiple providers work, to inform their inspection process, but the report did mention one example of a difference at an organisational level in the way that being for-profit might affect the inclusivity of a provision, albeit phrasing the finding in a way that focuses on the ethical practice of charities, rather than directly criticising those not operating in this way:

*Of the multiple providers we interviewed, those that were charities, as opposed to companies, offer all activities to all children with no additional charge. They told us they ‘enriched’ their curriculum with additional activities such as Forest School and swimming that were part of the offer for all children in their nurseries rather than something that parents had to opt in to.*

Ofsted's research also found that there were inconsistencies within nursery groups in terms of charging policies for additional activities, concluding that "nursery managers are making nursery-specific decisions on what to offer and how to fund activities."

In terms of staffing, the Ofsted research found that multiple providers were usually involved in recruitment and in setting the size and structure of staff teams. Maya, an Acorn manager, described resentment from staff and parents at her previous company, when it redeployed staff between nurseries to improve efficiency, but resulting in reducing continuity of care for children. Ofsted also noted the potential of staff deployment to have either a positive or negative impact. Their research also identified staff wellbeing as being very much influenced by the organisation, commenting that "nursery managers feel their multiple provider's ethos and values play out in their policies and working conditions." This echoes the comments by Helen, a manager at a for-profit nursery, who contrasted her experience as a manager at a large chain when she was "told never to be in the room. I was told I that I had a deputy who I could send in and she could report back to me, which is spying. I had CCTV that I was encouraged to use. And I was told that my place was to balance budgets." She then left that setting "because it was KPIs, it was business plans," and not focused on the children.

In contrast, in her current setting, she described examples of how children would be given breakfast if they needed it, even if it wasn't normally provided, and that if a parent was struggling to pay, they would still allow the child to attend; "I wouldn't even think about emailing Adam and Kate [owners], I'd just let that child come in, because I know that would be the agreement." On another occasion, she commented "in my heart, and I know Kate agrees..." which illustrated the focus on love within the company's stated ethos. Helen also compared the high staff turnover of the previous setting with the minimal turnover in her current nursery. She illustrated her assertion that "our staff are happy" by explaining "we are well listened to...and that goes a huge, huge way. And the same with Kate and Adam, if there's anything I'm struggling with, they'll do all they can to support me. So it's right from the bottom to the top that we feel supported, I think."

One of the areas set by a board is the amount of delegated financial authority, and Ofsted found a clear contrast between those nurseries operating for profit, and those run as charities:

*Many multiple providers set profit margins for their nurseries and they monitor these closely. They reflect that this gives little flexibility in the areas of essential spending such as staffing, rent and food costs.*

*Those multiple providers that are registered charities suggested that they had different profit margin expectations for different nurseries depending on the demographics of the children in the nurseries. (Ofsted, 2021b)*

Ofsted found that the amount of delegated authority for managing budgets varied across both types of providers, and the decisions on how to spend the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) was also inconsistent. This additional funding is intended to be spent for the benefit of the children identified as disadvantaged, so unsurprisingly the majority of nursery managers reported being involved in the decision on how the funding should be spent, but three managers in the research “suggested that the spending of EYPP funding was decided solely by the multiple provider.”

Sinead, a nursery manager in a large for-profit chain, described her previous organisation’s financial control of budgets as a limiting factor in her ability to provide adequate resources for the nursery, leading to her fundraising in order to have some play equipment for the garden. Another previous setting required her to have every room move approved centrally in order to maximise efficiency, rather than making the decision based on a child’s developmental needs. A nursery’s ability to provide funded places for low-income families was also limited by some of the multiple providers in the Ofsted research. In my interviews this was often described in ways that were clearly unethical, as in Acorn manager Tara’s account of an owner’s clear instruction not to admit children with additional needs, and perhaps the most telling comment in the Ofsted research was that “where multiple providers suggest that they allow nursery managers to make the decision on the ratio of funded to unfunded places, this is not always the reality. Not all nursery managers feel that they are able or allowed to make this decision for their nursery.”



KPIs that focus on profit clearly influence a nursery manager's ability to provide ethical childcare, and this will be explored in the next chapter. The focus on profit usually means a drive to maximise occupancy, and marketing strategies are usually determined at board level. Some organisations, I would suggest, employ 'carewashing' in the rhetoric of their marketing materials, which is often undermined by practice. I will explore this below, but first will consider the extent and nature of the influence of leadership roles in early years settings.

#### 7.2.4 The influence of leadership

An organisation's vision, mission and purpose are usually determined by the founder or leader, but leadership cannot necessarily be equated to the most senior role, although in each of the three large organisations in my research, the external perception of who was regarded as the leader matched the perception of those interviewed. Those three, plus some of the leaders of smaller organisations, were also seen by many people as leaders in the sector, with John, a director of a large not-for-profit group being a particularly strong advocate of social justice within the sector, championing provision in socially deprived areas and the need for better funding from government. Peter described the journey from a privately owned company to being fully employee-owned, beginning with his realisation that "you're the guy in charge, but actually you're dependent on everyone else," demonstrating a kind of relational leadership which was backed up by the interviews with employees who worked, or had worked in his company. He felt that it had been "a huge mistake" earlier in his organisation's history, to take on other investors, because he felt it was rewarding people "for making no contribution, in a significant way" within the business, and he was adamant that "anyone talking to me now it's 'no, don't do it' because it's a rare moment when the rewards, when the payouts given match the rewards, the contributions made." Peter is not in any way averse to marketisation; he is first and foremost an astute businessman, but he recognises the dependence of his company's success on the quality of the workforce, and this extends to his view on the quality of provision. When asked about KPIs, he said "Care, care drives the outcomes financially, every single thing."

Sharon, an owner/director of a large for-profit nursery chain, is also recognised as a leader outside of her organisation, but mostly in terms of environmental sustainability,

which influences practice within the nurseries, as well as the ways in which she manages her staff teams. The involvement of her family is important in her determination to leave a legacy, and she is currently exploring the options open to her as an alternative to selling up, including an employee-owned model. Dan, the owner of a small group of nurseries, had previously been Managing Director of one of the largest chains of nurseries, and he rejected the normal organisational structure of a large group, and was adamant that he'd never have a head office again. When asked about influences on nurseries his answer was typically to the point: "Greed, is, is obviously one of them." Both Sharon and Dan defended the for-profit model of operating for their own nurseries, but expressed a distrust of other for-profit operators.

Finally, one of the other sector leaders, who owns a smaller group of nurseries, is probably the most well-known of my interviewees on social media, with nearly 3,000 followers on Twitter™. Adam, the owner of a group of for-profit nurseries, is very active on social media, so I was able to compare his interview with his published articles, blogs and social media posts, noting that his views are consistently pro-ethical, reflecting, perhaps his choice to operate nurseries in areas of deprivation. Like Sharon and Dan, Adam defended for-profit provision, but subsequently sold his group of nurseries to a charitable organisation, echoing their distrust of other for-profit operators. I was unable to interview practitioners from all of those organisations, so cannot comment on the perception of each of the leaders from within each of their organisations, but the direct influence was clear with those that did talk about them. The comments ranged from admiration at their approachability and personal touch, with Sinead, for example, a nursery manager in Peter's for-profit group of nurseries, talked proudly about his visits, telling new staff "he'll want to know who you are, and he'll know that you're new without me even telling him". She was more scathing about her previous experience at the Right Start nursery: "it was [owner]'s way, or no way...you had to conform. And you know, you heard stories if you didn't, you know what would happen." Whatever their stated intentions, the personalities and personal values of organisation leaders clearly made an impression on the individuals that I interviewed, and whether they role-modelled the values they professed to embrace. Nursery manager Sandra described their CEO's visit (John) as "an amazing moment" because he'd brought other visitors with him, and "it made us feel valued." At this point in the interview, her deputy, Val, who was in the same room, chipped in to

comment that “the thing was..he went out of his way, he came in, he spoke to, literally, every member of staff.” The spontaneity and eagerness of her interruption added to my impression of the authenticity of both interviewees and confirmed the same impression that I had had of John, their CEO. I will explore the impact of leadership styles on practice in the next chapter, but will first explore the way in which policies are influenced by organisational purpose, and how good intentions can suffer ethical slippage.

#### 7.2.5 Ethical compromises

However good their intentions, leaders and managers described having to compromise their ideals when faced with practical difficulties. In relation to the parent-led nursery she helped to set up, Sam, a trustee/director, described the impact of financial and other barriers:

*the learning all the way through it is how, how difficult it is to follow an ethical approach to the extent that you want to, when all of these kind of, particularly the cost barriers, are hitting you time and time again, and the risk that in making a small compromise here, and a small compromise there, and we've had some of those conversations, and suddenly sort of felt that we're heading away from where we wanted to be*

Some, like Paul, a director of a for-profit nursery, described a disconnect between their personal values and ethos and the commercial terminology of the sector:

*part of what drives me in terms of my involvement in early years, is the sense of service to community. And I think, I get frustrated, because for me that feels a really core value, and I feel that the, this idea of service has sort of been hijacked in the neo-liberal agenda, and we now talk about customer service. And I like to think about it differently, I think about it as a sort of a sense of responsibility to that immediate community that we work with.*

The interviewees from the not-for-profit organisations were the most vocal about having to balance ethical intentions with practical limitations, particularly in terms of financial viability. John, a director of a large not-for-profit nursery group, described the difficulties of working with low-income families who struggle to pay childcare fees: “the commercial part of me is telling me, you don't serve anybody if you go out of business,

and there isn't enough money in the system, so you have to work with parents and try to somehow try and get it." He added that "we've got to accept the moral compass" but that "the hardest bit is maintaining integrity."

Practical difficulties in implementing ethical intentions may be minor and temporary, or serious and permanent, and may result in "ethical slippage," or "mission drift." Those concepts capture the dilution or ethical compromises of socially focused organisations, but where nurseries are run by profit-driven institutions, there are sometimes direct confrontations between cost-drivers and personal ethical standpoints. The quality of food was mentioned by several interviewees as an aspect of childcare provision where the rhetoric of marketing material was often not matched by the reality. Maya, an Acorn manager, described her personal ethical dilemma with a corporate chain, illustrating the stress and emotional labour that can arise in situations where personal moral standards are challenged by corporate policies and practice:

*Oh, it was terrible. She wasn't cooking good meals for the children. And then I'm sitting in a parent meeting telling them how great the nursery was. And I'm thinking, my conscience isn't clear. I can't do this. I really can't do this. I need to be honest.*

Maya's personal resolution was to change employers, and Dan, the owner of a small group of for-profit nurseries, described his board level confrontation when employed as a managing director of a large chain. He was told to reduce the number of qualified practitioners in order to make cost savings on salaries, but he also described how

*I'd sacked the catering company and we were doing our own home-cooked food. And they wanted to reinstate that because it was cheaper... it was stack 'em high and sell 'em cheap, basically.*

Dan refused to compromise on quality, so he left that company and started his own smaller group of day nurseries. His comments illustrate the influence of board-level leadership. As Managing Director, he had set the policy of having 75% of the workforce qualified to at least level three, and of ensuring high quality meals, and the final straw for him was when they "kicked out my board and replaced it with a board of their own" which was more focused on cost-saving, at the expense of quality (in Dan's view). That particular chain of nurseries was subsequently sold and rebranded after a

tragic incident, involving an unsupervised and unqualified practitioner, which Dan blamed on the company's adoption of a culture of cost-cutting.

Ethical slippage, a concept which I'll explore later, can also happen when nurseries attempt to interpret government policies in a pragmatic way, but which then results in unethical practices. After a visit with an Acorn colleague to a nursery within a large group, I noted in my diary afterwards (19/11/20) our discussion about the way they'd put their funded-only children in the room upstairs –“the only room without direct access to the outdoors! The area manager seemed oblivious to it being so obviously a two-tier provision in terms of quality.” It had been described by her as a practical solution to ensure the shorter sessions of funded children didn't disrupt those attending longer days, but it was clear that only the children downstairs had meals included, or a full range of additional activities. It was unusual for that particular group to admit funded-only children, and the impression my colleague and I gained from the area manager showing us around was that they were more of an inconvenient add-on, which I speculated in my diary was only done “to keep the local authority happy” rather than being treated as an integral part of the nursery.

The interpretation of government policies (around funded places, for example) is a process undertaken by individuals or groups within organisations, both at board level, and by managers. Organisational outcomes are dependent on the practices of the “social cultural modus operandi”, and I hope to help to illustrate the workings of “strategy-in-practice” (MacKay et al., 2021) in doing so. The issue of ethical practice for providing food within nurseries, for example, is subject to the interpretation of funding guidance that states that the “free” childcare “is not intended to cover the costs of meals.” Providers may charge for these separately, but only if such payments are optional. The suggestion is that alternative options could include “allowing a parent to bring in their own consumables or a packed lunch” (Department for Education, 2018b). The unintended consequence of this is that nurseries following that suggestion would inevitably have a differential in quality within the nursery at mealtimes, whereby some children would have a freshly prepared hot meal, and a mealtime experience that involves using cutlery, whereas others might have to sit separately to eat their packed lunch, which may not be as nutritionally balanced, nor involve the cultural experience of eating with cutlery. In order to avoid such obviously two-tier provision, other settings, as in the example above, provide funded hours at times which do not include mealtimes.

Mealtimes in early years settings are examples of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Department for Education, 2021b), particularly for children whose experience of eating at home may not include using cutlery or sitting at tables. This example illustrates the kind of ethical compromise that early years providers may make in response to inadequate government funding combined with restrictive guidance, which is well-intentioned, in wanting to ensure that parents who can't afford additional fees do not have to pay them, but not thought through in practical terms, as the result is that low-income families then find themselves accessing provision which offers less than the full offering. Whether or not a provider subsidises the funded-only places, in order to ensure inclusive and equitable provision, will depend on the organisation's priorities, financial resources and individual interpretation of the guidance. While I might be concerned about the social injustice of two-tier provision, for example, others might be concerned about ensuring that fee-paying parents are not being charged unfair amounts, in order to subsidise those who don't, or can't, pay the additional 'optional' fees. I will consider the decision-making processes in such situations more fully in later chapters, but will now consider the influence of sector organisations and other bodies.

### 7.3 Sector influences

#### 7.3.1 Ofsted – the regulatory influence

Ofsted, the regulator of the early years sector, was mentioned by many of the interviewees as a key influence on policy and practice, though Jordan, an Acorn manager, commented "I don't live in fear of Ofsted because, well, we shouldn't be doing it for Ofsted. We should be doing it for the children and the parents. We should be doing it because it's the right thing to do." The subtext here is that providers and Ofsted may not agree about what is best for children, as with the wider debate within the education sector about, for example, the use of phonics, or, as Jean, a director at a large not-for-profit group of nurseries, described disagreeing with an inspector who said that "you should correct what they are saying, which are colloquialisms, into proper English." Several interviewees commented that Ofsted inspectors too often judge a setting by the behaviour of children without taking into account their starting point, and consultant Ros felt that Ofsted "really inhibit, sometimes, the creativity of what's going on." Paul, a director of a for-profit nursery, also described the "restrictive" nature of Ofsted regulation, which he felt didn't "allow us the freedom to deliver

Montessori education in the way that we want to.” He expanded on his point by describing a discussion with an inspector about cohort tracking data, and not being able to reconcile his nursery’s focus on “individual children on unique journeys” with Ofsted’s inspection regime.

Interviewees from nurseries serving more economically deprived communities were the most likely to express frustration at the emphasis on recording attainment, as in Sandra’s comment that “education is important, but I think we’ve lost the importance of children of this age learning through play...this is the most important time of their lives...they’re learning all the time. Let them play.” The impression I gained from the interviews with those working in those nurseries was that their frustrations were centred on what they perceived as a lack of appreciation for how the children in their care were developing social skills, emotional resilience as part of a holistic approach to their development. In contrast, those interviewees working in the private nurseries seemed to be more focused on whether Ofsted judgements were good enough to satisfy parents and to boost the nurseries’ reputation.

The inadequacies of the inspection regime itself were commented on by Clare, a trainer and area manager at Acorn, who described the ways in which settings could “wing it on the day” but then have up to five years without anyone checking on a nursery’s quality. Several of the managers interviewed made similar comments about nurseries with poor practice that seemingly escaped the scrutiny of Ofsted in an inspection.” Michelle, an owner of a for-profit nursery, had calculated that there were an average of 14,700 hours between inspections, which then took less than eight hours to make a judgement. Her comment that an outstanding judgement was “so good for business” was echoed by the trenchant stand taken by Peter, a director of a large for-profit chain, who described how his organisation would appeal against a good judgement “because the report will be in the public domain...and the end of it we’ll threaten with judicial review, that inspectors wait for, if it comes to that, because they don’t want the aggravation” – and that if inspectors “want to stand up and tell us we’re only good from a nursery that is outstanding, then I will be furious.” The time and expense needed to take an inspection judgement to a judicial review would not be feasible for smaller providers, but Peter’s and Michelle’s comments demonstrate the importance of Ofsted endorsements of quality for their nurseries’ profitability.

Interviewee' views of Ofsted were generally positive, particularly in the way they have become more responsive to feedback from the sector in recent years. Sandra, the owner of a large group of for-profit nurseries, summed up the feelings of many of the interviewees when she said, "Ofsted have finally got there, right?" in describing the welcomed new emphasis on practitioners being able to talk to inspectors about their key children, rather than having to write extensive observations to demonstrate that knowledge. The ability to articulate knowledge then becomes a critical factor in a successful Ofsted inspection. Ofsted's regulations were not in themselves seen as contentious, and interviewees consistently expressed support for the rules on ratios, for example, seeing the government proposals to weaken those as a threat to quality and to the wellbeing of staff. The influence of Ofsted, then, was largely perceived to be a positive influence on an organisation's ability to provide ethical childcare practice. In addition, there are two other sector-wide influences, that of communities of practice, and the closely linked infrastructure around training and professional development.

### 7.3.2 Early years communities of practice

Communities of practice, which, as with the sector as a whole, are examples of Bourdieu's 'fields,' have an important role to play in the early years sector, not just within organisations, but as "shared histories of learning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 86) which transcend organisational boundaries. Interviewees made frequent references to wider social groups, which often cohere around a particular pedagogy, practice, or philosophy. Montessori nurseries, for example, follow a particular approach (Montessori, 1912) to a greater or lesser extent, in ways that bridge all three areas. Paul, a director of a Montessori nursery, commented that it often focused "on the sort of didactic materials. But I think that it runs much, much deeper than that, and I think there are some really core values and principles in that philosophy...it's a really longstanding and deeply rooted philosophy and not just a kind of educational fad." Peta, a senior practitioner at Acorn, was told at her interview for a Montessori nursery that "the reason we don't take children [below 18 months]...is because we feel that...that's time spent at home." Some Montessori nurseries do take younger children, but their focus is more frequently on pre-school education and, as described by Caroline, an owner of a Montessori nursery, is "about the feeling of independence that the children get...so that they, from a very early age, are used to making decisions



for themselves.” Caroline was a passionate advocate of the Montessori approach, and she used in-house training to ensure that the practice in the nursery matched her ethos.

Other communities of practice have evolved without recognised nomenclature, but with a shared philosophy. The ‘respectful care’ approach described by Cara, a nursery manager of a for-profit nursery, for example was described as “it’s devoting yourself 100% to be in that moment with that child”, and by her deputy, Amy, as “a care routine...should make that person feel like a warm bath.” This is very similar to the child-centred practice described by many of the other interviewees, such as Dan, a nursery owner who had started as a practitioner many years earlier, who said that his favourite phrase is “I know the secret of every single child in the world. They’re all unique.” When asked to describe child-centred practice, several interviewees, like Tara, an Acorn nursery manager, found it easier to describe what it isn’t: “the wrong way would be to do it like a conveyor belt.” The analogy of a conveyor belt arose in several other interviews as a way to describe impersonal care practices, and illustrates a risk associated with routinisation in childcare practices, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Other policy areas that are influenced by a specific ethos or community of practice are those relating to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. The ‘Communication-Friendly Spaces’ approach (Jarman, 2013) has been adopted by many nurseries, creating similar environments within nurseries, and similarly the ‘Loose Parts’ approach (Nicholson, 1971) and ‘Planning in the Moment’ (Ephgrave, 2018). These influential authors have influenced the purchasing, layout and use of resources within nurseries, to the extent that early years equipment suppliers have followed the trend, replacing the plethora of brightly coloured plastic toys with more natural materials, with almost every nursery now sporting a mud kitchen in its garden. The sector press and sector organisations, have helped to disseminate ideas for improving practice, and practices such as forest schools (Maynard, 2007), which began as trends, have now been more widely adopted across the sector. Communities of practice, then, have been a positive and professionalising influence on early years care and education, and they have often either originated in, or been developed by, training within the sector, both vocational and in continuous professional development (CPD). Liz, a trainer and consultant,

summed up their impact as providing “a better understanding...there’s more ways for people to connect with other people...it definitely is improving.”

Sector organisations such as the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), the Early Years Alliance, and support groups like Men in the Early Years (MITEY), could also be described as communities of practice, particularly as their conferences and events provide networking opportunities, and the campaigns, around ratios or funding for example, stimulate and encourage professional discussions about working practices. Perhaps the most successful example of an influential community of practice is the publication of Birth to Five Matters, non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage which was produced by a group representing 16 early years sector organisations (Early Years Coalition, 2021). One of those organisations, Early Education, combines campaigning with professional learning, which brings me to the impact of training and qualifications within the sector.

### 7.3.3 The impact of training and qualifications

There was unanimity from interviewees about the importance of training in the early years sector, backing up the research findings about the link between high quality and levels of qualification (Nutbrown, 2012; Mathers et al., 2014; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2019). There was, however, a divergence of opinion about the relative merits of different qualifications in the sector. Academics and researchers have demonstrated the impact of having early years graduates within nurseries (Mathers et al., 2011), but at the manager and practitioner level, there were more voicing concern about the practical abilities of graduates, with a strong preference for the more practical training many experienced with the now defunct NNEB qualification, which was commonly referred to as the ‘gold standard’.

Most interviewees, when asked about the importance of qualifications gave a qualified answer, and even Ros, a consultant and trainer who had also worked as a senior lecturer on early years degree courses, said “I don't think it's the qualification itself...the only thing I think of, by going to study, which is different to qualification, is that you can learn things at a deeper level. So I would say studying and understanding at a deeper level is important, not necessarily the qualification.” Liz, another

experienced trainer and consultant, summed up the view of several others when she said:

*I think it depends on the quality of the qualifications, doesn't it? ... you can be in a situation where you've got somebody who's unqualified and somebody who's qualified and the unqualified practitioner might be better than the qualified because they've got that something inside them. And, you know, and all the qualifications in the world, I don't think necessarily make you have that affinity to children.*

Jordan, an Acorn manager, similarly asserted “I don't think qualifications, like, necessarily matter. You know, obviously, it comes down to, like, two types of people...” and she then described her deputy, who was doing a degree, not enjoying it, and who had admitted she didn't think it would change her practice, and that it was just something she felt she ought to do. In contrast, Jordan described another colleague who is

*constantly trying to evolve. And I think the practitioners that are reflective and recognize that early years evolve evolves, constantly, and we have to be adaptive. They're the people that, you know, that lead the nursery and that lead practice. And then you have the other people that are like, oh, I did my NNEB and this is how we used to do it and, you know, the dinosaurs... But how many times have we hired somebody straight from uni that, that doesn't know how to speak to a child because they never bothered to get a part time job or, you know, you learn on the job, don't you?*

Emily, a deputy manager at Acorn, having completed her degree several years after her initial qualification, and after having had children, felt that doing it as a mature student “makes it better because you've got the experience and you can relate it to the work that you're doing?” She had also described herself as a hands-on person that learned best through doing, and the benefits of qualifications helping to make practitioners more reflective was described by Amber, an Acorn senior practitioner who was working towards a degree; “it made me look at my practice differently.” Similarly, Tara, an Acorn graduate manager, emphasised the importance of both

practical and theoretical knowledge: “I think it's not just a qualification. I think it's everything. It's the full package. It's the experience that comes with that qualification.”

Although a positive correlation has been identified between graduate leaders in early years settings and the quality of early education, it also found that “staff experience and adult-child ratios, were identified as being important for the more nurturing and ‘care-based’ aspects of provision” (Mathers et al., 2011, p. 4). This was a common theme in the interviewees’ responses, with several enthusing about fellow practitioners who have no qualifications but who, as trainer and consultant Liz put it, “might be better than the qualified because they’ve got that something inside them.”

There was a great deal of enthusiasm expressed about ongoing training opportunities, and some interviewees, like Anne, an Acorn manager, tried to articulate how training courses influenced practice:

*once a member of staff comes ... they might change something, so then that enables the spark to continue throughout the nursery. Or they've had a good idea and then they'll sort of bounce out of each other and then change things in order to improve things... Some people will bring that training back and continue with it and then want to develop further. Others will start with it but then it sort of goes by the wayside because other things get in the way of what they do.*

She also described how training courses helped give confidence, particularly in areas like ‘Planning in the Moment’ which she said “I felt that was a good thing even before I read about it” but that she only had the confidence to implement it after hearing it being endorsed by recognised trainers in the sector, illustrating the impact of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998a).

Several interviewees expressed concern about the inconsistent quality of training for vocational qualifications, with Ros, a trainer and consultant, blaming conflicting interests; “I think the weakness in that has been down to the assessment, where, right at the beginning when people like [names training provider] and others got involved and wanted to get them through quickly. Trying to do things at speed is the biggest fault.” Training providers were and are paid according to the success of their students, and there is therefore an incentive for both them and the settings in which they’re

placed to focus on the pace of completion rather than the quality of work or performance. Several interviewees recognised the value of encouraging their practitioners to continue their training beyond the standard level three qualification, but finances were cited as a barrier, as in Paul's comment about his single site nursery: "I would like to see some of the team move on to, to degrees and beyond. But again, that comes down to finances and there's no discrete pot that we can tap into to, to fund that...I think the whole structure of qualifications itself is, is something that just needs an overhaul, if I'm honest. I think the lack of funding around degrees and ... postgraduate opportunities and opportunities to specialize is just, it's not supported."

These comments about the influence of training could be seen to reflect as much on the quality of practice as on policies within early years settings, but policies about how planning, assessment, the organisation of the daily routine, and the implementation of the key person approach (a policy which is now embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage) are very much influenced by the manager of a setting. Several interviewees made disparaging comments about managers or practitioners deemed to be "old school," by which they meant not moving with current best practice, such as planning thematically, rather than planning "in the moment." Training appeared to be the key factor in determining whether practitioners were aware of developments in early years practice, and the availability and encouragement of training was seen as very variable between different nurseries. Apart from a couple of managers describing the impact of some training courses as short-lived, there seemed to be a general consensus about the importance of training, and the effectiveness of in-house, practical training, which sees trainees learning skills from a position of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Given the importance placed on training by the sector press and by Ofsted, however, there is also the likelihood that some practitioners and managers may have expressed enthusiasm which is not necessarily implemented in practice, and the responsibility for supporting the training of new practitioners was often seen as a burden in nurseries which struggled to maintain a high percentage of qualified practitioners.

## 7.4 Interpreting purpose into policy

### 7.4.1 The influence of KPIs

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are often used by an organisation's owners or leaders to monitor performance in line with organisational objectives, and they were mentioned by several interviewees, usually in the context of occupancy and profitability. Maya, an Acorn nursery manager, for example, described a previous nursery as "very corporate, all about FTEs, marketing, meeting targets...not really about the child." Another Acorn manager, Jordan, similarly described her experience of working in chain nurseries as "very much like, these are your deadlines, these are the reports that need to be in on a Friday. You know, we don't really care about anything else kind of thing." I experienced this myself when the candidates from large nursery chains, who were being interviewed for a sector award of Nursery Manager of the Year, cited profitability statistics in their interviews, indicating how influential such KPIs can be for management teams.

Such comments suggest that the practice of childcare is viewed by practitioners as separate from the financial measurements, and several interviewees expressed a concern that managers sometimes lost sight of the nature of the work involved due to their focus on financial data. Lucy, a director of a large for-profit nursery chain, contrasted her experience of being a lead manager for quality in two large organisations; in one, she approvingly noted that her education team was "very much part of everything," whereas in the other corporate chain she felt that "the senior team at XX were the most removed of any senior teams I've worked in...it was almost like a completely separate function...a very different culture." From conversations outside of the interview with Lucy, it was very clear that KPIs were an important part of her role, but that she felt they could only be meaningful if there was some understanding from the senior team of the reality of working practices. Her view was that the second organisation had a quality function as a box-ticking exercise, rather than to implement any meaningful changes, that might have required working in partnership with those setting the organisation's budgets.

#### 7.4.2 Practitioner interpretations

Practitioner interpretations of organisational purposes tended to be very sweeping statements compared to the analysis offered by senior figures like Lucy, above. The comments about organisational purpose tended to describe nurseries being either 'about' money or, conversely, 'about' children, and Amy, a deputy manager in a for-profit nursery, described a stark contrast between two nurseries which illustrates the way in which organisational purpose can influence a practitioner's working practices. The nursery she worked at for eleven years "was just literally children getting dropped off. You put toys in front of them, you know, really bog-standard things" and she contrasted that with her current nursery, which she had visited out of curiosity with a friend and described almost an epiphany of realising what nurseries could be like: "just the moment I walked through the door...the staff that were there...the passion that came out of their mouths. I was just sort of OK, this is completely different."

Amy was offered a position there, and a "whole week" induction. "That was me blown away, I was just like, this is, this is something I've never heard before. Especially through the respectful care...I thought I enjoyed it before, but nothing compared to what I am here." On probing the difference between the two, she said "it's completely child-centred here. And ones in the past, it's just been you know, Duplo drop, not a care about what we are actually setting up." Amy also gave a vivid illustration of her new-found confidence in putting children's needs first in her current nursery when an Ofsted inspector "came and started talking to me and I put my finger up I said I'm just gonna stop you there....I had to explain to her, I said, I'm going to give him a bottle, then I'm gonna put him to bed, and then I'll be with you. She went "oh all right, yes, yes."

Her understanding of the nursery's priorities was by that time very secure, giving her the confidence to challenge an interruption of a child's care routine, even by an Ofsted inspector, but also to ensure that her attention when feeding a baby was going to be on the baby, and that story, which seemed to be one she was accustomed to relate, formed part of the community of practice, of respectful care, in that nursery. The attentiveness and caring behaviour illustrated a very effective embedding of an ethic of care. The narratives of child-focused policies and practices in the interviewees usually came from senior practitioners and managers. Practitioners were more likely

to describe leaving nurseries rather than challenging or trying to change practices, and several, though less dramatically than Amy, described a realisation of what child-centred practice should be like only on moving to a nursery with a more ethical, child-focused approach. Role-modelling was mentioned as an effective way to embed the desired practices, by both managers (“she needs to follow those high expectations herself”) and practitioners. Nursery policies are generated in order to further an organisation’s purpose and they are also influenced by the personal ethical code or beliefs of the nursery manager or other leaders within the organisation, which is an issue to be discussed in the next chapter.

### 7.4.3 Parents as customers

The voice of the customer can be a significant influence on policy-making within early years settings, who are keen to accommodate the preferences, demands and expectations of families. Local authorities can wield some influence in terms of eligibility for the statutory funding, but parents and carers are often seen as customers in the marketized early years sector. As discussed in the previous chapter, there may be pressure on parents, from their peers or society, to ensure that their child is “school-ready” and parental anxiety about a child’s development or achievement can begin very early and can unwittingly encourage a nursery to adopt overly formal teaching methods. Protective parents who do not understand the benefits of risky play may react badly to their child going home with a bruise or grazed knee, or assumptions may be made about parental wishes, as in the case of the Right Start nursery described by Acorn nursery assistant Rachel, for example, where parents were “seen as the customer” and assumed parental concerns about protecting clothes resulted in children not being allowed to engage in messy play.

Several interviewees commented on a lack of understanding by parents about how children learn through play, but the introduction in recent years of software apps that allow practitioners to share brief observations and photos or videos of children during the nursery day in real time, has been noted by several interviewees as being helpful in improving parental understanding of their child’s development. This may be by shifting the focus from product (taking home a painting) to process (a picture of messy play, for example). For first-time parents, however, there may still be a mismatch between what idealised nursery provision should look like, and the reality of high-



quality provision. Several of the interviewees commented on the difference between the expectations of first-time parents and those who had experienced life with a small child, particularly in their perceptions of activities which may look messy but may be purposeful mess in the eyes of a practitioner, a difference commented on by consultant Liz in 5.2.4. The distinction between the kinds of mess requires a perception of the environment from a child's perspective, an example of 'motivational displacement,' in which "our motive energy is flowing towards others and their projects" (Noddings, 2005, p. 16).

Parental influence on policies is probably largest in terms of pressure on any policies that might restrict personal choice of parenting style; as described in previous chapters, preferences about a child's diet, sleep, use of medication or dealing with challenging behaviour may lead to different levels of tension and disagreement if a nursery's policy does not match or accommodate a family's preference. Largely, however, policies are formulated at an organisational level prior to a family selecting a nursery, although the influence of parents can still be seen in areas such as whether a nursery puts on a Christmas performance or pre-leaving 'Graduation' ceremony, which are arguably more about pleasing parents than for the enjoyment of the children involved.

As Tronto (2010) noted, "satisfying consumers may not be the same thing as providing care adequately" and she advocates the need for institutions to "think about the caring process as a whole in order to guide their actions" and for the needs of care workers to be taken into account when meeting the needs of the 'customers.' In the world of early years, the 'customers' are the parents, and the children are the care recipients whose needs are decided by both parents and early years practitioners, and there may be differences in those opinions. If ethical childcare is about putting a child's needs first, the challenge of meeting parental demands and expectations in such situations can lead to ethical sensemaking, as I will explore later.

The interviews with parents did, however, illustrate their clear understanding of what standards of care are acceptable. The parent interviews also confirmed parental readiness to remove children if they are not happy with the quality of care. Parents may only have filtered insights into what goes on during the day at nurseries, but as the story of Tamsin's early collection of her son in 5.3.6 showed, parents expect

attentiveness, responsiveness and physical reassurance for their children, and will make their unhappiness known if they feel that the childcare in a nursery is lacking those key aspects. As mentioned in 6.4.2, parents may have mixed feelings about using childcare, and their ability to act as a 'customer' may be affected by whether their primary driver is economic necessity or a choice of early education, but that exploration is beyond the scope of this research.

## 7.5 The influence of practice on strategy and policy-making

### 7.5.1 Strategy-as-practice

The process for formulating policy in early years settings varies according to the organisational hierarchy and management structure. Several interviewees described a lack of practitioner agency within large corporate nursery chains, where policies were implemented in response to top-down directives, but there were also examples of effective feedback loops resulting in changes to policy, if directives proved unworkable or ineffective. Acorn nursery assistant Rachel, for example, described how she and other practitioners "fought our case enough" to persuade the risk-averse Right Start nursery to allow them to take children out on walks. Emily, an Acorn deputy manager, contrasted the close monitoring she experienced in one nursery chain, where there were strict rules on how displays had to be presented, and "everyone would have to make their room spotless for the show round" if prospective parents were visiting, to the increased autonomy in her current setting where she felt practitioners had "the ability to be able to change the experience they're having, the learning opportunities" and that "they should be able to, because I feel like practitioners know their children best."

These are examples of negotiated collectively constituted ends and demonstrate a micro-level strategizing praxis which draws on a practitioners' understanding of macro issues (Ofsted's approval of children being given access to the world beyond the nursery's walls) to give confidence to challenge organisational risk management restrictions. The link between local strategizing and larger social phenomena (Seidl & Whittington, 2014) can even be seen in Sinead's account of an employee forum successfully persuading corporate management that the benefits to employee wellbeing outweighed any concerns about parental perceptions of professionalism (the rules around length of nails did not change, as that was recognised by all as a

legitimate safety measure). Strategy making as a socially embedded process (Tsoukas, 2018) also recognises that practices have collectively constituted ends that are suffused with values (Gehman, 2021; Sayer, 2011) and in early years practice in particular, I would argue that “ethical comportment has its *telos* in involved intuitive expertise” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991). Acorn nursery manager Tara’s account of undermining the instruction not to accept children with additional needs (in 5.3.5) is an example of her professional ethical code overriding policies based on profit-driven organisational purposes.

As (Whittington, 2006) pointed out, there is a distinction to be made between practices, and what happens ‘in practice’ and the praxis of the latter is where organisational directives and habitual routines are interpreted by individuals. At this point of interpretation, there may be conflicting pressures that influence an individual’s practice; the drive for efficiency and economising from managers, perhaps, conflicting with a practitioner’s understanding of what is in the best interests of children. The external phenomena that influence that understanding may be regulatory visits by Ofsted or the local authority, or sector training. ‘Praxis episodes’ (Whittington, 2006) might occur when organisational policies are discussed, whether at board level, team meeting level, or informal conversations between practitioners. The research data illustrated the wide variety of levels of autonomy in different organisations, which inevitably affect the degree of influence wielded by individuals. Cara’s refusal, as a manager, to bow to the parental pressure not to allow a male practitioner to fulfil key person responsibilities, (changing a nappy, in 6.3.1) will have set a precedent for similar situations at that nursery, but in other nurseries, with a stronger emphasis on a ‘the customer can choose’ strategy, the ‘easier’ solution of changing the key person to a female colleague may have been adopted, potentially undermining the professional standards of the staff team. The messaging of such a decision, which could be interpreted as *phronesis*, or “engaged judgement” (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014) on the part of Cara, since she acted instinctively in the situation, in accordance with her personal and professional beliefs, while being undoubtedly aware of the wider repercussions of her actions. The dilemma, if there was one, reflects both the relative strengths, and tensions between, a community of practice (of early years practitioners) and commercial drivers.

The “purposive practical coping” that aptly describes the “relatively smooth and unobtrusive responsiveness to circumstances” (Chia & Holt, 2006) that constitutes the practical mastery of effective childcare practice, also helps to explain the way in which habits can inform organisations’ emergent strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The definition of strategy as “a pattern in a stream of decisions” (Mintzberg, 1978) is helpful in considering how repeated decisions in the face of a range of circumstances will often illustrate an underlying ethical stance, whether or not this has been made explicit. A nursery that is willing to admit, and make adaptations for, children with additional needs demonstrates its ethic of care through a sequence of ethical decisions and subsequent actions, in contrast to the repeated stories, across a variety of interviews, that illustrated the lack of ethical substance behind the Right Start nurseries, which consistently blocked actions that were not financially rewarding.

#### 7.5.2 Values articulation work

Practice is “an inherently value-laden array of activities” (Tsoukas, 2018, p. 332) and “the taken-for-granted nature of practices is infused with...standards of excellence that necessarily shape practitioners’ work,” which is very true of early years practice. As Tsoukas explains, however, the habituation of practices can also result in them becoming “mindlessly routinized or narrowly self-interested.” I will explore this further in the next chapter, but in the context of policies, as means of embedding consistent practice within early years settings, the concept of values articulation work offers an explanation of how purpose and values might become more successfully embedded in an organisation’s culture. Explicitly articulating a moral purpose can help to focus awareness of it and create a value commitment and reference point within an organisation. Such values work (Gehman et al., 2013) can be seen in several examples within the interview data; Cara, a nursery manager in a for-profit nursery, explained the lengthy induction given to new practitioners, but also extended the articulation of their ethos to parents:

*for us, having children at the centre is about attachment, having parents along that journey with you is about attachment and relationships you build with them. So we do parent workshops on respectful care for babies*

She also described how the values work was embedded in the induction for new practitioners, explaining, for example, how a mentor used an observation of the

reaction to a child's emotional upset; "K was able to articulate that to a new member of staff to showcase how this competent practitioner was supporting the child without taking over or stealing the learning away from the experience. And so that's really a crucial skill which is far greater than a manager can offer, it's practice on the floor." I will explore further in a later chapter the commonalities between values-articulation work and ethical sensegiving.

## 7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the way in which organisational purpose has directly, or indirectly, shaped or influenced the policies which underpin the practice in early years settings. I have considered the levels of influence from board directors to practitioners, but also the wider stakeholders including sector influences, communities of practice, families, and professional training and qualifications. Leadership influence, both in articulating and in role modelling ethical practice has been shown to be an important factor in shaping the culture of an organisation, and practitioner agency and personal ethics have also been shown to influence policy changes or adaptations.

These meso influences on ethical practice are summarised in figure three, below. The research question for the meso level was "What are the organisational factors that influence the extent to which early years organisations are able to offer ethical childcare provision?" The answer is that it does seem to make a difference whether a childcare organisation is profit-focused or pro-social in its purpose. Leadership behaviour also has a strong influence on whether policies and practices are ethical in their nature, and support for professional development, including the wider encouragement of communities of practice, similarly support ethical practice. My conclusion is to affirm Tronto's (2010, p169) comment that "Non-family care can be outstanding in its quality, but only if organizations that provide care also care about their own ways of working." In the next chapter I will focus on the ways in which policies are implemented in practice, and the routinisation and habituation of ethical or non-ethical practices, which will then lead onto a discussion of ethical sensemaking.



*Figure 3 Meso influences on ethical childcare practice*

## Chapter Eight – From Policy to Practice

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the ways in which policies are implemented, and how they affect the ethical nature of practice, covering the micro level of analysis. The practice in early years settings is carried out by individuals working within teams, and in exploring the influences on that practice, I will need to examine aspects which have meso or even macro origins. I will begin by considering the agency and degree of autonomy of individuals within early years settings, and how this is influenced by perceptions of professional identity. I will then look at decision-making processes, and the factors that influence behaviour, including emotions and personal upbringing. The impact of organisation routines on childcare practices provides a framework within which to consider those practices, and the way in which they were described by interviewees, and this leads to a discussion on the related area of sociomateriality. I conclude the chapter by considering the embodied nature of care practices and the role of sensemaking in implementing ethical childcare.

### 8.2 Autonomy, agency, and professional identity

#### 8.2.1 Individual ethical drivers

Several interviewees described a personal motivation of wanting to make a difference to children's lives as a reason for working in the early years sector. Paul, a for-profit nursery director, described his "sense of responsibility to that immediate community that we work with," and ascribed this ethos to the Montessori philosophy adopted by his nursery, and similar drivers were described by other interviewees. Sandra, the manager of a not-for-profit nursery, for example, repeatedly described how much she loved her job ("I'm passionate about it") and that for her the nursery "is about the team. OK. And when I say the team, I mean everyone. The children, the families, the staff." She described the challenges of working in an area of severe deprivation, with over 90% of children having English as an additional language, and her conviction about the difference the nursery made to the lives of the families in that community. She described how hands-on her role was within the setting, and concluded by hinting at the personal impact of the role; "I'm not saying I don't have my bad days. I'm not saying

I don't go home some nights and I want to cry my eyes out and bang my head against the wall....I have this perfect job to do... I love it so much.”

Not all interviewees had Sandra's passion, but a significant number of those working in areas of deprivation voiced similar sentiments. Sandra's account illustrates the risk of exploitation of the workforce through emotional labour (Barnes, 2019; Hochschild, 1983), at least partly because of the vocational nature of the profession, in which attentive and caring practitioners directly influence the development of the children in their care (Gerhardt, 2004). Hannah's emotional account (5.2.3) of wanting to make a difference and be a voice for the young families she was supporting reflects a predisposition toward a care ethics orientation, which has been identified as a facilitator for the expression of moral courage (Simola, 2015).

### 8.2.2 The influence of personal backgrounds

Interviewees came from a range of backgrounds, from those who had only ever worked in the early years sector to those who came to it later, and particularly after having their own children. Cara, a nursery manager, speculated about the impact of family size, after noticing how many of her staff team came from large families and added “I very much think that birth order has a massive impact on your temperament and the person you become.” Caring for younger siblings or family members, in blended families for example, was mentioned by several interviewees as a formative early influence. The way in which caring attitudes become second nature was also commented on by several practitioners who had noticed a difference in their personal practice when they themselves became parents, with “instinct” being mentioned as an influence. I will explore this further in the following chapter, but mention it here as an example of ethical expertise relying on a trust of intuition, and the need to recognise that “most of our everyday ethical comportment consists in unreflective, egoless, responses” and “spontaneous coping” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1991). Policies imply intentionality, but the implementation of policies in early years settings relies more on the “everyday ongoing ethical coping” of practitioners than on following a manual of operating procedures, and I will now explore the agency of practitioners in the implementation of policies.



## 8.2.2 Individual autonomy and agency

In chapter two, I briefly discussed the debate about the role of autonomy in a relational ethics of care, and I have described several examples of practitioner agency, and the degree to which this is limited or encouraged in different organisations. The interview data showed that managers were, as part of their role, more likely to exercise individual agency in decision-making, but also that this included instances where their actions directly contravened organisational instructions or policies. In addition to Tara, a manager, taking in children with additional needs, in defiance of her employer's instruction (in 5.3.5), other senior practitioners described examples of defiance, such as Emily's account of cuddling children despite being told not to pick them up if they were distressed (in 5.3.4). These examples of defiance may have been able to influence policy by setting a precedent, and Rachel also described practitioners successfully pressurising the management of the Right Start nursery (in 5.3.4) to allow them to include risky play in their activities.

Maya, when working as an area manager for a large chain, described highlighting her concerns about the quality of care, commenting that her reports "didn't go down too well" when she detailed poor quality practices that contradicted the official messaging of everything being fine. She then left that company, because "I didn't feel comfortable with that side of the process and my conscience wouldn't have it." Practitioners, however, generally expressed a preference for simply leaving a nursery, rather than protesting, if they didn't agree with the practices. "I didn't feel comfortable" and "it didn't feel right" were phrases used by several practitioners when they described the reasons for leaving nurseries, and often within the context of practices that were perceived by the interviewee as unethical, as in the account given by Peta, a senior practitioner at Acorn, of her previous nursery:

*The place wasn't very nurturing. We weren't, if there was a child that was crying, the staff would say... no, they're fine. They don't need picking up and things... It's not what I believe in. It's not how a practitioner should be.*

Peta's discomfort with the practice of not responding to a child exhibiting signs of distress demonstrates a shift from "absorbed coping" in what would have been her instinctive reaction in the normal childcare routine, responding quickly and sympathetically to a distressed child, to "involved thematic deliberation" when her

action was challenged by another practitioner (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). The challenge was an interruption to her normal practice, and resulted in her reflecting on whether her instinct and normal reaction was correct, and questioning, internally at least, whether her colleagues at that nursery were correct in their instructions. This sensemaking within the moment also illustrates the moral dimension of routine enactment. The teleo-affective structure of childcare practice focuses on the needs of the child, and when practitioners recognise that the practice is disregarding those needs their moral agency, and professional identity, is challenged. Values make the difference between the 'what' of describing practice and the 'how' and 'why' of explaining practice (Gehman, 2021) and I suggest that early years practitioners have become increasingly aware of 'intent' since it was incorporated into Ofsted's (2019a) inspection framework.

The moral agency of individual practitioners covers a spectrum from deliberate to inadvertent virtue (Arpaly, 2003). "Most acts of 'not caring' happen unthinkingly" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), an observation which has similarities with the "sad truth" of unintentional immorality or evil (Arendt, 1978). Simply put, In the situation described above, for example, Peta may have felt confident that she was morally correct in not agreeing with the other practitioners' seeming disregard of a child's distress, but a less experienced practitioner may have doubted her own perceptions and feelings and accepted the instruction to leave a child to cry. Many parents faced with an unsettled child at bedtime have similarly believed the advice of those advocating controlled crying, but may have instinctively felt uncomfortable about it (Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Blunden et al., 2010). Such responsiveness to a child's distress, whether at home or in a nursery could be compared to "inverse akrasia" (Arpaly, 2003), if what are perceived to be morally correct actions are in opposition to rational beliefs, similar to Arpaly's example of Huckleberry Finn's self-blame for doing the "wrong" thing in not turning in the escaped slave. Several practitioners commented on the way in which Ofsted guidance is interpreted differently within organisations, and by managers and room leaders, and the ability of practitioners to challenge instructions within nurseries seemed to depend largely on how experienced and confident individuals were.

Kim, an Acorn manager, for example, speculated about what difference it would have made, if she'd experienced the poor practice at the Right Start nursery without having

previously worked at a good local authority nursery. She expressed concern that it might have had a negative impact on the quality of her own practice but was also confident that her personal care ethic would have ensured that she used empathy and attentiveness. Other similar accounts of individuals challenging or rejecting dubious childcare practices were narrated during the research interviews, but the nature of such interviews is that individuals would probably have felt less comfortable describing occasions where their moral agency was inactive or unresponsive. The research participants, being voluntary, and having been told the subject of the research beforehand, were also a self-selecting group biased towards an ethical awareness. The process of gaining, improving, or losing ethical awareness is still a valid focus for exploration, though, even if individual journeys have different starting points or trajectories. One factor influencing those ethical journeys is the degree to which individuals have a perception of their own professional status and identity, and I will now explore how that might influence an individual's practice.

### 8.2.3 Professional identity & the influence of emotions

The views expressed by practitioners in the interviews about their professional identity generally focused on how undervalued they felt by both society in general and by the government. Sharon, an owner and director of a large for-profit chain, expressed a firm belief that practitioners are “teachers, you know...right from babyhood” and although her views on job titles were not shared by most interviewees, most of the qualified practitioners consistently described themselves as professionals and expressed pride in their qualifications and confidence in their competencies. Practitioners also described care and caring actions as being a key aspect of their identity, not just recognising the need for care, but that responding to a child's need for care was a key part of their role, echoing Hamington's emphasis on the performative nature of care, distinct from intellectually empathising (Hamington, 2010).

Ros, a trainer and consultant, reflected that many of her early years university students did not initially see themselves as professionals, but that they developed that self-perception. She also felt that “there needs to be a balance of professional people who can articulate children and childcare and learning, alongside the practitioners that maybe haven't got that level of qualification” suggesting that the current balance was “about right.” Others linked the issue of professional identity to workforce pay and

conditions, with Dan, an owner of a nursery group, recalling the period of government investment in training for the early years workforce as “a real buy-in to it becoming a profession rather than something that got women back to work.” The self-perception of professional identity was clearly linked to qualifications, pay and conditions, but the comments about calling practitioners teachers in an attempt to improve their professional status reinforces the valorisation of education over care, discussed in earlier chapters (Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Goouch & Powell, 2013).

Status within settings was also cited as an important factor in whether individuals felt empowered to make decisions. Most nurseries operate a clearly defined hierarchy from managers, through seniors or room leaders, down to qualified practitioners and then unqualified assistants and apprentices. This is reinforced by Ofsted, who have clearly defined expectations of leaders and managers, with “leadership and management” being one of the four areas to be given its own grading within inspection reports (Ofsted, 2019b). This brings us to the issue of decision-making, which provides an illustration of the degree of autonomy given to individuals.

Emotional responses might not seem relevant to a discussion about professional identities, but emotions were mentioned many times in the interviews, and often in relation to difficult decisions that had to be made by practitioners and leaders in their professional capacity. The triggers of emotional incidents were almost always situations in which a child, family or colleague was perceived to be suffering in some way. One of the most open and candid discussions of emotional situations was also the interview in which the participants asked to be interviewed together; two nursery managers and the husband-and-wife owners of the group of nurseries. It became very apparent, in the way in which there was an expectancy of a supportive response, that the warm emotional attitudes on display were built around the organisation’s values (Weick et al., 2005). If this expectancy was violated, as with the callous response to an employee’s injury in the Right Start nursery incident described earlier, this also generates emotion, in a much more negative and stressful way.

Similarly, the incidents described by other interviewees which were described as causing distress at the time were related to a lack of caring response to children displaying emotional upset. “The emotional responsive nature of caring cannot be divorced from the practical aspect of caregiving” (Davis & Degotardi, 2015, p. 3). The

accounts in which interviewees described upsetting incidents were also those where they described subsequently leaving the organisation, and in terms that suggested that the lack of professionalism and ethical conduct was a primary reason. Emotional incidents were clearly factors in career decisions, and lack of emotional responsiveness was a common factor in several interviewees' descriptions of unethical practice, which directly corresponds with the requirements of an ethics of care to be responsive and attentive. Professional identity as an early years professional seemed to be bound up with emotional responsiveness, and caring, as a "collection of actions tied to disposition and linked to identity" (Hamington, 2010, p. 5), was seen as both action and attitude by interviewees, and a prerequisite mindset for early years professionals.

#### 8.2.4 Leadership and ethical decision-making

At director level, interview data about decision-making that concerned ethical ranged from the kind of locations, sizes or types of nursery might be considered suitable for acquisition, to the content of policies about admissions, charging policies, the routinization of practices (and whether risky play or messy play was encouraged or forbidden), as well as setting out the levels of control and autonomy given to nursery managers and practitioners. Even directors did not always have full decision-making power, as illustrated by Dan when he described his experience with his board, and particularly the influence of venture capitalists, when he was Managing Director of a large chain; "they asked me to do lots of things to the company that I wasn't prepared to do...they kicked out my board and replaced it with a board of their own."

The amount of autonomy given to nursery managers depended very much on the type of organisation or ownership. Cara, for example, had a great deal of autonomy and was able to operate her nursery in the way she wished, because the owner of the small group of nurseries had worked with her for many years and there was a trusting, respectful relationship, suggesting that the relationship between owner and manager may be a more significant influence than the type of organisation. When I visited, Cara had just discovered that the group was to be sold to a larger provider, and she left soon afterwards, as she felt that she would no longer have as much autonomy or freedom to develop the nursery in her preferred way. This was partly due to the loss of the personal relationship between herself and the owner but also because the new

owner was a larger group of nurseries, which Cara believed to have more centralised controls. She pointed to a very personalised display of staff photos in the entrance hall, for example, which she believed the new company would not allow. Several of the other nursery managers similarly described their reason for leaving previous nurseries being a lack or loss of autonomy, or disagreements with working practices imposed at board level or by individual owners.

Owners who were also hands-on managers ran their nurseries exactly as they chose, but the majority employed a separate manager, and the extent of their autonomy varied. Typically, the owner would retain control of all financial decisions, leaving the day-to-day operational management to the nursery manager, but in some cases it was difficult to assess the reality of delegated authority. In one case the owner was keen to tell me that she entrusted her manager with all of the day-to-day running of the nursery, but this seemed to me to be undermined by the quite formal language that I witnessed being used between them, and the guarded body language of the manager and practitioners as I was given a guided tour, which seemed more relaxed when the owner was briefly out of the room. I was surprised at the way in which the owner told the manager, rather than requested, to make coffees for herself and myself, but this added to my impression that the nursery was tightly controlled by the owner when she was present, and I was not surprised when she then decided that she couldn't free up anyone other than herself to talk to me.

Acorn nursery manager Kim described the "not-very-nice" owner-manager of a previous nursery she'd worked at, not as a manager, but being left to run the nursery.

*I worked seven o'clock to seven o'clock most days, and she was...quite emotionally manipulative in that because she lived there, if there were things left over to do, she would be like, oh, I've got to go and sort out my daughter... and it was sort of like, will you stay and do the kitchen? And I would, because I was very naive and easily persuaded at the time... she often would sit in the office and... I'd walk through and she was looking at Christmas shopping ... she wasn't really involved and a lot of it was left to me running it day to day. She dealt with all the business, the money. All that stuff. But the provision, that was me and my team*

It could be argued that Kim's impressions of the owner-manager underestimated the work involved in "business, the money," particularly as she was a relatively inexperienced practitioner at the time, but she was reflecting on her early career from her current position as a manager herself. Autonomy was clearly given to the staff team to operate the nursery in terms of day-to-day provision, but with no empowerment for any decisions that involved finances. Relational leadership was, unsurprisingly, the most evident leadership style in those leaders and managers that narrated accounts of ethical behaviours.

At the practitioner level, examples of ethical decision-making related partly to their level of autonomy (Trevino, 1986) but also to the way in which practices were implemented. Several of my interviewees expressed confidence that they would challenge poor practice, but it is likely that only more confident practitioners would have volunteered to be interviewed, so it would be misleading to make any generalisations from my data. The multiple descriptions of poor practice suggest that it is not uncommon for such working practices to become embedded in a nursery, as with the situation described by Acorn practitioner, Lauren:

*I've seen it before in some nurseries, not here, luckily, but I've worked in previously where children, especially a bit, the older ones, aren't going to sleep, and it's kind of just like forcing them down, like pushing them down, pushing their head down, like, come on, you will go to sleep, kind of, because then people want to use that time as like their chill time, or their time to catch up on paperwork and stuff. And, you know, that's, that's awful. That's not caring.*

In such cases, as with similar incidents described by Paula and Peta, practitioners often then chose to leave that nursery, rather than attempt to change nursery practices that were embedded in the culture. It is, of course, possible that they could just continue with their own, more caring, practice, and not follow the example of what they perceived as other practitioners' less caring practice. What is not known is the extent to which the kind of poor practice described above was condoned by the nursery management and to what extent they were aware of it, if at all. This brings me to the issue of differences between espoused policy and the implementation of it in practice.

## 8.3 Policies in practice

### 8.3.1 Policy and degrees of implementation

One area which illustrates the disparity between the espoused theory of some early years settings with their theory in use (Argyris & Schon, 1974) is the way in which a key person approach, an essential element of ethical childcare practice, is implemented. The key person approach is a requirement in the Early Years Foundation Stage, which uses the terminology of 'must' for mandatory requirements, and 'should' for advisory elements. "Each child must be assigned a key person. Their role is to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs ... to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents" (Department for Education, 2021b, p. 16). The degree to which this policy is effectively implemented, however, varies enormously, and there are several influencing factors.

The key person approach was referenced by several interviewees when discussing examples of good or bad practice, but also in terms of individual responsibility and status. Acorn manager Jordan, for example, asserted that "you can't walk around as a manager thinking that you are the most important person in the nursery because you're not. You know, it's the, it's the key persons, isn't it? And it's how we all support each other." Two of the parents that were interviewed also cited an effective key person approach as being one of the distinguishing factors between two nurseries; Rebecca and Karen contrasted the consistency of the key person in "that initial getting to know him, getting to know us, him being able to have that familiar face" with the approach at their previous nursery where on arrival "anybody would try and take him."

Two factors have had the unintended consequence of making consistency in staffing more challenging; firstly the trend to extend nursery opening hours, in response to the needs of parents working non-standard hours, or with time-consuming commuting journeys. Secondly, there is a wider trend towards part-time work, which then increases the number of children attending part-time, and early years practitioners, particularly those with young children, are also increasingly seeking part-time hours. Both these factors make it more difficult to arrange shift patterns that ensure consistency of familiar staff for children, and make the key person approach more



challenging to implement effectively.

Pressure on staffing also means that many nurseries are not able, or willing, to free up staff to conduct home visits, which the Birth to Five Matters guidance recommends; “It is most helpful for a key person to attend the home visit with another colleague. This frees up opportunities for parents to talk while the key person makes playful connection with the child” (Early Years Coalition, 2021). As Ofsted’s own research found, the redeployment of staff across a group of nurseries, in order to maintain the mandatory staff ratios, can have negative consequences in that it can “disrupt key-person relationships with children in their nursery” (Ofsted, 2021b). In the interviews, the contrast between company rhetoric about the quality of practice and the real-life situation often sparked reflection and concern for interviewees, as in the case described by Maya (in 5.3.4), when she described the experience of having to lie to parents about the quality of nursery practice being the last straw for her. These moments can be seen as examples of “absorbed coping” being transformed into more conscious deliberation (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), an aspect of sensemaking that I will explore in the next chapter.

Interviewees consistently commented on the discrepancies between marketing materials of nurseries and the reality of childcare practice, and the inclusion of children with additional needs is an area in which reality rarely matches stated values. Inclusivity is an important aspect of ethical practice, but even nurseries with a clear commitment to inclusive practice struggle to be fully inclusive if a child needs one-to-one support for the whole time they attend nursery. The additional funding provided by local authorities is limited to the funded hours, term-time only, which is of little help for working parents, and may be impossible for nurseries to either finance or recruit staff for. The need for one local authority (NCC, 2022) to issue a reminder to providers that “as per the statutory duty, no conditions are to be placed when offering a funded place to a child...regardless of their individual needs” indicates their awareness that many providers are not willing or able to accept children with additional needs, largely due to the insufficient funding to support the additional staffing required, and also because of difficulties in recruitment which are endemic in the sector.

### 8.3.2 The influence of continuous professional development

Knowledge and skills have been recognised as a precondition for effective care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), and although there were a range of opinions about the value of qualifications in early years practice, there was much more consistency expressed about the importance of induction, training, and ongoing supervision in ensuring consistent high-quality practice. Interviewees were generally enthusiastic about continuous professional development (CPD) of early years practitioners. It was also clear that access to CPD varied a lot between organisations, ranging from a bare minimum of only mandatory training being provided outside of normal working hours, up to dedicated training days and paid time out for a variety of courses. Sinead, a nursery manager from a large employee-owned group which had recently introduced two training days a year, described the excitement the days had generated amongst her team:

*So we're like, we're all buzzing before we even get there. It's a day out for us, it's a day out, we're all together. And actually it's then that you realize that a baby member of staff might not even see a preschooler member of staff. I mean they see them in the staff room..I never get, you know, you get an hour if you're on the same lunch as people, but otherwise... And so we, we love that. We really appreciate them.*

Sinead was fully aware of the benefits of the whole team being together on a normal working day, not a weekend, “oh my god, you mean you take so much in, and it's really nice and it's it becomes a team-building day for us. And we always do something special.” For most nursery groups, it is still unusual to close the nurseries to provide staff training time, although an increasing number have now ‘creatively swiped’ (Peters, 1987) the idea of INSET (in-service training) days from schools.

Several interviews commented that training made staff feel valued, and from the perspective of an organisation leader, Peter’s view was that “you can't do enough training. But it's got to be right. It's got to be relevant.” The importance of training being experiential was also mentioned by interviewees, and Ros, a trainer and consultant, described her frustration at having to teach theory without a practical context when working in China:

*they want you to do the theory and then the practice... I think it's very hard to learn something without the practice... there has to be a very, very good element of that training that is real, that makes it real...I was trying to teach them in China ... to drive a car without the car...I do believe with childcare you've got to have some experience.*

The learning to drive analogy is an illustration of how embodied the practical learning is within early years, and the importance of tacit knowledge, and Cara, a nursery manager of a for-profit nursery with a strong emphasis on respectful care, provided a vivid example of an impactful training experience, which took place during an informal discussion after her interview. She recounted a particularly successful training session that she had done with practitioners, where she separated them into two groups. She explained the task to the first group, out of earshot of the second group, who had been told just to sit passively, and then each member of the first group took a cold wet flannel and thoroughly but quickly wiped clean one hand of a person in the second group, without explaining why or engaging in any discussion. They then left the room, returned with a warm wet flannel, and sat beside the same person, this time taking the time to massage and clean the other hand, explaining what they were doing in a soft and gentle tone. Cara described the impact as being more effective and long-lasting than any discussion would have been, with all the practitioners realising at a more sensory and impactful way, the difference in care routines when done with sensitivity and a caring attitude. The recipients commented that their hands felt different to each other afterwards, with some asking for their first hand to then be given the caring treatment of the second, to make them feel more balanced.

This exemplifies the connection between sensible knowledge and practice-based learning, by which I mean the kind of tacit knowledge that is gained from sensory experience, described by (Strati, 2007), and the way in which practitioners were given a deeper insight into the impact of their actions in a simple care practice, the point being that they felt the difference on their hands, and recognised that a child's face is even more sensitive. As Strati points out, touch is "a perceptive-sensory faculty which does not enjoy elevated theoretical status" in social sciences, but it is acknowledged as a vital element in caring practices, and I would argue that early years practitioners

in particular can benefit from understanding the potential impact of caring touch, and its role in reducing cortisol levels in infants (Gerhardt, 2004).

### 8.3.3 Barriers to professional development

Continuous professional development, then, is an important contributory factor in ethical childcare practice, but there are several barriers that impede its effective implementation. Firstly, most day nurseries are open from early morning to early evening, usually for at least ten hours per day, which makes training outside of nursery opening hours difficult to arrange without impacting on practitioners' personal time. For the same reason, the trend for training to be increasingly online is also a barrier for many early years practitioners. Online training may be less effective for training in practical skills and has limited scope for working collaboratively. Early years practitioners often have limited technical expertise and are also less likely to have access to a computer than workers in other sectors. Linked to the issue of time, cost is probably the biggest barrier. Some mandatory courses, dealing with safeguarding or special educational needs provision, may be subsidised by local authorities, but the decrease in local authority budgets for early years training means that the cost of training is now more frequently borne by day nurseries or in some cases by the practitioners themselves. A large part of training costs for nurseries is usually in the cost of freeing up practitioners' time, whether covering individual absence, or closing nurseries for whole team training.

Finally, there is the issue of motivation. Evidence from the research interviews suggest that many nursery owners or managers are reluctant to invest in training, not just because of the cost, but because they do not recognise the benefits and in some cases do not welcome the new ideas that are brought back from training, in cultures where nursery proprietors are keen to maintain the status quo, as in the case described about the Right Start nursery rejecting the ideas about risky play. Similarly, several interviewees commented on the need for practitioners to be willing to learn. As Clare, an area manager and trainer at Acorn, explained, the effectiveness of any training is dependent on the attitude of the practitioner.

*If they're happy to, to go on training and to listen and to actually want to learn. So it does come from the drive within you as well. So the willingness to want to*

*go on training, to listen to what's being said and to apply that in practice and...to be reflective in action, I suppose, and on action afterwards as well, to see how that went...how things can work better.*

Her conclusion was that “you need to have the attitude, the personality and the motivation to want that change to happen, otherwise it won't happen.”

Reluctance to do training may not simply be caused by apathy, however. A perceptive insight was made by Helen, a manager whose for-profit nursery was in an area of deprivation, about their nursery group's training being organised centrally in such a way that

*it becomes more of a social event, if you will, than a scary training boardroom situation. A lot of these staff members haven't had the nicest time at school. And when you say training to them, they think I'm going to sit them with a textbook. And it's about saying, you know it's skills. We want to give you skills and I want to make you the best childcare practitioner you could be... It's identifying where they want to go.*

As both Lucy and Helen, managers at for-profit nurseries, noted, training sessions often doubled up as social events, and allowed informal professional discussion and problem-solving.

## 8.4 Organisation routines

### 8.4.1 Routine dynamics in childcare

If “routines codify organizational knowledge” (Howard-Grenville et al., 2016), an examination of routines within day nurseries can shed insights into the way in which organisational policies are embedded in practice, but also how practices themselves reflect and affect the ethos and culture of an organisation. Although there is now much more emphasis on ‘free-flow’ play and child-led ‘planning in the moment’ (Ephgrave, 2018) almost all nurseries have some kind of daily routine based around arrivals, departures and mealtimes, and usually with some scheduled activities. In contrast to nursery schools, most day nurseries have an extended timeframe for ‘drop-offs’ and ‘pick-ups’ at the beginning and end of the day, but there is usually a more specific

collection and drop-off time at the end of the morning and beginning of the afternoon, and some nurseries offer a wider range of session times, including short days to tie in with the end of the school day.

The attendance patterns thus form a kind of routine, as arrivals and departures have to be managed, and fitted around mealtimes, including whether or not breakfast is offered on arrival. The flexibility of the nursery around these is often an indication of how strongly their ethical values are embedded. Lyn, for example, a manager of a for-profit nursery in an area of deprivation commented that “we don't provide breakfast, we don't, but I also know if a child hasn't had breakfast you know, of course, we'd make them a piece of toast, of course we would.” The dynamics of arrivals and departures largely involve staff deployment, as children may need settling-in at the beginning of the day, ideally by their key person, but at the end of the day, most nurseries will provide verbal feedback to parents, and the quality of that, and the time spent on it, is often an indication of the emphasis placed on parent partnership. This was particularly noted in the interviews with parents, who all mentioned the quality of feedback as one of the indicators of a good nursery. Karen, a parent, described how Noah's key person “was always the one that came to the door and always the one that fed back to us...and it didn't feel like that was a chore for her to do....straightaway she wanted to get to know [Noah] as an individual”

The routine dynamics of childcare practices will be discussed below include the pattern of settling-in sessions, which are almost always carried out for new children, to familiarise them with the nursery staff and environment before being left for the first time. How these are managed reflect a nursery's approach; one nursery stipulates on its website that their two-hour settling in sessions, during which the parents must stay with the child, “are held up to twice a week, they are provided free of charge over a one or two week period.” The implication of this timescale is that after this maximum of four visits with a parent, full fees are paid for each session a child attends, so there is no offer to leave a child for an hour or two initially, to allow them to settle in more gradually – if a parent is having to pay for a full session, that can act as an incentive for them to use the whole session, whether or not their child would benefit from shorter sessions initially. An ethical approach, I suggest, would place a child's needs above the drive to begin charging full fees as quickly as possible.

#### 8.4.2 Care Practices & Routines

The care practices that take place throughout the day are also routinised to varying extents, and routinisation is itself an ethical issue. Cara, a nursery manager, commented that “virtually all of the EYFS can be covered in a care routine” but interviewees also reflected on the risk of routinisation of care practices being more about efficiency. It used to be common practice, for example, and considered good practice by many, to have regular nappy changes at set times (with additional changes as necessary when dirty nappies make themselves known). Several interviewees used a conveyor belt metaphor to describe this, succinctly capturing the impersonal nature of a timetabled approach. In some cases the interviewees are describing the way a nappy change is conducted, the performative aspect of the routine, where one practitioner may do several in a row, being passed the infants as if they were packages on a factory line. The routinisation is also about who does the nappy change, and the decision process about the timing of nappy changes. Current best practice, the ostensive aspect of the routine, would generally be recognised as nappy changes taking place when an individual child’s nappy is in need of being changed, and whenever possible carried out by the key person. Part of the rationale for this is that a key person would get to know a child’s individual frequency of urination, and their bowel habit, and would also thereby monitor the sufficiency of a child’s fluid intake, as well develop an understanding of when a child is ready for toilet training, as well as noticing changes that may be an indicator of a health issue. The other important aspect is the recognition that nappy changing is an intimate care procedure and ensuring that the practitioner is a familiar and trusted adult is seen as treating a child with respect. It also helps to reinforce the idea to children that private parts of the body should not be exposed to strangers.

This approach to nappy changing is an example of a care routine that requires more thought and attentiveness to do ethically, reflecting Noddings’ insistence (2002) on receptive attention being central to a caring encounter. It is far more efficient to have regular set times for nappy changes, and for practitioners to take turns to do nappy changes in batches. It is also easier to share the task with more junior members of staff and trainees, who may not yet be key persons. The ethical approach, however, reaps benefits in several ways; key persons become more knowledgeable about their

key children, and the one-to-one time can be an opportunity to share known preferences, continue a pattern of favourite songs, rhymes or jokes. Several interviewees described “ideal” nappy changing practices and they consistently focused on individualised and respectful care, and the avoidance of any part of it being treated as a routine, particularly anything approaching a conveyor belt in terms of a focus on speed, efficiency and uniformity. Role-modelling was mentioned by several interviewees as an important strategy for embedding good practice. The detail of descriptions extended to “just walking to the changing area...the emotional attachment and the bonding with the key person, just from holding hands and walking there...how they’re interacting when they’re changing nappies...is there eye contact? Is the practitioner being mindful of cold hands?” (Clare, graduate trainer and consultant).

Cara, a Nursery Manager with an avowed ethos of respectful care, described their approach to care routines, and in doing so, noted the risk of asking a child for permission become routinised to the point where it becomes tokenistic, and using terminology that echoes Tronto’s (1995) emphasis on the phase of care-receiving:

*we put a lot of effort into our care routines and we prepare for them, we don't go and pick up a child from behind and they don't know we're coming, going right we're changing your nappy and walk off. We go to them, we go down to their level we, we offer them, we ask them, we ask for permission to interact to pick them up or whatever the interaction is we're going to do and we listen, it's reciprocal. So lots of people ask children in care routines for their perspective, they don't listen. In listening takes more time. You have to wait for a response from the person you're interacting with. So that is important.*

Mealtimes and baby feeding routines were also described in several practitioner interviews, and the common themes were firstly, the importance of adapting to infants and children’s individual needs, and the challenge of balancing this with more rigid routines, as in the provision of breakfast for a child arriving after the prescribed breakfast period, as described by Lyn, above, and secondly, the ways in which practitioners physically supported mealtimes and feeding; contrasting senior practitioner Amber’s description of a comfortable and soothing bottle-feeding experience, for example, with the mealtime described by Acorn manager Anne from her previous experience, where practitioners stood over children to supervise rather



than sitting with children and engaging with them while they were eating. Care routines embed organisational knowledge, and the routinisation of sleep, feeding, transitions and separation were described by many of the interviewees, providing detailed descriptions of childcare practices. Of these, sleep routines were most frequently cited as examples of ethical or non-ethical practice, so I will now consider these in more detail.

### 8.4.3 Sleep routines

Most infants and toddlers attending for a full day at nursery need a sleep at some point during the day, which commonly settles down to a nap after lunch each day. The ethical issues that arise are threefold; firstly, whether a child is allowed to sleep at the time that suits their individual need; whether the sleep routine is tailored for the child's individual needs, in terms of comfort, resources, and patterns of behaviour, and whether the child is allowed to awaken naturally. Most of these depend on practitioners being sensitive, caring, and with sufficient autonomy to flex the nursery routine to accommodate children's needs, but also involves parents and their instructions, the sleep furniture and the sleep environment within the nursery, and these need to be placed within the context of changing practices within the sector.

Historically, day nurseries catering for children younger than two years of age have had a 'cot room' for sleeping infants, with additional fold out beds or mats for older toddlers needing a nap. The move towards more child-led environments in nurseries, encouraging children's independence and self-regulation, has led to the development of coracle-style beds, which provide an element of cosiness and enclosure to encourage children to settle and stay asleep in one place, but which also allow them both to access a place to sleep when they feel tired, and to get up independently when they wake up. The presence of an attentive practitioner is still essential, but the design of traditional cots does not facilitate the stroking and caressing which is often needed to soothe and reassure a child settling for a sleep at nursery. The coracle design provides an easier way for practitioners to settle sleeping toddlers, and to encourage children's understanding of the sleep routine and practice, without being put behind the bars of a cot, which is restrictive for children, and carries a risk of back injuries for practitioners (Community Playthings, 2015).

The accommodation of sleeping toddlers outside of the “normal” post-lunch sleep time can sometimes provide an indicator of whether childcare is personalised to children’s needs. Knowing that most nurseries prefer visits in the mornings, and definitely not at lunchtimes, I was not present at any of the nurseries to witness how sleep times were managed, but I did overhear practitioners debating whether one child would make it through lunch without falling asleep and whether they should encourage her to stay awake or put her down for an early nap. The conversation focused on what the parent’s preference would be, and this is probably the most contentious of the ethical issues around sleep time. No-one would question the need for the sleep routine to include individualised comfort (whether a child has a pacifier, favourite teddy or blanket, for example) when being settled for sleep, but practitioners may be faced with parental demands that conflict with their own views about whether or how long a child should be allowed to sleep at nursery.

Acorn senior practitioner Imogen’s description of how she deals with parents who want to limit the length of their child’s sleep at nursery describes an approach which successfully achieves a balance between prioritising an individual child’s needs and understanding parental wishes, and demonstrates a degree of autonomy and her professional knowledge:

*we do have some parents that have them on time limit sleeps, but we normally like encourage them to wake up, but if they don't want to wake up, I normally just have that conversation with the parent and just explain actually after half an hour, we tried to wake them, but they were so tired they weren't able to wake up, so we had to let them wake up naturally. And parents are normally quite understanding. I know obviously they're thinking if they sleep now, it's hard for us tonight, but actually, if that child can't make it through the day, they're just really miserable aren't they.*

Interviewees were consistently able to describe the personalised care and sensitivity required from practitioners at sleep time. Manager Cara, for example gave a very detailed description of a recent sleep routine that she had observed. She described how a toddler whose mum was expecting a new baby was fixated on a little picture she’d been given of a scan of the baby. Her key person, illustrating the caring attentiveness essential for an embedded ethic of care,

*knew how important this, this little piece of paper was. So she had said to her, whilst you had your lunch, I've set your bed area up and she ... blu-tacked her picture of her scan photo just up on the side just right by so the little girl could lie there, she could drift off to sleep and she could look at her picture which was really important to her. And I think when you've got people who are really connected to the children, they do lots of little things like this in the moment every day to make those things easier and to go, that was, you know, that was a connection.*

#### 8.4.4 Pace

Pace was referred to in several interviews, usually in the context of describing poor practice when meals or nappy changes are rushed. In describing the post-lunch routine in her nursery, Cara emphasised its pace:

*it's not rushed down from the table at lunch ... it's in their time, it's unhurried, the member of staff gives themselves 100 per cent to that child in that prime time. They're not going to be talking to other staff about you know where's the paper towels, or what time are you on your lunch break, it is devoting yourself 100 percent to be in that moment with that child, and so it maybe they've had a bottle together they've sat together they have some calm time together, and then they go towards the bed.*

Pace is an ethical issue in day nursery routines, and although it depends on practitioners being sensitive to the negative impact on children of rushing care routines, is largely affected by organisational factors of staff shifts, staff ratios and session times. Staffing levels have a direct impact on pace. If, as in Cara's example above, a practitioner is concerned with restocking paper towels, they have less time to focus on the children. There are mandatory minimum ratios, but if there are no ancillary roles, such as housekeepers, to undertake or help with the basic tasks of laundry, clearing up after children's meals, or ongoing cleaning of toilet areas, and replenishing hygiene supplies, the reality in many nurseries is that practitioners are expected to do these tasks alongside their care of the children. Similarly, if there is no non-contact time for practitioners to do record-keeping, of observations and

assessments, they may become dependent on sleep times to catch up with those, as in the example above.

Encouragingly, temporality and pace are increasingly being considered worthy of research within the early years sector, with some arguing a need for slow pedagogies (Clark, 2023). Fisher and Tronto (1990) identified time as one of four preconditions or “ability factors” for ethical care, recognising that skills and knowledge are insufficient if caregivers do not have sufficient time to apply them. The data from the interviews in this research was consistent in linking a slow pace with the highest quality of childcare, and the non-statutory curriculum guidance (Department for Education, 2020) repeatedly includes phrases like “make time,” “take time and ‘tune in’” and “allow plenty of time.” One advantage early years practitioners may have over time-pressed parents at home is that their role is, first and foremost, to give time and attention to the children in their care. Pace also applies to the initial settling-in phase for new children, with several interviewees commenting on the need to take this slowly, including Caroline, an owner-manager who said she advises parents that “the longer the settling-in process can be, the more settled the child will be.” Similarly, home visits require additional staff time, but, as nursery manager Anne noted, parents “feel more reassured that you’ve given them the time, in their home, that you’ve listened,” illustrating the implementation of the attentiveness which is crucial for an ethic of care (Noddings, 1984).

#### 8.4.5 The interruption and impact of Covid-19 on routines

The Covid-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on day nurseries, not just in the initial lockdown period, when only children from keyworker families, and those deemed to be vulnerable, were permitted to continue attending, but also in the immediate changes in practices due to the need to minimise the risk of infection. Social distancing measures were largely limited to employees and parents, and the two most dramatic impacts of these were, firstly, not allowing parents into the nursery building, meaning a return to the ‘old school’ practice of dropping children off and picking them up from the entrance to the nursery. Secondly, for several months, children were separated into ‘bubbles’ of a limited number of children, to minimise the risk of having to close an entire nursery in the event of an infection.

Interviewees commented on the pandemic measures in passing, as the interview data largely precede the post-pandemic reflections that have since taken place within the sector. The dramatic changes to routines and practices that had to be implemented provided an insight into the nature of their external and internal structures (Seidl & Whittington, 2021). Practitioners were more theoretically detached from their usual practice and to question, re-evaluate, and permanently change, routines and practices, moving from the “absorbed coping” of everyday care routines to a “theoretical detachment” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), resulting from the breakdown of normal practices as a result of the Covid-19 measures. The Covid-19 adaptations therefore provide a useful test site for an application of some of the practice theories used in this research.

Taking Schatzki’s assertion that all practices have organizing principles, with a set of ends, as well as a general and shared understanding, to a greater or lesser extent (Schatzki, 2002), the practice of dropping-off children at a nursery would be generally agreed to aim for a smooth and relatively swift transition for the child into the nursery’s care, to enable a parent to get to work on time, but also to minimise the risk of any upset for the child, and to ensure that handover information (about a child’s wellbeing or care needs) is given and acted upon. The end of day (or session) collection is usually less time-sensitive, and although many parents may be keen to pick up their child and get home as soon as possible, others are equally keen to stay and discuss their child’s day with the child’s key person, and sometimes to observe their child at play before making their presence known. With the Covid-19 restrictions, there was initially some concern on the part of both practitioners and some parents, about the new practice of doorstep handovers, but discussions with settings (both within Acorn and with other providers) over the last year have almost wholly been in favour of the new routine, with most comments being about the decrease in upset children, who quickly formed new habits, of, for example, parting from the parent at the door and then running to the window to wave at them, before settling into nursery activities. Discussions on social media (Rennie, 2021) confirmed that practitioners generally wanted to maintain the new routine even after the relaxation of the social distancing rules, and most parents at Acorn parent meetings recently have agreed. Not having parents saying slow goodbyes in the nurseries seemed to have a positive impact on the emotional wellbeing of all the children, who then settled more readily into the

nursery routine. At the end of a nursery day, the situation is more complex, with most nurseries gradually resuming the previous collection routine, but with wide variations about how quickly this happened, and with some in the sector raising concerns about the ease with which the apparent decrease in emotional upset appears to have been universalised (Zeedyk, 2021).

Taking Schatzki's differentiation between organizing principles and the more peripheral aspects of childcare as a practice, the telos of providing childcare is that children need to be cared for safely and in an emotionally warm environment while their parents are at work. The act of caring for children is therefore an organising principle, whereas the dropping-off and collection arrangements are more peripheral, and therefore can be more readily changed. Other peripheral aspects of practice were also temporarily suspended, including home visits, visits to care homes and social events involving children and their families. Schatzki's view of the social life of organisations being "a mesh of practices and material arrangements" is relevant here, as his site ontology makes it clear that "practices are the site, but not the spatial site, of activities" (Schatzki, 2005) and childcare practices certainly extend beyond the nursery premises. In terms of communications, the face-to-face verbal feedback that was to some extent foreshortened by the social distancing arrangements at pick-up times, was supplemented by extensive online communication systems in most nurseries. Software applications (eg Connect™ and Family™) allow messaging, sharing of photos and videos, and real-time updates on children's care and activities while at nursery. These were also used extensively during the pandemic to maintain contact with children who were unable to attend during the period of limited access. The developing use of software for communications in nurseries is just one aspect of sociomateriality, and I will now consider this more widely.

## 8.5 Sociomateriality in childcare settings

### 8.5.1 The materiality and impact of chairs

Material resources were identified by Fisher and Tronto (1990) as an "ability factor", or precondition for caring activities, and this was certainly borne out by the accounts of interviewees. Caring has been described as "an ongoing sociomaterial accomplishment" (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016) and chairs provide an example of

how material objects affect the quality of care practices. For childcare practitioners to provide caregiving in a way that is emotionally and physically rewarding, it is important that they are comfortable. Few of the interviewees mentioned their physical comfort or discomfort within their caring roles, which is not surprising, as the provision or not of comfortable seating for infant feeding, for example, may not be questioned if a practitioner has not experienced different nurseries where some baby rooms have comfortable chairs, and some don't. The main observations came from Liz, a trainer and consultant who has visited a wide range of settings in her work, and who commented on the difference between nurseries where practitioners have had to improvise with cushions on the floor, and those who have comfortable chairs. Her assertion that it "has an impact then on the attachment" is borne out by the neuroscience research on the importance of babies being "lovingly held" (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 40). On being asked to describe her perfect nursery, Liz described its nurturing feel and that it "had, like, sofas."

Acorn senior practitioner Amber described how to bottle feed a baby; "make sure you're comfortable and make sure the baby's comfortable." She then used the phrases "sit on you comfortably...give as much comfort" which indicated the importance of physical ease within the feeding routine, both for practitioners and infants. I similarly noticed that the nurseries I visited where there was a clear focus on nurturing care also had comfortable seating for infant feeding – both for practitioners, but also for visiting breastfeeding mothers. Conversely, the impression I gained from other nurseries was a reluctance to provide seating that might encourage practitioners to be too relaxed, which may be a reflection of the level of trust in practitioner conduct, and whether the management of the nursery adopted a Theory X or Theory Y perspective of their staff teams (McGregor, 1960). Whether or not comfortable seating is provided, baby room practices depend on the situational context – the social interactions with colleagues, and the time constraints for one-to-one care practices. Mandatory staffing ratios within baby rooms in the UK are one staff member to three infants or toddlers under two years of age. There is therefore additional pressure on other colleagues, if a practitioner lingers, for example on a bottle feed.

Chairs can also be a point of contention within childcare practice (Bone, 2019). If infants and toddlers are strapped into chairs (for their safety) their movement is

constrained and they have no autonomy or choice of seating position (Montessori, 1912). It is where convenience for practitioners potentially clashes with infants and toddlers' preferences and comfort. As Acorn manager Tara's account of a distressed baby in a highchair illustrated (in 5.3.5), practitioners are sometimes challenged by the conflicting needs at nursery mealtimes. Tara used her intervention to explain to the practitioner the importance for a child to feel settled and comfortable before expecting them to feel happy to sit in a highchair and eat, and demonstrating to her that physical proximity (by allowing him to sit on her lap) would enable him to accept some food. The practitioner had been following 'normal' mealtime protocol and needed to be given the confidence to challenge and adapt the normal routine in order to cater for a child's emotional needs, and in turn his nutritional requirements.

Similarly, most older toddlers and children feel more comfortable doing activities standing at tables, and most nurseries now wouldn't expect them to sit in chairs, other than for mealtimes, adult-led table-top activities, or by choice. Rugs and cushions in book corners are more inviting than children's chairs, and chairs are often only used in role play areas by children who are pretending to be adults. Children are very tactile, and express their feelings by the way they handle objects; "emotions circulate through objects" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 194). Associations with objects affect both children and adults within early years settings. Practitioners also have to understand the emotional impact of physical objects and the way they're handled, to take account of individual children's backgrounds, as in the comments by Helen, a manager of a nursery which had several vulnerable children in its care, some of whom struggled with sudden loud noises, such as doors slamming, because of previous traumatic experiences, as narrated in 5.2.3.

### 8.5.2 Practitioners' Clothing

Clothing also influences practitioners' well-being, and their self-perception. The types of uniform worn by early years practitioners has evolved over the years, from nurse-style dresses to casual clothing and smart-casual branded tops. The degree of autonomy granted to practitioners about their appearance varies enormously between different early years organisations. When Sinead, a manager of a nursery in the employee-owned group, described the "massive" impact and "the biggest celebration" resulting from a partnership council agreeing to a request from its members, she was



referring to the relaxation of uniform rules to allow coloured nail polish. She described the baffled responses from male colleagues who had no idea how big a deal it was for many female practitioners, and she noted that this was a huge difference from her previous experience in other large chains: “In the whole of my childcare career you could never turn up with painted nails, never, you know?”

Uniform clothing was mentioned by several interviewees, particularly in connection with the Right Start nursery group, which prided itself on traditional values and which used “matron” instead of Nursery Manager as a job title. Peta, an Acorn senior practitioner who had worked at the nursery before it was taken over by Right Start, cited the uniform as being one of the changes she disliked, describing how she “kept getting asked, do you work for a bank or something” and emphasising that the shirt and skirt was particularly impractical in the baby room where she was working. Kim, an Acorn manager who had also worked for the nursery group, added that skirts had to be tailored and of a certain length, and she described her rebellion against the no-trousers rule so that she could get down to play comfortably with the children, and because it was also more decent; “When you’re sat with the children, you’re not always being the most ladylike.”

The three main issues arising from a no-nail-polish rule and the restrictions on uniform are autonomy, practicality and brand image. Freedom of choice to wear clothes, hair, make-up and tattoos are about practitioners feeling able to express themselves as individuals. Practicality works in different directions – in both interviews mentioned here, practitioners objected to the impractical nature of the required and hated uniform, but health and safety is usually the reason given for rules on nail length, jewellery and hair styles. The issue of brand image encompasses both of these areas, with most nurseries having some kind of uniform, which is usually seen as helpful to parents as well as practical for staff. In many of the nurseries I visited, managers did not wear uniform, differentiating them from practitioners, who almost always did. The implication is that they do not get involved in the messier aspects of a nursery day, and perhaps subtly, is therefore an indicator of status.

### 8.5.3 The materiality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Protective clothing in nurseries is usually limited to aprons and gloves for care practices, meal times and messy play, although the issue of PPE (or rather, the lack

of it), became a major focus during the Covid-19 pandemic. The issue of protective gloves and aprons arose in interviews for a completely different reason, as there are also ethical implications in the use of plastic aprons and gloves. Restricting the use of PPE to save money is most likely to be seen as unethical practice, if it has a negative impact on practitioner safety and wellbeing but the second reason for minimising the use of disposable PPE is the environmental factor. This was mentioned by Sharon, a director at a large for-profit nursery chain, who was keen to ban the use of single-use plastic in her nurseries, but who had to compromise, commenting “I don’t want to lose a member of staff over plastic gloves. You know, if she’s great and, or he is great in every other way, then the compromise I will make will be to say use one plastic glove.” She ascribes the reluctance to abandon gloves to prior training: “...nurseries where the manager or baby room manager is ex-NNEB and would not move to not using gloves.” The reference to the old qualification also suggests that those refusing to comply are more mature practitioners, with more experience and confidence to object to practices they don’t agree with.

Another problem with PPE, in addition to cost and environmental impact, is about the impact on a child. I was very concerned when a new practitioner, who had previously worked in a school, assumed that she should wear plastic gloves before applying sun cream to the children in her care. It led to an interesting debate in a staff meeting, (diary 05/05/21) when practitioners agreed that they would themselves hate to have sun cream applied by plastic-gloved hands as it would make it feel like a medical procedure, and this prompted a debate about using gloves when wiping the noses of children too young to do it themselves, and the reflection it prompted about how that might feel for children whose parents almost certainly wouldn’t use gloves for that task at home, and who might be disconcerted by a practitioner’s unwillingness to touch them without being gloved-up. This echoes the experience of practical learning involving cold and warm flannels described in 8.3.2 and is an example of “the materiality of organizational experience that often evades analytical-rational description and which stems from the knowledge-evoking process” (Strati, 2007, p. 65), which in this case is an increased awareness of the impact of a simple caring action, namely, wiping clean a child’s face.

#### 8.5.4 Children's play equipment

The quality of equipment and resources used by the children can also have ethical consequences, as in the story of the left-handed child struggling with right-handed scissors in 5.2.4. In that case it reflected failings in the practitioner's observational skills rather than simply inappropriate resources, as left-handed scissors were clearly on hand in the setting, but had not been identified as being necessary, and there have been many accounts on social media about children of colour not being given an appropriate palette of colours when being asked to do self-portraits, despite such crayons now being easily available. Similarly it is now very easy to ensure diversity of resources in books, role play areas and small world resources, an area often noted by Ofsted inspectors. A question that arises from the scissors incident is whether the practitioner was aware of the difference between the pairs of scissors (left-handed scissors usually have different coloured handles to differentiate them from right-handed scissors), and if not, whether that was due to inadequate training, induction or leadership within the room. It is highly unlikely that it would have been in any way deliberate, but impossible to ascertain the reason for the lack of reflection and problem-solving actions about the child's difficulties. It is also possible that gender stereotyping may have played a part – boys are often perceived to have less patience and interest in fine motor skills than girls, so the boy's struggles may have been (probably unconsciously) ascribed to his gender, rather than his left-handedness.

The type of toys and equipment in a nursery often reflects the depth of knowledge of owners or managers, and whether they are aware of current best practice, and the impact of sociomateriality. There is certainly more awareness now of the impact of boundary objects and pacifiers (Van Laere et al., 2019), and take-home teddies, for example, have been questioned. A recent discussion amongst Acorn managers at one of their meetings (diary 24/09/21) highlighted their impact on social inclusivity. Clare, an Acorn area manager, challenged the popular ritual of encouraging children to take home the nursery teddy and to then bring in photos of what the teddy did, and when she asked the managers how they felt personally about similar rituals in schools, one of the managers opened up about how much she dreaded her nephew's turn with the school bear, as she was providing kinship care for him, and was keen to maintain privacy around his family's difficult circumstances. Other managers then commented on how competitive the teddy's holidays became with some parents in the more

affluent nurseries who seemed keen to impress. The discussion then led to a blog post to draw attention to the implications of a well-meaning but potentially problematic practice (Watanabe, 2021). An ethic of care, in its focus on the impact on individuals, may help to question such practices.

The nursery environment itself would make an interesting topic for further research, particularly in terms of décor, the use of colour, and of different materials, as well as layout. As in the example described in 5.2.4 by Maya, an excess of very bright colours can have a noticeable impact on children's behaviour and wellbeing, and environmental psychology is increasingly being recognised in nursery design (Dudek, 2013).

### 8.5.5 Organisational culture

The role of organisational culture is too wide-ranging to be a focus in this research, other than to acknowledge the tacit understanding, explicit rules, and teleo-affective structures that form the 'inherited background' within organisations (Witt via Tsoukas 2020) and illustrating Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Interviewees mentioned the unwritten rules that govern behaviour, particularly when describing particularly good or bad practice. These included the way in which practitioners are treated as employees, and how, or whether, siblings are separated while at nursery, and several interviewees commented on the 'feel' of a setting; as Clare commented "as soon as you walk in, you can tell" (what the culture of a nursery was like), and as the parent, Maria, described in 5.2.3 in her comparison with a hospital ward. In one interview, the Managing Director, Sharon, described how she encouraged eco-friendly practices by giving all the staff reusable water bottles, but her avowal of the culture being "mostly carrot rather than stick" was then undermined by her terminology of a "ban" on plastic bottles of water – "we don't let them bring them on site" and even more by the comment about what happens if a manager brings a packed lunch to a managers' meeting with single use plastic packaging: "they know what reaction they're going to get from me...they only do that once." The impression I received was not of winning hearts and minds, but more of enforcing rules from above.

The examples of unethical practice described in the interviews do not give an insight into the process of how breaches of ethical practice gradually become normalised, as

that would require a more longitudinal approach, but there were several references to the taken-for-granted patterns of behaviour within a nursery. The occasions when practitioners become consciously aware of a nursery's culture were often when their experience contradicted their expectations, illuminating the tacit and embodied dimension of custom and practice. The way in which care is embodied in routines provides an insight into the role of care ethics within practices.

#### 8.5.6 Embodied care and embodied routines

As Shotter (1996, p. 385) explained, “as living, embodied beings, we cannot not be responsive to the world around us. We continuously react and respond to it, spontaneously, whether we want to or not...and in doing so, we necessarily relate and connect ourselves to our surroundings in one way or another.” In exploring the nature of “our spontaneous, embodied understandings as they occur in our conduct of our everyday practices” and with particular reference to Wittgenstein's view of rules, he describes the way in which our actions become embodied and our reactions unthinking. In early years practice, as several interviewees commented, interaction with children should be at the children's physical level, not when standing over them. Experienced practitioners develop embodied caring competence to the extent where it becomes second nature to adapt one's physical stance, tone of voice, and to engage verbally with children during routine care routines such as nappy changing. It is less about knowledge, skills and attitude, as a way of becoming embodied in the character of their being in the world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Shotter, 1996). A practitioner's awareness might only be triggered by a breach of the ‘rules,’ such as practitioner Paula commenting that “you can hear silence sometimes from the nappy room and I say, ‘just talk to them.’”

Sensory awareness also plays a part in developing embodied caring competence, which relies on attentiveness and empathy on the part of the practitioner to consider how a child is experiencing a care routine. Examples from the interviews which exemplify this are the description of the different experience of being cleaned with a warm or cold flannel, and the several mentions of practitioners wiping children's noses from behind and without warning. The empathic understanding of the impact of different physical acts is also illustrated by the prioritisation of physical care and affection over education, which was voiced by Lyn in her account of a child arriving “in

her pyjamas because their house was raided by the police at six o'clock that morning. And so she was brought in in last night's nappy, she's two, in her pyjamas, her hair askew, mum crying. She's got two younger babies...and when we see that, comfort and care for them, I mean, we're on the front line of this. And of course that child learned something that day, but more importantly she was loved that day. And I don't know if she would have been at home. And that's really sad to say."

At the end of their interview, Lyn's colleague Helen said that they were most proud of "where the children end up in the end. They might not be writing, but they're not panicking every time someone makes a loud noise. They can go to an adult and have a hug and be okay...we get there in the end." Her emotion was evident in her shaking voice, and both examples demonstrated an affective attunement to the needs of the children in their care, anticipating the need for physical acts of comforting, and triggering similar responses in colleagues witnessing her emotion. As I have endeavoured to illustrate, ethical childcare practice is often intuitive, embodied and reliant on tacit knowledge, and encounters with examples of unethical practice are, I believe, instances where a process of sensemaking becomes evident, and I will now begin to explore that concept.

## 8.6 Sensemaking

### 8.6.1 Sensemaking in practice – agency and autonomy

As I explored in chapter three, sensemaking is a process by which practitioners work to understand issues or situations which are confusing or which violate expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) and it focuses on lived experience, with particular attention given to the role of language and dialogue. Ethical practice is often considered in the context of ethical decision-making, but within childcare practice, it is clear from the interview data that subtleties of physical actions can make a significant difference to the quality of childcare practice. When an expectation of behaviour is violated by witnessing other practitioners responding differently, this can interrupt the flow of practice for an individual and cause them to deliberate on the action and to evaluate their own beliefs in the context of having colleagues with different views or behaviours. In table seven, below, I have added examples (in italics) of the types of sensemaking that I believe take place within childcare settings to the typology developed by (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). The ontological category of 'absorbed

‘coping’ is particularly applicable to the daily sensemaking of childcare practitioners, with an increasing degree of detached reflection in the next two categories, culminating in the more abstract representational category. There is a similar sequence in the degree of embodiment in sensemaking, which also differentiates between hands-on physical care practices which involve sensory awareness, to abstract discussions about company policies.

As explored earlier, there are different levels of autonomy within childcare settings, and the agency of individuals is affected by several factors, including seniority, confidence and experience or qualifications. Sensemaking may be undertaken by all individuals, however, and in a variety of situations, not only those which give rise to formal debates about the antecedents of an incident or situation.

Table 7 Typology of sensemaking applied to childcare settings, based on Sandberg and Tsoukas, (2020)

	<b>Types of Sensemaking</b>			
<b>Features of Sensemaking</b>	Immanent	Involved-deliberate	Detached-deliberate	Representational
Location of sensemaking	Primary practice world – <i>within childcare settings</i>			Secondary practice world – <i>external discussions about policies and practice</i>
Ontological category	Absorbed coping – <i>day-to-day childcare practices, adapting to children’s</i>	Involved thematic deliberation – <i>becoming conscious of methods being used and to</i>	Abstract detachment – <i>reflections on practice</i>	Theoretical detachment – <i>discussions about childcare practice, not specific to a setting</i>

	<i>individual needs</i>	<i>challenges to assumptions</i>		
Object of sensemaking	Routine <i>childcare</i> activities [eg <i>Lauren's</i> description of adapting sleep routines for each child in 5.2.3, and <i>Paula</i> noticing an absence of talking or singing at nappy changing in 8.5.6]	Interrupted activities or <i>challenges to the way</i> activities are undertaken [eg <i>Tara's</i> response to upset child at mealtime, instructing colleagues to adapt normal practice in 5.3.5]	Problematic/ problematized activities – <i>discussion or reflection</i> about practice or events [eg <i>Lynn &amp; colleagues</i> reviewing response to parent disclosure of armed robbery in 9.3.5]	Problematic/ problematized decontextualized activities – <i>challenges</i> within <i>childcare</i> practices in general [eg <i>Cara's</i> discussion with parent about male practitioners, in 6.3.1, and <i>Imogen's</i> discussion with parent about sleep times in 8.4.3]
Purpose for organisation	Enacting routine activities – <i>ensuring consistent quality</i>	Restoring interrupted activities – <i>resolving differences in practice</i>	Re-viewing problematic/ problematized activities – or <i>incidents or complaints</i>	Explaining problematic/ problematized activities - <i>to understand how childcare should be practised</i>
Specific sense generated	Practical sense – <i>by</i>	Contextual sense – <i>as part of a team</i>	Conceptual sense – <i>how organisations</i>	Spectatorial sense – <i>external advisory view by</i>



	<i>individuals in a setting</i>	<i>within a setting</i>	<i>conceive of practice</i>	<i>academic or other experts</i>
<b>Core constituents</b> sense-action	Unified	Partly unified, partly separate	Temporarily separate	Completely separate
temporality	Practical (immediate-anticipatory)  Existential  <i>In the moment planning and adapting routines</i>	Practical (immediate)  Pragmatically chronological (retrospective-prospective)  <i>In the moment, but may have an impact on future practice</i>	Pragmatically chronological (retrospective-prospective)  <i>Reviewing actions and practices after events or incidents</i>	Analytically chronological (retrospective-prospective)  <i>Discussing and rationalising past actions to explain or to adapt policies moving forward</i>
embodiment	Principally bodily;  minimally cognitive-discursive sensing -  <i>Lauren instinctively adapting how to settle a child to sleep in 5.2.3, and Paula's</i>	Partly bodily; partly cognitive-discursive sensing –  <i>Tara's instinctive reaction to comfort a child thwarted by the 'normal' mealtime</i>	Little bodily; mainly cognitive-discursive sensing –  <i>Lynn and her team's discussion about the correct course of action following the disclosure,</i>	Minimally bodily; principally cognitive-discursive sensing – <i>Cara's and Imogen's discussions with parents about policies and practices in the nursery in 6.3.1 and 8.4.3</i>

	<i>reaction to not hearing her colleague's voice</i>	<i>protocol in 5.3.5</i>	<i>evaluating their own response, in 9.3.5</i>	
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### 8.6.2 Sensemaking in daily routines

At an unconscious, embodied level, there are a variety of adaptations within childcare routines and in early years practice which require a basic level of sensemaking, from adapting the pace of an activity or story to the attention span of individual children, for example. At a more serious level, the kind of sensemaking that takes place in monitoring children's health and wellbeing requires a more deliberately conscious level of sensemaking. A recent incident within an Acorn nursery, for example, as recounted to me by manager Kim, separately to her interview, (diary 14/11/22) involved a practitioner who became concerned during a nappy change by the breathing of one of the babies, which seemed to her to be laboured, in that the baby's chest was rising more than usual with each breath. She discussed her concerns with colleagues, some of whom did not share her conviction that there was a problem, and nor did the parents of the child, but she trusted her intuition that the child's breathing was atypical and a cause for concern, and this was borne out when the child was subsequently admitted to hospital after paramedics were called. Having confidence in her personal intuition and observations was in this case critical, as in the examples of medical sensemaking described by (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). This kind of sensemaking is also important in dealing with safeguarding concerns, which often rely on intuition that something doesn't seem right, as discussed in earlier chapters.

### 8.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, as summarised in figure four, below, I have explored the way in which policies influence practice, and the challenges encountered when the practices in real-life situations do not match the espoused values or intentions of organisations. I considered the impact of training and professional development and then investigated organisation routines and the way in which care practices are influenced by individuals

and by wider factors. I then explored the sociomateriality of childcare settings and how this influences practice, and concluded with a preliminary exploration of sensemaking within childcare settings. The research question at the micro level was “Within the agency of individuals in early years organisations, what determines the extent to which decision-making and practice is ethical?” This leads me to the next chapter, which explores this concept in more detail and in particular the way in which sensemaking can be used to understand the factors that influence ethical childcare practice.

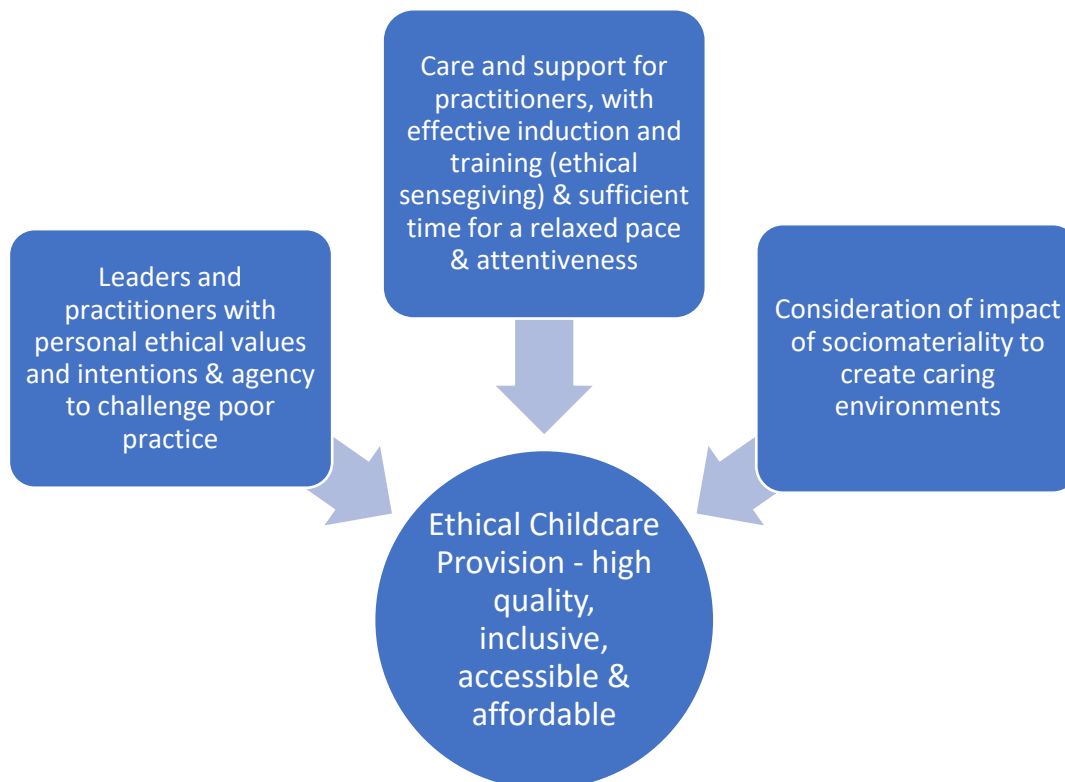


Figure 4 Micro influences on ethical childcare practice

## Chapter Nine – Discussion: Ethical Sensemaking

### 9.1 Introduction

Having explored the macro, meso and micro influences on ethical childcare practice, I will now discuss how the perspective of ethical sensemaking can provide an insight into the way in which ethical intentions and personal moral codes of behaviour can become embodied and embedded (or not) in childcare routines and practices. Many of the competences needed for sensitive and caring childcare practice involve tacit, but social, knowledge. They are often hard to articulate, and studying the details of childcare practices in previous chapters has, I hope, helped to “valorise the intimate connection between mind and body and the knowledge incorporated in bodily schemes, physical abilities and the collective development of a ‘professional vision’ made of experience and its codification” (Gherardi, 2012, p. 207). I will firstly explain and define the concept of ethical sensemaking and will then examine how it draws on both the ethic of care and practice theory. I will then consider how it can be applied to childcare practice in early years settings, what its triggers are and how it can be encouraged, before also considering its role in my own research journey. I then conclude by outlining its potential positive impact on practice, how sensemaking and sensegiving can be used to combat ethical slippage, and how they may have wider applications outside of the early years sector.

### 9.2 The concept of ethical sensemaking

#### 9.2.1 Defining the term

As discussed in chapter three, previous uses of the term ethical sensemaking have usually been in the context of ethical decision-making in the context of human resources (Ness & Connelly, 2017) and have included proposed strategies for ethical sensemaking (Johnson et al., 2013). The concept has also been applied to food banking (Elmes et al., 2016) with an ethical sensemaking model based on one created by (Sonenshein, 2007). In contrast to these, my proposed use of the term focuses on the way in which organisations and people with ethical intentions encourage or carry out ethical practices, and the ways in which sensemaking processes work at an almost subconscious level, in embodied practices. The model I then propose includes macro and meso sensemaking, not just decision-making by individuals.

### 9.2.2 Wayfinding as sensemaking

The concept of wayfinding (Chia, 2017) provides a view of organisational learning which has several elements in common with sensemaking, and which helps to illuminate the process of ethical sensemaking. Chia argues that the term wayfinding is more appropriate for describing a practice-based approach to organisational learning, contrasting it with navigation that has pre-determined goals and routes. Sensemaking similarly shares a dynamic, responsive approach and Chia's description of a "nurtured sensitivity...and the unconsciously-learnt responses shaped by a collective's repertoire of practices" echoes the kind of apprenticeship learning described as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sensemaking, like wayfinding, is about sensing, improvising and adapting, and although Chia is concerned with organisational learning, and the way in which organisations respond to environmental demands, sensemaking at an individual level could similarly be described as being dependent on "the silent transmission and absorption of social practices by members of the collective that occurs non-deliberately and unconsciously." Early years practitioners learn by observing and mimicking other more experienced practitioners, in the same way that children learn. Language and cognition cannot always capture the fine-grained detail and subtleties of skilful childcare, particularly in the embodied skills of comforting or calming distressed children, for example, and Chia's application of practice-based understanding of skill mastery to organisational learning is a helpful adjunct to the process of sensemaking that I will now explore in more detail.

### 9.2.3 Ethical sensegiving

The concept of sensegiving was originally used in relation to the way a CEO or leadership team might disseminate a vision of strategic change to an organisation's stakeholders (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Within the context of the early years sector and ethical childcare practice, the term can usefully be applied to the way in which nursery leaders and senior practitioners might "influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality," and, as with the strategic change example, the process of sensegiving would be done in "an iterative, sequential, and to some extent reciprocal fashion" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442) and might involve other colleagues, parents, and external trainers and

consultants. Manager Cara's explanation to her deputy Amy in her induction about the nursery's concept of respectful care, for example, backed up by further mentoring within the nursery, changed Amy's understanding of what good childcare practice should be. It was not just an instruction of how care practices should be conducted, but a deeper understanding of the importance of embodied empathy, of how a care practice is experienced by a child, and which illustrates the reciprocity emphasised by (Noddings, 1984) and the care-receiving phase described by (Tronto, 1993).

The triggers and enablers of sensegiving for leaders and stakeholders were usefully categorised by (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), and they also observed that sensegiving, "concerned as it is with influencing the interpretations of others, is undoubtedly a political activity" (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007, p. 77) which is particularly relevant for ethical sensegiving. Inclusivity and the prioritisation of a child's needs above the organisational drivers for efficiency or profit, and the attentiveness and time required for ethical, respectful, care practices can be challenging for early years providers, as illustrated by my research evidence of interviews with a wide range of leaders and practitioners. Where practitioners have felt a disconnect with their personal moral code, as in the accounts of experiences at the Right Start nursery, they have sometimes engaged in sensegiving themselves. Acorn manager Kim described an experience there of overruling practitioners who were trying to force a child with additional needs to sit at a table, saying that she "defined myself as SENCO, and was like 'no, if he wants to go and play, he can go and play, and they, you could see it, not computing in their heads.'" She then described how she developed the understanding and practice of the two other team members in the room over the next six months.

### 9.3 Applying the ethics of care to sensemaking

#### 9.3.1 Using the ethic of care to define ethical childcare

At the beginning of chapter two I outlined my definition of ethical childcare and subsequently demonstrated the ways in which care ethics provide an appropriate lens through which to assess the degree to which childcare provision can be deemed to be ethical. Even when using such a well-established and recognised framework, however, I recognise that my perceptions and judgement of what is ethical are very personal, and influenced by my own experiences as a parent, as an involved participant in childcare settings and as a feminist with socialist leanings. It is this

recognition of my own personal bias that has led me to explore ways of exposing the sensemaking processes within childcare settings, to gain a greater understanding of how and why an ethic of care can and, I believe, should be implemented within the sector.

Ethical childcare, then, is provision which has care as an organising principle (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), and which recognises that ethical behaviour is rooted in “human affective response” (Noddings, 1984) and encompasses all levels of influence within organisations, from political, economic and social forces down to the embodied nature of caring practices. The recognition of ethical childcare can itself be a felt experience rather than a cognitive judgement, reflecting the affinity of care ethics in early years with a relational pedagogy of professional love (Page, 2018). Interviewees described judging nurseries on “gut instinct” echoing Tronto’s view that she could “just tell” whether practitioners were caring, within ten minutes (Tronto, 2010). I have illustrated the way in which care ethics can be developed into embodied care (Hamington, 2004) and the integration with sensemaking further extends that concept.

There are several factors which illustrate why care ethics and sensemaking are mutually enlightening perspectives, particularly in relation to childcare practices. The embodied nature of childcare practice, and the importance of tacit knowledge are two key areas that focus on the micro level of analysis, but sensemaking also enables an exploration of the social processes which develop an organisation’s culture and behaviours, including the importance of stories. Power relationships, emotions and sociomateriality can also be examined with a sensemaking perspective and each of these can illustrate whether or not an ethic of care has been successfully embedded within an organisation or early years setting. I will now consider the influence of ethical sensemaking at different levels, beginning with the macro level and zooming in to the micro level of embodied practice.

### 9.3.3 The role of sensemaking in applying care ethics to the marketized childcare sector

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, there are many who would argue that neoliberal marketisation is antithetical to an implementation of care ethics at a macro level (Penn, 2013; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017; Tronto, 2010). A focus on sensemaking can lead to an over-emphasis on agency, and a lack of attention to

macro forces such as mass media and government policy, (Weick et al., 2005) but policies and media coverage are themselves determined by groups of individuals who are engaged in sensemaking processes. It has also been argued that a neoliberal drive for professionalisation involves increasing levels of surveillance and compliance with a push-down curriculum, which then decreases discretionary decision-making by individuals (Sims, 2017). At the macro level of national policy development, however, there is still some scope for individuals to make influential decisions. My experience of giving evidence to the Public Accounts Select Committee (House of Commons, 2016) gave me an insight into the processes that feed into the production of funding policies, and a realisation that many of the politicians involved in the decision-making processes had ethical intentions, although my perception was that their ethical sensemaking was hampered, firstly by their personal axiology, in embracing a belief in a neoliberal reliance on market forces, and secondly by their epistemological reliance on measurable outcomes. The reliance on quantitative evidence by government departments inevitably means that little attention is paid to the more intangible benefits of emotionally nurturing childcare on children's development.

Someone with a belief in the efficacy of market forces, for example, inevitably trusts those market forces to provide an efficient way to distribute government funding, believing that demand-side funding provides more consumer choice than supply-side funding, which would result in greater state control. This attitude has ethical repercussions; there is widespread recognition that financially sustainable nurseries are less likely to be found in areas of deprivation, and most nursery groups or chains actively seek locations in affluent areas. Government statistics confirm that childcare provision is decreasing in more deprived areas, and also less likely to achieve outstanding Ofsted judgements (Ofsted, 2022a). The decision making is made at a strategic level within childcare organisations when deciding which nurseries or groups are suitable acquisition targets, or which locations new nurseries should be built in. The interviews with sector and organisation leaders, and presentations at sector conferences, and literature from agents within the sector confirmed that current and potential profitability was the most significant factor for most would-be buyers of nurseries (Miller, 2022).



The application of an ethic of care to the sensemaking process can highlight the range of factors involved in such decisions. Those chains whose mission is primarily profit-driven prioritise shareholder returns over the needs of employees, families and local communities, and as my interview data demonstrated, closed down less profitable nurseries with very little, if any, consultation or discussion with families or employees. Nurseries operated by charitable or not-for-profit organisations demonstrated a sensemaking process that was more consultative and appeared to close settings as a last resort. In the middle ground, nurseries operated by employee-owned partnerships were as focused on profitability as the privately owned chains, but with more consultative decision-making processes. Only those with a primarily social purpose, however, actively sought to sustain nursery provision in low-income areas.

Within the early years sector, it is common to see the large corporate nursery chains engage in charitable activities, in order to demonstrate philanthropic and, presumably, ethical intentions. Unfortunately, the ‘carewashing’ mentioned in early chapters (e.g. 2.6.1) also applies in some of these cases. As the research into for-profit providers demonstrated, through a process of forensic accounting (Simon et al., 2020a, 2020b), one large provider raised £30,000 for its charitable foundation, but at the same time charged the charity £82,770 for the staff time spent supporting the foundation. Similarly, another nursery provider launched “a scheme to provide children whose parents are unable to afford nursery fees with a free childcare place” (Morton, 2022). Such a laudable-sounding effort is then undermined by the first line of the article which states: “Currently the nursery group does not offer funded two-year-old places.” The scheme, intended to make up for the exclusion of low-income families who rely on two-year-old funded places, is limited to just four children at one of the nurseries, and the scheme is partly funded “with donations from other companies.” The scheme is then described as forming part of the group’s ‘impact strategy.’

#### 9.3.4 Organisational ethical sensemaking

Within an organisation, however, my interview data suggested that whether or not a setting had an embedded ethic of care did not wholly depend on an organisation’s type (whether for-profit or not-for-profit), or an individual’s political beliefs. The nurseries and the practitioners which most clearly demonstrated an ethic of care in both rhetoric and in practical examples, were those least concerned with making a profit, but there

was insufficient evidence of a causal correlation between organisational type and ethical practice. The ethical sensemaking processes within a childcare organisation, suggest that financial drivers continue to have an impact on policies and practice. Affordability and accessibility, key aspects of ethical childcare provision, are not determined simply by fee levels, but by the way in which funding is applied, whether additional costs or up-front deposits are applied, and whether meals, nappies, and activities are included or charged separately. Ethical measures to improve accessibility, affordability and quality, inevitably have a negative impact on finances, and nursery managers continually balance the need to be financially sustainable with efforts to improve quality. Organisationally, ethical sensemaking would similarly make effective use of care ethics in evaluating policies and the routine dynamics within early years settings. Taking a care ethics perspective to transitions, for example, would ensure that the wellbeing of individual children would be prioritised in decisions about moves from one group to another, ensuring that emotional security is not sacrificed to efficiency in managing occupancy. Finally, at the macro level, a kind of ethical sensemaking can also be seen to operate in terms of government policies and societal influences, as with the debate with treasury officials described by Dan. If there is no 'caring about' in the political will driving the policy formation, there are inevitably going to be unethical, thought possibly unintended, consequences

### 9.3.5 Individual ethical sensemaking

At the individual level, ethical sensemaking as described in the interviews could be summarised as interpretations of policy when there was dissonance with an individual's personal morality. In some cases, interviewees were very forthright about the ethical issues. Acorn manager Jordan, for example, described the discomfort and helplessness she felt when, as a student, she had witnessed behaviour that she considered "horrendous," but which was "brushed under the carpet" by her tutor when Jordan told her about it. She escalated a later protest to Ofsted, with more tangible results, but she had resolved her own distress by leaving the nursery. As a student she was powerless to challenge and resolve the unethical behaviour, when her tutor was reluctant to believe her or to take action. In other cases, ethically correct behaviour was less obvious. Lyn, a manager at a for-profit nursery in a socially deprived area, for example, described a practitioner being told by a parent from the travelling community that her husband had been arrested for armed robbery but that "he didn't

do it, it was his brother, but we're going to keep that between us." Lyn and the practitioner "sort of argued" about what they should do, and she described how they were "just thinking about this child, you know, forget everything else." They escalated their discussion to consult the nursery owner, Kate, and then recalled the local authority safeguarding training that they had recently attended "and we were told...there's a police thing you can ring...even if you hear something that's hearsay" and on calling, anonymously, they were reassured by the response, as the police "were really grateful" for the information.

The dilemma in that situation was that Lyn and the practitioner were clearly very concerned about taking any action that would jeopardise the "particularly good relationship" that had been built up with the mother of the child, who had confided in the practitioner, but they were also clear that they couldn't ethically ignore the information, even if it was technically hearsay. The sensemaking that took place was collective, in that it involved the practitioner, the manager and the owner of the nursery, and although they began with different objectives, from protecting the parent, to "doing the right thing" legally, they had all focused on what mattered for the child. Maintaining a good relationship with a difficult family was a very high priority, but helping to prevent a wrongful conviction, and alerting the police to the possible correct identity of the offender was also a moral issue that needed to be resolved.

The Sensemaking-Intuition Model (SIM) proposed by (Sonenshein, 2007) provides a useful framework for considering the ethical sensemaking in that scenario. The sensemaking began at the point when Lyn challenged the practitioner, when she said "I don't think I should tell you what she told me" and the individual moral concern was shared and explored. The dilemma was firstly whether to tell the police, and secondly whether this could or should be done anonymously. In the first stage of the SIM, Lyn and the practitioner had together constructed the issue, and articulated the desire to do the right thing, and Lyn and Kate acted as "social actors" in helping the practitioner to test her interpretation of the situation, expanding her horizon from the relationship with the parent to the wider issue of criminal justice. Sonenshein then argues that the second stage of the SIM is the point at which individuals reach plausible interpretations and have a reaction which serves as a moral judgement, and that is the point where

the SIM usefully focuses on individuals' "affective reactions" and recognises that "affect can emerge prior to cognitions."

In the case of the identity of the armed robber, the social pressure from Lyn and Kate was clearly a factor in the practitioner's consent to informing the police, and the third stage of the SIM, explaining and justifying the action taken, is demonstrated in Lyn's account, after the event. She described it as "putting all the pieces together...we're pieces of a puzzle and where we can try and fit them we will...but that's really difficult. You know, these people are not always nice people." That final comment highlights another factor in the ethical sensemaking that wasn't articulated but was implicit in the description; it was very evident that an anonymous tip-off was felt to be safer for the individuals making the call. In this instance of ethical sensemaking, relationships were an important factor, highlighting the need to consider the implicit social processes that underpin individuals' responses to ethical issues. The relationship with the parent would have been jeopardised by an open breach of confidentiality, which could potentially have resulted in the child's removal from nursery, which is a safe place for him. The disclosure would not have been made at all if the practitioner had not already built a trusting relationship. The trusting relationships between the practitioner, her manager and the nursery owner was also apparent in the description of the debate about the right course of action, and helped to achieve a consensus. At the heart of the process there was also an explicit desire to "do the right thing."

Ethical sensemaking can also influence and improve pedagogy. The scissors episode described in 5.2.4, for example, illustrates a more effective sensemaking on the part of the observer, than of the practitioner undertaking the activity, who failed to engage in trying to understand the reason for the child's struggles. Part of the reason for this may have been the greater experience and skill of Clare, the consultant, but the ethic of care requires an attentiveness and an embodied empathy, and these are the features of Clare's observation that led to her realisation that the child was struggling with scissors because of his left-handedness. A relational pedagogy in particular has an affinity with the relational approach to caring that is the ethic of care, (Noddings, 1984) and is an integral part of sustained shared thinking (Howard et al., 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

## 9.4 Using practice theory in ethical sensemaking

### 9.4.1 Using sensemaking to interrupt, reflect and challenge ethical issues

Ethical issues in nurseries are not usually as dramatic as the armed robber scenario (9.3.5), and ethical sensemaking is more likely to be an “iterative process” (Maitlis et al., 2013, p. p239) although it is often triggered by an event or an anomaly between espoused policy and observed practice. As Maitlis et al note, emotion is a critical role in the sensemaking process, particularly, I would argue, in ethical sensemaking. Events or observed behaviour that produces negative emotions, such as the scenarios described in several of the interviews, are more likely to trigger ethical sensemaking, as individuals wrestle with the dilemma of their own response. Emotion is also likely to shape and conclude the sensemaking process; an individual that feels emotionally satisfied that they have “done the right thing” is more likely to be able to rationalise and justify their response than someone who is still feeling anxious or guilty about poor practice in their nursery, such as Acorn manager Maya describing “I’m thinking my conscience isn’t clear. I can’t do this. I really can’t do this. I need to be honest, I need to be open.”

An example of the insights into sensemaking offered by practice theory can be seen in the scissors episode, but also in Clare’s identification of other sociomaterial problems, such as children being expected to sit on chairs that were the wrong height for the tables, a lack of diversity in role play resources, or appropriate outdoor clothing. The detail of childcare practice in those examples helped to highlight the underlying ethical issues, whereby some children were disadvantaged by a lack of attention and thought on the part of practitioners. Similarly, Emily, an Acorn deputy, described the natural response of children when presented with a big red box at the Right Start nursery, “obviously, if a child sees a box, it’s full of toys, what are they going to do? They’re going to tip it up.” The children were then told off for tipping the toys out of the box, and she commented that “it upset me actually, working there” after having worked at a better nursery “and seeing how it should be done.” Emily’s response in that situation, and after being told not to cuddle children was “I didn’t listen to them...I cuddled them children and I done the best for them” and concluded “hence why I only stayed there for, I think it was like four months” and said afterwards that she felt ashamed of working there.

#### 9.4.2 Understanding the process of ethical slippage

Practice and process theory provides a useful approach in attempting to understand the ways in which ethical intentions can become embedded in practice, but even more so in the process of ethical slippage, where practice becomes less ethical by degrees, with change happening slowly and incrementally “through ‘creep’, ‘slippage’, and ‘drift’, as well as natural ‘spread’” (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 204). The examples of unethical practice at the Right Start nursery, discussed in previous chapters, illustrate what can happen when the culture of a nursery means that poor practice is not challenged. Acorn manager Tara described her discovery that children in her new nursery “were being put to sleep with their shoes on, their bibs on.” An inexperienced nursery assistant may easily make the mistake of not removing a sleeping child’s shoes, particularly when toddlers fall asleep outside of an after-lunch nap routine. In most nurseries, that would be corrected by a senior practitioner, who would explain the benefits of a child having shoe-free time, particularly when asleep, and hopefully triggering a reflection by practitioners about how it would feel to have shoes on when resting or sleeping. The bib rationale would be more straightforwardly a health and safety issue but the removing of shoes for sleeping children, although it may seem like a minor concern, is an example of an embodied ethic of care – or a failure of it if not implemented, indicating a lack of empathy and attentiveness. A practitioner who works in a nursery where children’s shoes are routinely left on (perhaps to save the effort of putting them back on when a child wakes up) may come to accept the practice; a process of ethical slippage.

#### 9.4.3 The importance of tacit knowledge, and the use of phronesis

Tacit knowledge plays a central role within ethical sensemaking, in that the focus on ethical practice is embedded within childcare practices, and is not reliant on being articulated within company policies and procedures. The caring behaviours described in the examples of ethical behaviour and practices in the research interviews demonstrate a recognition of unspoken cultures within early years settings; a common understanding within teams that caring behaviours are expected and reinforced. The nature of those caring behaviours is based on personal insights that are “essentially inarticulable” (Tsoukas, 2002). The interesting aspect of tacit knowledge in terms of sensemaking is the way in which teams develop tacit knowledge. Ethical practice is

not the preserve of individual practitioners, but within early years settings depends on a collaborative approach. Pace, for example, can only be managed collectively, if there is to be no friction between an impatient colleague and one who is engaged in a slow-paced care practice.

The distinguishing features of tacit knowledge within a practice perspective have been described as being threefold (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019); the mutual constitution and irreducibility of tacit and explicit knowledge; the inseparability of sociomaterial practices, and the importance of embodiment. Early years practice provides examples of all three; the language of practice guidance describes the actions that need to be witnessed for a full understanding; the sociomateriality that is integral to all childcare practices, and the essentially embodied nature of childcare practice. The popularity of 'Planning in the Moment' (Ephgrave, 2018) reflects the growing awareness of the need to be constantly responsive to children's attentiveness and interests and to adapt teaching and learning to changes in their environment, their lives outside of nursery and to the development of activities within nurseries. Skilled practitioners learn to sense waning interest by children and are alert to their fascination with events of the moment, whether that is a change in the weather, the discovery of a worm in the garden, or a visitor to the nursery. Recognising schemas in children's behaviour can be taught, but need to be followed through with the development of more tacit observational skills and attentiveness.

Phronesis, the concept of practical wisdom, that encapsulates the application of embodied, tacit knowledge to bewildering situations, is an integral part of ethical sensemaking. Practitioners and leaders frequently have to exercise judgement, but the decisions and actions arising from those situations are always contingent upon the context, and in early years practice, because of its embodied nature, tacit knowledge, and phronesis are both essential for ethical sensemaking. The phronesis in ethical sensemaking is also bound up with practitioners' self-identity as early years professionals, allowing them to prioritise the ethically 'right' actions over external requirements that may not be in the best interests of the children within their care.

#### 9.4.4 Embodied ethical sensemaking

Examples from the interviews of awareness of embodied ethical practice include descriptions by Acorn trainer/consultant Clare, of observing whether or not

practitioners have eye contact with infants when feeding them (5.3.6) or changing their nappy, and her comment “is the practitioner being mindful of cold hands?” Amy, a deputy manager of a nursery focused on respectful care, used the analogy of a warm bath (5.2.3) to describe how she wanted a child to be relaxed in her care, pointing out that with a pre-verbal child she would rely on “going by what their movements are and how I feel as well” to assess how a child is feeling in response to care practices. This sensemaking, that takes place within a childcare routine, is very much of “absorbed coping” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) and is part of the intuitive, embodied response by practitioners to the body language and behaviour of the children in their care. It is interpretive, in diagnosing the cause of a child’s upset, or ascertaining the level of their cognitive involvement in an activity and was described within the interviews by phrases such as “tuning in,” or being “responsive.” The account of children sleeping with shoes on is an example of a failure to use embodied ethical sensemaking.

Care has been described as being “less concerned with the adjudication of individual acts and more concerned with the maintenance of right relationships in particular contexts” (Hamington, 2001, p. 105), and this focus on relationships rather than ethical decision-making is at the heart of the concept of embodied ethical sensemaking. Hamington also argues that care “is a way of being in the world that the habits and behaviours of our body facilitate. Care consists of practices that can be developed or allowed to atrophy” (Hamington, 2004, p. 2). Hamington argued that the morality of embodied care has a telos of wellbeing and flourishing, and the examples described by interviewees of childcare practices that prioritise emotional wellbeing alongside physical care practices illustrates embodied care, which relies on instinct, or caring imagination, to use Hamington’s terminology, to determine tone of voice, physical posture and actions. Embodied knowledge begins with perception and is not passive. Noddings’s concept of “engrossment” (Noddings, 1984) describes the focus of attention on the cared-for which is an essential pre-requisite to embodied caring, and the use of caring imagination synthesises empathy and rationalising about how best to meet the needs of pre-verbal children, for example.

Embodied perception (Hamington, 2004), can help to create unconscious caring habits and habits of care in themselves can help to inculcate caring dispositions. When deputy manager Amy was interrupted in her bottle-feeding of a baby, by an Ofsted



inspector who wanted to ask her questions (7.4.2), she instinctively made the decision to refuse that request in order to give her full attention to the baby being fed. Her confidence in doing so, asking the inspector to wait until the baby had been settled, was an example of embodied ethical sensemaking, borne out of an understanding of the importance of attentiveness to the baby, and an embodied habit of how to bottle-feed in a caring way. By explaining her priorities to the inspector, she was also then engaging in ethical sensegiving, in the unusual context of a power relationship that would normally place the inspector's demands above the practitioner's view of her own priorities.

By doing so, Amy was demonstrating Hamington's concept of embodied care. She was using her caring knowledge, which she has gained from her understanding of the baby's immediate needs, which extended beyond nutritional requirements to take account of the importance of the baby's equally important need for caring attention. Amy's caring habit for feeding a baby in an attentive manner had developed from her caring knowledge and was embodied in the way she instinctively moved her body to cradle the baby, gave eye-contact and spoke gently. The third aspect of embodied care, according to Hamington, is caring imagination, and Amy's action in this example exemplified all three aspects; she empathized with the baby's needs and feelings of wanting her attention, she critically reflected on the priorities she was faced with, and took the psychosocial context into account in her decision to challenge the inspector's demand on her attention. Her sensemaking, in deciding how to respond to the inspector, was an example of involved-deliberate sensemaking, (as shown in Table 7, above) in that her care activity had been interrupted, and her reaction was both bodily and cognitive-discursive. She gestured "stop, don't disturb me" (which she demonstrated in the interview by putting her hand up), and then quietly explained to the inspector her intention to prioritise the baby's needs before responding to her questions. In doing so, she combined sensemaking and embodied care – and also engaged in ethical sensegiving by explaining her actions to the inspector. Figure 6, in the concluding chapter, sets out the combination of embodied care and sensemaking processes, but first I will further explain the ways in which sensemaking applies to early years practice.

## 9.5 Ethical sensemaking in practice

### 9.5.1 Triggers for ethical sensemaking

At a macro level, the triggers for ethical sensemaking might be the dilemmas facing politicians who are tasked with decision-making about the most effective way to support policy initiatives dealing with early education priorities, encouraging working families and safeguarding children in need, and in how to balance this with the need to restrict expenditure. As the funding issue is associated with complex stakeholder interests, the communication of the rationale for funding decisions can be seen as an example of leader sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Leaders and practitioners within early years settings are then faced with a sensemaking task to understand the rationale and ethical sensemaking is the process of aligning policy directives with individual moral codes and beliefs.

Triggers for ethical sensemaking within childcare settings are likely to be incidents such as parental complaints, challenges from colleagues or other early years professionals, or reflections arising from training. The account by Acorn manager Tara, for example, (in 5.3.5) about her challenging the way attempts were being made to feed a toddler, despite him being upset, revealed a lack of understanding on the part of the practitioner, who was under the impression that she was following normal practice by keeping the toddler in the highchair. Her question “are we allowed to do that?” in response to Tara’s instruction to take the child out of the chair, comfort him, and feed him on her lap if necessary, clearly triggered an ethical sensemaking episode for that practitioner, who was struggling to reconcile the apparent disregard of normal practice by a new manager. Tara followed up with an example of sensegiving, with her explanation of the rationale behind her instruction, and a more general directive to “do whatever’s right for the child.”

Other sensemaking episodes included the dilemmas of practitioners trying to balance parental wishes or instructions with what they felt, as professionals, was in the child’s best interests. Emily, for example, described the dilemma of whether to wake a child up after ten minutes, in line with a parent’s stipulation; “Do we do the best for the child or do we do the best for the parent?” and she relates a compromise of letting the child sleep a little longer and then explaining to the parent that the child “wouldn’t wake up” until he’d been allowed to sleep a little longer. There was no doubt in Emily’s mind

about the correct course of action for the child; “you and I both know that children need to be able to sleep for their brain to develop” and she added that she would then try to give her “professional opinion” to the parent about why she felt the child needed to be allowed to sleep. Similar dilemmas, of balancing parental requests with children’s needs, were voiced by other interviewees, including those, like the concerned father described by Cara, about the role of a male practitioner (6.3.1), and others where parents, usually fathers, complained about boys being allowed to dress up as ballerinas or Elsa from Frozen. In such cases the confidence in the practitioners’ views about the need to challenge such gender stereotypes reflected the strength of a nursery community of practice. In cases of ethical sensemaking, the consensus between colleagues about what was “right for the child” enabled practitioners to have confidence in their professional knowledge, and to assert their professional identity .

The Covid-19 lockdown period also created triggers for ethical sensemaking at an organisational level, facing the dilemmas of how to protect staff and children from the risk of the virus, while provide ongoing care for vulnerable children and those of key workers. Further ethical dilemmas included the need to minimise the risk of infection at drop-off and pick-up times without causing distress to the confused infants and toddlers, particularly if masks prevented easy recognition of the adults who were to care for them. Such episodes were beginning to take place during my research, and it was too soon for interviews to be able to reflect on the consequences of the operational decisions made, although, as the online discussion about post-Covid routines showed in chapter six, there were lively debates about what might be the most ethical solution.

### 9.5.2 Ethical sensemaking as organisational learning

Ethical sensemaking, I suggest, can help to balance the potential conflict between organisational drivers for success and practitioners’ concern for excellence; both are important, but need to be balanced. One way in which nursery managers can engage in sensemaking to embed ethical practices can be seen in the concept of “social poetics,” described as “relationally responsive dialogue” in which “meaning may be created between people, both in the moment of speech and after the moment in reflection upon it” (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Learning as reflective/reflexive dialogue involves “reworking learning from a cognitive to a dialogical process (Cunliffe, 2002) in which managers and practitioners may be instinctively struck by a situation in an

embodied, tacit way and then make sense of, rationalise, and agree responses through dialogue with colleagues, and through further reflection.

Sensemaking may not be concerning ethical behaviour, but in the early years sector a practitioner's concerns about whether an action is ethical will trigger a sensemaking process in which they consider whether the concern needs to be addressed organisationally, and the ensuing dialogue is an example of what Cunliffe describes as a change in focus "from a purely theoretical *talking about practice* as an uninvolved observer (outside-in), to include a dialogical, responsive *talking-in-practice* (inside-out)." Such dialogical opportunities for learning can be seen in the vignettes described by interviewees, such as the account by Acorn manager Kim when she described learning from a previous line manager who demonstrated and then discussed how to involve children in everyday tasks such as finding boots or tissues. That sensegiving by her colleague, enabled Kim to extend her understanding of appropriate activities for children, changing her perception of what had previously been viewed as a task, separate to her role as an educator, to an activity that she could involve children in, to jointly problem-solve the issue of missing objects. Kim's lively account of the experience also provided an insight into her new-found talent for making mundane tasks an example of sustained shared thinking (Howard et al., 2018; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

### 9.5.3 The role of sensegiving in encouraging ethical sensemaking

Sensegiving has been described as a critical behaviour for leaders wishing to implement strategic change, with (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) proposing a four-stage model which progresses from sensemaking and then sensegiving by a CEO, followed by the same sequence for stakeholders. Although sensegiving is not discussed in any detail by (Weick, 1995, 2012), I would suggest that a lack of sensegiving by key members of the team of firefighters in the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 1993) was a contributory factor; the experienced foreman lit an escape fire and told his colleagues to join him, but failed to explain the rationale that might have helped them to make sense of the instruction.

Within a nursery situation, and in the context of sensemaking as 'absorbed coping' (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), there are less likely to be key decisions and actions to be analysed, but several interviewees commented on the need to explain the rationale

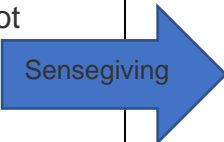
behind practices to new and inexperienced practitioners, as in the example described by deputy manager Amy who was “blown away” by her induction into the respectful care approach, saying that she used to “go behind a child and just wipe their nose” and hadn’t ever considered the need for more sensitivity when undertaking such care practices, which she now considers “just seems so obvious.” Nose-wiping techniques are a very small example of how an ethic of care may or may not be embedded in nursery practices, but Amy’s example demonstrates the need for practitioners to understand the impact of physical actions in a more reflective way, in order to implement a change of habit. The blue arrow in the model of ethical sensegiving in table seven, below, shows the impact of sensegiving by her nursery manager, transforming Amy’s practice to be more consistently sensitive.

The practice of sensegiving is also illustrated in the interview with Amy’s manager, Cara, who described in great detail how one of her colleagues provided sensitive support to a child who was struggling to regulate her emotions, and how her colleague K observed the situation with a new practitioner and “was able to articulate that to a new member of staff to showcase how this competent practitioner was supporting the child” and Cara’s view was that such “practice on the floor” was “a really crucial skill” in embedding child-centred practice in the nursery. My perception was that there were high levels of leader sensegiving within the nursery, which led to a successfully embedded culture of high-quality childcare and early education. In other interviews, practitioners described their personal commitment to ethical practice in settings that were not always supportive of it. Low levels of ethical sensegiving, from nurseries such as the Right Start nursery, for example, led to poor practice when practitioners also had low ethical awareness, and fragmentary pockets of ethical practice when individual practitioners attempted to maintain their own ethical standards. Sensegiving as a process could be identified in the descriptions of managers and senior practitioners who were training or supervising others, but was not something that was described by any practitioners who were not in positions of power or influence. Their individual sensemaking of the nursery culture and practices led either to an acceptance and tolerance of poor practice, a narrowing of focus onto ensuring that their personal practice was ethical, or, in several cases, a move to a different nursery that was perceived to have higher standards.

Sensegiving clearly resonates with the values-articulation work discussed in chapter seven (Gehman et al., 2013). A common way of training practitioners in early years settings is by role-modelling the desired behaviours and skills, but a more discursive approach is required for communicating an understanding of why a practice should be done in a certain way. The risk otherwise is that a nappy changing routine, done sensitively and ethically, might be interpreted by the observer as unnecessarily time-consuming, if it is not accompanied by the sensegiving or values-articulation to explain the importance of a relational, attentive approach, thus falling into the lower right quadrant of table seven, of fragmented ethical sensemaking.

*Table 8 Ethical Sensegiving Model, based on Model of Organisational Sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005, p. 32)*

	Low ethical awareness & sensegiving from practitioner	High ethical awareness & sensegiving from practitioner
High ethical commitment and sensegiving from leader/org	<p><b>Restricted ethical sensemaking</b></p> <p>Policies in place but not consistently practiced or embedded – risk of ethical slippage</p>	<p><b>Embedded ethical sensemaking</b></p> <p>Policies and internally consistent practice – an embedded ethic of care</p>
Low ethical sensegiving from leader/org	<p><b>Minimal ethical sensemaking</b></p> <p>Carewashing only in policies and likelihood of poor practice becoming embedded</p>	<p><b>Fragmented ethical sensemaking</b></p> <p>Pockets of ethical practice, not consistent, or supported by organisational culture</p>



#### 9.5.4 The role of ethical sensemaking in embedding ethical practices

Ethical sensemaking in early years settings takes place when practitioners or managers are attempting to reconcile the reality of ongoing practice situations with an idea of what ethical childcare practice would ideally be. When leaders and practitioners have an aligned vision and understanding of effective techniques, as in the nursery managed by Cara, the sensemaking is focused on individual circumstances and collaborative discussions about how ethical practices can be embedded with new practitioners, and how parents' understanding of children's developmental needs can also be enhanced. This kind of embedded sensemaking is the ideal focus, and as table seven, above, shows, it can be achieved when high levels of sensegiving by leaders successfully influence the practice of less aware practitioners. In contrast, when there are low levels of ethical awareness and sensegiving by both leaders and practitioners, there is an increased likelihood of poor ethical practice, with a lack of sensitivity and awareness, and in ethics of care terminology, a lack of attentiveness. The fourth category, whereby individuals are ethically-minded, with personal high standards of practice, but where this is not supported or encouraged by leaders or organisational circumstances, is where ethical sensemaking results in tolerance or rejection of an organisation.

This is, of course, a simplification of real-life situations, which may, for example, include individual teams within nurseries that have their own high or low ethical awareness, and there may also be individual variations in the quality of practice, whereby some care practices are carried out sensitively, but other areas of practice are given less consideration or attention. Sensemaking is closely aligned with reflexivity, and reflective practice is encouraged in all early years training modules and in the communities of practice described in earlier chapters. The specific feature of ethical sensemaking that is not covered by reflective practice, is the awareness and attentiveness to the wider concerns of accessibility and inclusion, which interviewees commented on in terms of whether children with additional needs, for example, were accepted at a nursery, but also internally, to the embodied nature of sensitive childcare practice. Amy's description of realising the lack of sensitivity in her usual nose-wiping technique illustrated a challenge to a habitual childcare practice, and Cara's

description of using cold wet flannels in contrast to warm wet flannels to clean hands in a staff training session both illustrate the impact of a sensegiving episode. The embodied and sensory nature of both situations reinforces the sensory aspect of sensemaking, which can be cognitive, but can also be communicated in more physically embodied ways. Sensemaking can consist of a heightened awareness, as in Maya’s realisation that a child was reacting badly to the overly bright colours in a nursery environment (5.2.4). This attentiveness to visual clues, and bodily sensations, such as sleeping with shoes on, or the feel of cold hands at a nappy change, as well as a sensitivity to inequalities and vulnerabilities is why sensemaking sits comfortably within an ethics of care framework. Figure five, below, summarises the positive influences that can facilitate ethical childcare practice.

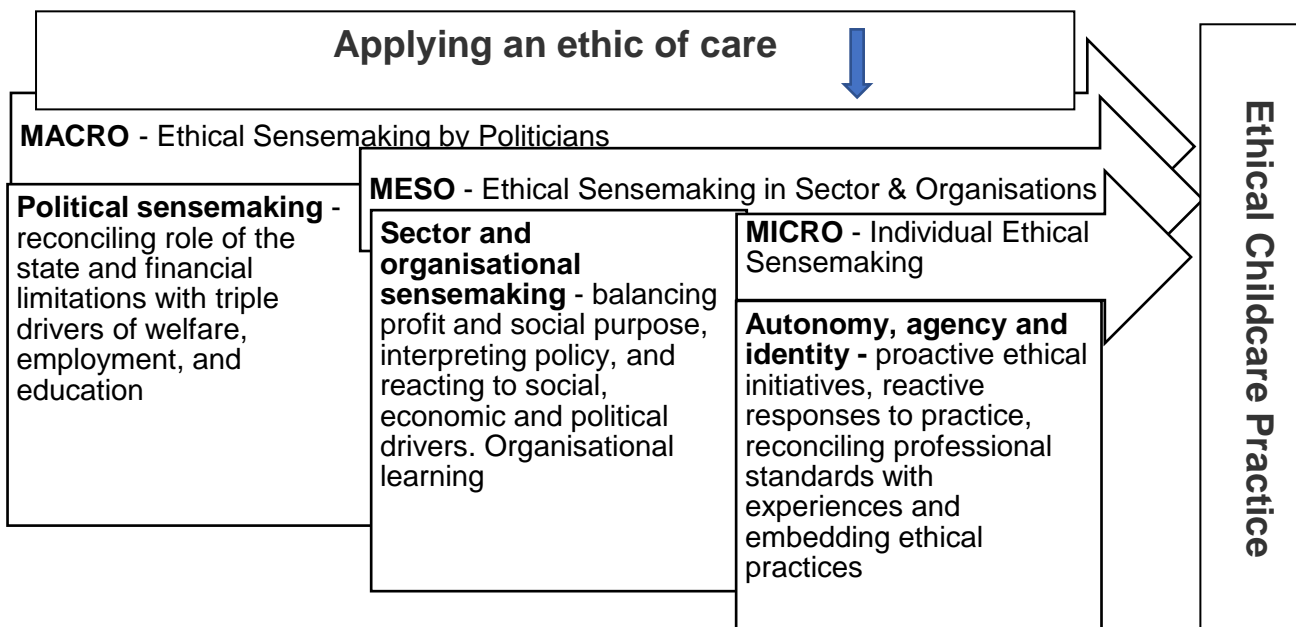


Figure 5 Ethical Sensemaking, from Macro to Micro

## 9.6 My research journey as ethical sensemaking

### 9.6.1 The impact of care ethics and practice theory on my thinking

My personal research journey was in many ways a process of ethical sensemaking, and it is often a feature of interpretive sensemaking that researchers scrutinise their own sensemaking (Welch et al., 2011). I was initially attempting to understand the rationale behind government policies that, to my mind, had unethical consequences. I



then broadened my focus to try and unpick the factors that might mitigate the impact of macro influences, beginning with organisational features. My increasing awareness of the full scope of the ethics of care drew my attention to exploitative aspects within the sector, and the interviews very quickly disabused me of any ideas of generalising about those organisational features being causal antecedents of ethical practice. Practice theory heightened my awareness of the micro practices that either embedded or ignored ethical intentions, and I became increasingly interested in the phenomenological analysis of childcare practices. I also realised that descriptions of specific details of practices were interesting because of the way in which they demonstrated the intent and purpose of the practitioners, and how this was in turn influenced by colleagues, by managers, and by their own personal background and training. The culmination of my journey was in the discovery of sensemaking, which seemed to me to encapsulate the combination of the ethics of care with practice theory, but also captured my own personal research journey of discovery, which is ongoing.

On reflection, I also realised that sensemaking took place within the research interviews themselves. I mentioned (in 4.7.1) that several interviewees seemed to stop and think before answering, and that comments about 'not having thought about that before' suggested that they were then giving the issue some thought. One particular instance was when nursery manager Kim reflected on some of her early experiences (described in 8.2.2), using phrases such as "looking at it now...", "when I think back on it", "I didn't know how sad I was until I left that place...I didn't realise how miserable I was." After moving from a poorly run nursery to an excellent local authority nursery, Kim then moved to a nursery attached to a private school, and quickly challenged the poor practice there. When asked whether she would have recognised the practice as poor if she hadn't had experience of high quality in her previous setting, she said "ooh", paused for a while, clearly thinking, and then said, "I worry about might have happened, actually." She then reflected on how her confidence in recognising good practice depended on having had the experience in the 'good' nursery, although she also commented that her training and personal ethical nature would have ensured she herself cared in a way that would be consistent with caring "as if it was my child." Her sensemaking was retrospective, enabling her to understand how her prior experiences had affected her ability to recognise, and her confidence to challenge, poor practice.

### 9.6.2 The exploration of other disciplines

One of the surprises for me, very early in the research project, was the realisation of how far my topic extended into a wide variety of disciplines. My feet were firmly planted in the School of Business and Management, and I had anticipated the crossover into Early Years Education, but I very soon found myself grappling with issues within the fields of philosophy, ethics, sociology, politics, feminism, psychology, neuroscience, economics and public policy. I consider this to be a strength rather than a weakness, as this is my first major research project, and I hope to follow through with some of those avenues of potential further exploration. My list of sources grew continuously over the six-year period of my studies, and after severe pruning still numbered over 1000, with approximately half of these comprising journal articles. The Journal of Business Ethics was my most cited journal, with 39 articles in my list of sources, followed by 23 articles from the Academy of Management Review, and 21 from Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. I used articles from 198 journals in total, across a range of disciplines, but with a clear emphasis on the field of organisation studies, management, ethics and social responsibility.

The extent of this range is partly due to the way in which both the ethics of care and practice theory can be applied to different types of organisation and situations. It is also a reflection of the way in which early childhood as a subject of interest straddles numerous fields, from the perspective of the child, the parents, the carers, politicians and policy makers. The original intent in framing the research discussion was to consider each level in turn, from macro down to micro, but although I used that structure in chapters four and five, beginning the findings chapter with the individual perspective and zooming out to the macro level, and then zooming back in for the first part of the analysis, I then used the practice perspective to consider the range of influences on childcare provision, and in doing so spanned the levels and different disciplines, but hopefully finding some useful insights in the process of ethical sensemaking, seeking to understand the application of ethical intentions in the real world.

### 9.6.3 Critical social science and reflexivity

Ethical sensemaking, for me, sits within the realm of critical social science, and is compatible with the concept of phronesis, which is, as I have argued, important in

embedding ethical childcare practice in early years settings. The practical wisdom of *phronesis*, as described by (Sayer, 2011), is the product of successful ethical sensemaking; it is concerned with particular people and situations, is practical, embodied and intuitive and, crucially, has an ethical dimension. Sayer argues that “people are ethical to the extent that they are concerned about how to act with regard to others’ well-being as well as their own, precisely because they know they can easily act in ways that cause harm” (Sayer, 2011, p. 145). A recent example from my own experience (diary 16/09/22) was the decision of a child’s key person to stay beyond her normal hours to care for a child who had not been collected, thereby providing continuity of care from a familiar adult. The nursery manager and another senior colleague stayed to liaise with the local authority social care team, when none of the child’s family could be contacted, but the key person recognised the importance of her relationship with the child, and volunteered to stay too, to minimise the disruption and upset for the child. The discussion that took place between colleagues to decide on the course of action was ethical sensemaking that took account of the child’s physical and emotional wellbeing, but also the logistics of the situation and the wellbeing of the staff – the key person was not ‘required’ to stay, but volunteered. It was ‘involved-deliberate’ (Table 7) sensemaking on the part of the immediate team, but ‘detached-deliberate’ on the part of the senior colleague and myself who was not initially involved at a direct level, other than on the phone, but who then decided to go to the nursery to provide direct support.

The reflexivity of my research journey also involved ethical sensemaking, at the representational level, in selecting the vignettes and illustrative examples from the interviews for analysis. Several interviewees narrated details that might have jeopardised confidentiality, even with changes of names, and occasionally comments were made with a specific aside of ‘but you can’t use that!’ The reflexivity was not required for the editing out of such comments, but for a consideration of how and whether such details affected my analysis. I was aware of a contextual set of wider issues, relating to unethical practice, for example, than I could quote, which may have strengthened my negative view of the practice examples that I could use. Fortunately, I did not face any ethical dilemmas about whether to refer such cases to external agencies, as none were current, and none directly involved safeguarding, other than episodes in which interviewees recounted having reported such incidents. Contextual

reflexivity also allowed me to ascertain the support being given to practitioners who had been in difficult emotional situations. Most of the narratives that included potentially distressing episodes took place at two nurseries where I was able to gain an impression of the relationship between colleagues, and the emotional support I witnessed, in reassuring words and hugs, also reassured me as a researcher that I had not caused distress by encouraging such disclosures. The impression I had was that the reverse was true, in that their experience was of gaining validation and recognition of their professional identities in my interest in, and attention to, their stories.

Discovering the concept of embodied ethical sensemaking could also be seen as a kind of sensemaking, with its origins in my increased awareness of embodied care, through reflecting on the scenarios that had made the biggest impact on me from the research data. When I then viewed them through the perspective of practice theory, and the wider contextual aspects, beyond agential application of care ethics, I recognised the importance of fully appreciating the combination of other factors, such as sociomateriality (how the provision of a comfortable seat might facilitate embodied care, in a more relaxed and attentive infant feeding experience, for example).

## 9.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the concept of ethical sensemaking and sensegiving. I then applied the ethics of care to sensemaking, using practical examples to illustrate the relevance within this research area. Sensemaking is particularly helpful in being applicable at macro, meso and micro levels, and I then used practice theory to further explore how ethical sensemaking can illuminate the ethical aspects of sensemaking processes. The importance of tacit knowledge and the embodied nature of caring practices both fit with a sensemaking perspective, and in particular the focus on how unethical practices lead to ethical slippage. I concluded this chapter with a look at my own research journey through a sensemaking lens, which helps to explain my choice of theoretical models. I believe that ethical sensemaking offers an opportunity to use learning in action to embed ethical practice in early years settings, and I will now draw the findings from all nine chapters together in a concluding chapter.

## Chapter 10 – Conclusion

### 10.1 Introduction

My research has demonstrated that childcare in the UK is not consistently ethical, if my interpretation of ethical childcare is accepted, and if my research sample in England is representative of the four nations in the UK. There is a great deal of high-quality provision, but my research suggests that there are still examples of poor practice which has evaded the scrutiny of Ofsted, and which is either not apparent to, or is tolerated by, practitioners and parents. Access to high-quality childcare is also easier for families with higher incomes and is particularly hard to access for children with additional needs. Early years education is valorised over childcare practices, and the workforce is struggling with low morale, poor pay and conditions, and a lack of professional recognition. My research has explored the factors which either facilitate or hinder the provision of ethical childcare, and has considered the macro, meso and micro levels of influence, using the ethics of care and practice theory.

In this concluding chapter I will summarise the findings of my research and the contribution I believe it will make to both theory and practice. I will consider the degree to which the ethics of care provides insights for the early years sector, and the ways in which practice theory illuminates the factors that influence the provision of ethical childcare. I will discuss the extent to which ethical sensemaking offers a new perspective in this area, and after outlining the limitations of this research, I will conclude by suggesting opportunities for further research.

### 10.2 Contribution to theory

#### 10.2.1 The ethics of care and the early years sector

From a theoretical perspective, the value of a care ethics perspective being applied to the early years sector is, firstly, that it spans the macro to the micro level, providing an ethical lens through which to examine the degree to which national, sector and organisational policies take into account the impact on children. Placing care at the heart of an evaluative framework exposes the unintended consequences of decisions that have been made without care-full consideration. Secondly, an understanding of the development of care ethics, and the influence of maternalism, helps to explain why childcare as a practice has always been, and continues to be, undervalued. It also

highlights the exploitation, emotional labour, and neglect of the early years workforce, and the inadequacy of government policies in supporting women to re-enter the workforce after maternity leave. At a phenomenological level, the ethics of care also demonstrates the crucial importance of nurturing care and attentiveness in the early years sector, and provides a deeper understanding of the tacit, embodied nature of early years practice.

The example given by Amy in 7.4.2 of the difference between nurseries that ‘Duplo drop’ in comparison to her current nursery, where practitioners exhibited “passion” for their “completely child-centred” approach, illustrates one of the key benefits of an ethics of care approach within an early years setting. The nursery’s ethos was explicitly one of respectful care, but the attentiveness and engrossment illustrated in both Cara’s and Amy’s accounts of practice (for example, the warm bath scenario in 5.2.3, and the sleep routine in 8.4.3) are, in my opinion, examples of an implementation of an ethic of care.

#### 10.2.2 Practice theory and the early years sector

Secondly, I have demonstrated the relevance of practice theory to the early years sector, exploring how purpose influences policy, how policies influence practice, and how the purposive practical coping within early years settings can influence strategy formation in organisations. The routinisation of childcare practices and the ways in which nurseries manage their staff teams, in different types of nurseries, has provided an insight into the extent to which individuals have limited, but effective, agency. Practice theory has provided a way of exploring the embodied nature of ethical childcare practice, with a focus on sociomateriality, sensory and emotional aspects of childcare, and the intuitive, tacit nature of knowledge and skills within early years practice. Caring knowledge, empathy and habits can be conveyed through apprenticeship-style legitimate peripheral participation, and communities of practice can play an important role in embedding ethical practice. Unconscious caring habits can be developed by the encouragement of childcare routines which focus on the needs of individual children. The concept of phronesis has proved particularly useful in understanding the application of theory to practice, and the process of sensemaking and sensegiving can be developed to ensure that ethical sensemaking takes place within early years provision.

### 10.2.3 Ethical sensemaking and the early years sector

Thirdly, ethical sensemaking, as a relatively new theoretical concept, extends sensemaking theory and within the context of the early years sector can be used to combine practice theory with the ethics of care to help understand the nature of ethical childcare practice, and the ways in which this can be hindered or facilitated. Ethical sensemaking provides a way to reflect on past and current practice and situations at micro and meso levels, and the key finding of the research is the way in which practice is influenced by the process of highlighting the ethical aspects of childcare provision.

As shown in figure five, in the previous chapter, ethical sensemaking can take place at a macro level, with politicians and policy makers attempting to achieve their triple drivers of social mobility, supporting working families, and improving educational outcomes but with the added challenge of working with restricted financial resources. The sensemaking processes can only be glimpsed by those outside the government, but those glimpses have shown how well-meaning policy makers use a process of balancing different priorities to achieve workable policies, with varying degrees of success. They then engage in sensegiving to communicate their rationale to local authorities, and through them to early years providers.

Within the early years sector, and organisations within the sector, there is further ethical sensemaking, with leaders and managers attempting to balance their priorities, whether those are financial or pro-social, and with very different circumstances. Zooming into the practitioner level requires a more phenomenological lens, and ethical sensemaking becomes more about absorbed coping, with episodes of more involved and/or detachment (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Ethical sensegiving is undertaken by those who are in positions of either promoting ethical practices or challenging unethical practices, and the degree to which ethical practice is embedded will depend on whether there are high levels of ethical sensemaking within the organisation. This in turn depends on the levels of both leader and practitioner sensegiving, as shown in table seven, in the previous chapter, based on Maitlis's model (2005).

### 10.2.4 Unique insights from combining perspectives

In addition to the insights described above, I believe that the primary theoretical contribution lies in combining these perspectives in the practice of childcare. The

nature of ethical childcare is best understood by using the ethics of care perspective, but the way in which this can be embedded in an organisation's culture and conveyed to new entrants to the early years sector is through a focus on practice at micro and meso levels, and by making individuals aware of the importance of tacit knowledge, sensory awareness and embodied habits. Individual insights resulting from episodes or instances of ethical sensemaking can influence organisational policy and strategy and highlight the role of an organisation's purpose, thus reversing the initial trajectory of purpose to policy to practice. Ethical sensemaking can be strengthened by recognising the ways in which it can be embodied, and I therefore propose a model for embodied ethical sensemaking.

In figure six, below, I combine elements of both sensemaking models outlined above, in tables seven and eight, and apply Hamington's concept of embodied care, and its three components, using examples from the research data. I begin with a predisposition for ethical care, as exemplified in the interview data which consistently talked of a 'right' way, and of putting children's needs first. The first component of embodied care is caring knowledge, which often stems from an ethical predisposition, and is likely to be influenced by early experiences of being cared for, and including later experiences of caring for others, both within childcare and in lived experiences outside of the workplace. Training and professional development contributes to this knowledge, particularly in terms of understanding child development, attachment theory, and awareness of the impact of stress and distress. Caring knowledge is then habituated in care activities, and caring habits are a form of caring knowledge.

Caring habits in early years practice mean that practitioners do not stop to think about their bodily positioning, tone of voice, and attentiveness to the children in their care. Caring habits necessarily include the attentiveness of Noddings's concept of engrossment, and the empathic intersubjectivity between practitioners and children becomes instinctive. At this point there is a correlation with the 'absorbed coping' of sensemaking that takes place continually in nurseries, in the responses made to changes in children's emotional wellbeing, and in the skilful implementation of care practices and daily routines. Although primarily determined by individual agency, caring habits and the sensemaking of absorbed coping are influenced by organisational features which may determine staffing levels, consistency in staff



deployment, and whether leaders and colleagues engage in ethical sensegiving. Embodied caring habits also allow practitioners and managers to challenge instances of unethical practice, such as Tara's response to the upset baby in a highchair (5.3.5), which illustrated the 'involved deliberate' type of sensemaking in table seven.

Caring imagination is the aspect of embodied care that moves beyond direct primary experience, and it relies more heavily on empathy and motivational displacement. Critical reflection is an essential ingredient in caring imagination, according to Hamington, and this is also a factor in 'detached-deliberate' sensemaking. The psychosocial context is important here too, with the influence of colleagues and social pressures inevitably affecting the sensemaking process. Sandberg and Tsoukas describe such sensemaking as primarily cognitive-discursive, but the dilemma of the parent involved in an armed robbery (9.3.5) was not a simple moral decision. The practitioner had "a particularly good relationship" with the mother, who was part of a traveller community that "don't tell outside people what goes on within their group" so the risk of jeopardising that trust between parent and practitioner, and the potential impact on the child's care, had an emotional element that went beyond moral rationalising. Similarly, the debate about drop-offs and collections post-Covid (6.2.2) that exemplified the theoretical detachment type of sensemaking was not purely analytical, as the participants displayed heightened emotions in the expression of their views.

Recognising the embodiment of ethical intentions, into an individual's caring knowledge, caring habits, and caring imagination is helpful in understanding the difference between childcare practices that could be described as acaring (Hamington, 2004) and care practices that are warm, sensitive and thoughtful.

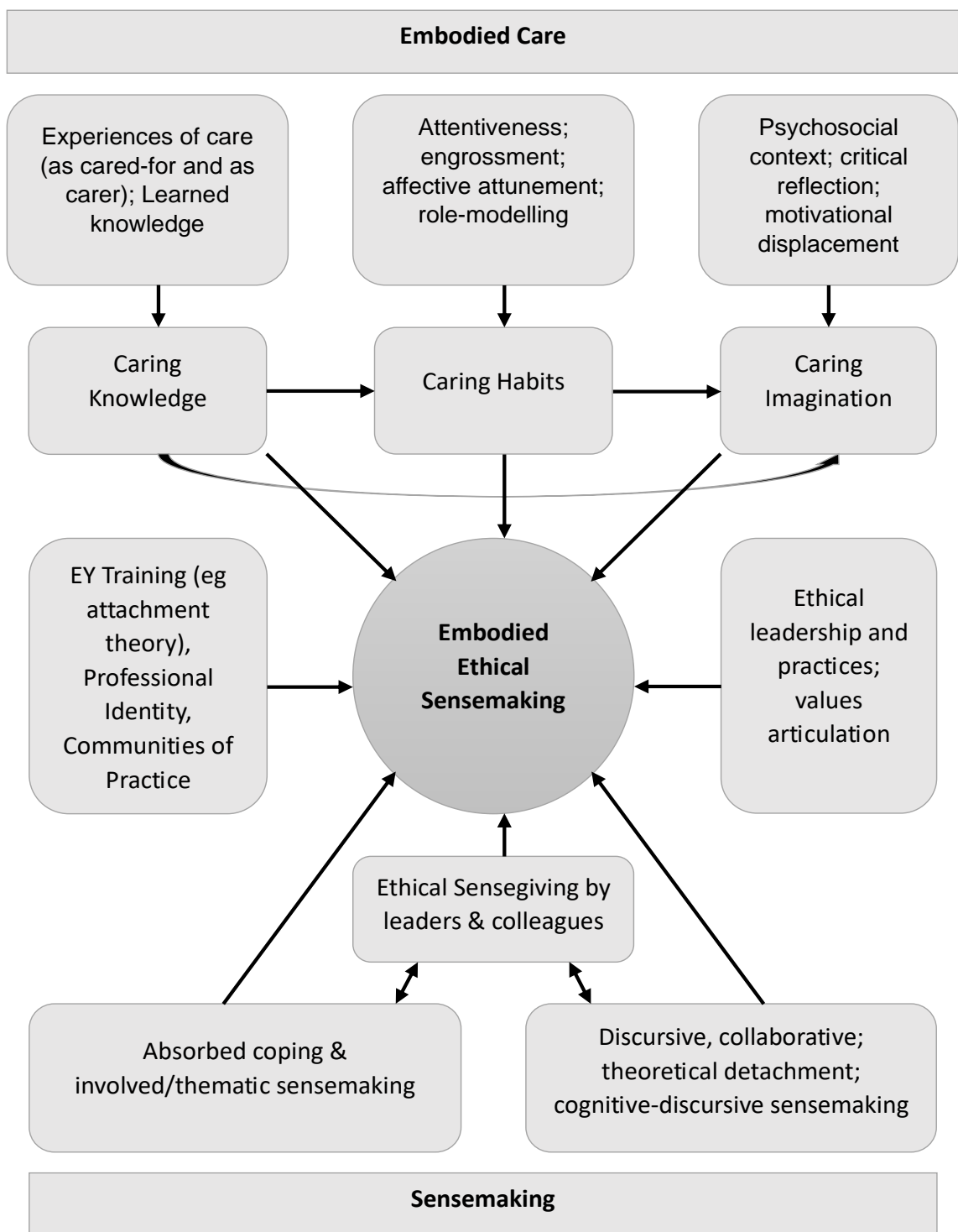


Figure 6 Embodied Ethical Sensemaking in Early Years Practice

### 10.3 Contribution to practice

#### 10.3.1 Applying the ethics of care in early years

The practical contribution of this research is also threefold, and firstly, from using the ethics of care, is the opportunity to use care ethics as a central focus in the training and professional development of early years practitioners. This would ensure their understanding of both the theoretical background to childcare practice, but also of the phenomenological experience of childcare for children and practitioners, and a greater awareness of the impact of sensory, sociomaterial aspects of childcare, and the wider application of care ethics. I would argue, with Ruddick, that “the generalization of attentive love to *all* children requires politics. The most enlightened thought is not enough.” (Ruddick, 1980, p. 361). The ethics of care provides a well-established framework for policy-making as well as for practical training, and a heightened awareness of care ethics would encourage practitioners to challenge poor ethical practice and carewashing. The focus on care would also help to rebalance and reconcile the education-care divide, and to engender caring habits, which then embed caring values in early years settings.

#### 10.3.2 Applying practice theory and sensemaking in early years

Secondly, there are practical benefits to be achieved from the insights of practice theory, in drawing attention to the taken-for-granted aspects of practices and routines, and improving the understanding of the importance and impact of tacit knowledge and embodied ethics. Externally imposed events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, often trigger reviews of practices but a more proactive approach would encourage reflective practice, and phronesis. An understanding of the ways in which routines are created, embedded and sustained would help leaders and managers to implement improvements and to anticipate barriers and difficulties. Similarly, encouraging sensemaking as an activity could help to resist a blame culture from developing – and especially if ethical sensemaking is encouraged.

#### 10.3.3 Applying embodied ethical sensemaking in early years

Finally, the task of making sense of confusing and challenging situations in early years settings is usually left to individuals, but a greater awareness of ethical sensemaking would focus attention on the ethical aspects of decisions and practices. Similarly, sensegiving is already part of a leadership role, and a focus on ethical sensegiving

would ensure that leaders and managers pay more attention to the ethical implications and consequences of their actions and decisions, and help them to articulate values. A greater understanding of the embodied nature of caring knowledge, habits and imagination would increase the awareness of practitioners to the impact of their actions, and the use of more sensory experiences in training and development, such as the warm flannel example in 8.3.2. would help to heighten that sensory awareness.

Ethical sensegiving and ethical sensemaking shines a light on aspects of practice which are too often taken-for-granted and reinforces the importance of reflective practice and learning in early years. Encouraging reflective discourse between practitioners would strengthen sensegiving and sensemaking processes within settings, and would help to sensitise practitioners to the impact of actions, noises, décor and adults' body language on the children in their care.

#### 10.3.4 Recommendations for policy-makers

The above recommendations are essentially about improvements to the training and development of the early years workforce, both in initial training, whether on apprenticeships or at colleges, and in ongoing professional development within settings. I would add a further recommendation for policy makers, in that I believe there is currently inadequate recognition of the importance of caring practices. When Ofsted took over the inspections previously done by social services inspectors, who focused more heavily on care practices than education, education became the primary concern for inspections of early years settings. The inspection framework (Ofsted, 2021a) provides descriptors for the quality of education, but 'care' is not mentioned. Inspectors make judgements on 'behaviour and attitudes' and 'personal development' but there is no recognition of the impact of caring practices other than a reference to the need to promote children's emotional security and wellbeing. The EYFS framework (Department for Education, 2021b) has four overarching principles which emphasise learning and development and the need for children to learn "to be strong and independent" with no recognition of the need for sensitive, responsive care for very young infants and toddlers. I suggest that there is a need for official recognition and promotion of the non-statutory guidance (Early Years Coalition, 2021, p. 13) which recognises the need to pay "as much attention to children's care as it does to play and learning."

This recommendation is in fact a plea for policy makers to listen to the practitioners within the sector. The non-statutory guidance was the result of a collaboration of 16 early years organisations and its purpose included “reaffirming core principles” of placing “the child at the centre of practice.” It asserts the requirement for thoughtful organisation and respectful interactions in respectful caregiving and need to plan for and to reflect on physical care practices. The omission of this recognition in the statutory guidance needs to be addressed, and greater attention by inspectors on the importance of child-centred, respectful care practices would greatly help to facilitate the embedding of high-quality, inclusive childcare practices in early years settings, as well as supporting the professional development of the early years workforce and thereby enhance the wellbeing of young children and their families that need to use childcare provision.

## 10.4 The limitations of this research

### 10.4.1 Data limitations

The data for the research spans interviews, observation, diary entries, and a range of documents, both online and printed. It is, nevertheless, limited in its geographical scope, only covering English early years settings, and limited in the number and type of organisations. A broad cross-section was achieved, but it was not a numerically balanced selection, and the self-selection of interviewees inevitably limited the sample to those with an interest in ethical practice, and the data is therefore not to be taken as a representative example of the early years workforce. Policy-makers were also not included in the interviews, except indirectly, and figures at senior levels within the sector and organisations were largely those with whom I already had a social or working relationship. I did not have access to board level discussions, other than within my own organisation, and most interviews were carried out with individuals, whose evidence could then not be challenged by colleagues. The other limitation in the data was temporal, in that it is a rapidly changing sector, and the research material, though frequently updated, only reflects a relatively short period of time, and there is no longitudinal analysis of how ethical practice improved or diminished within organisations.

Perhaps most significantly, for a research project using practice theory, there is very limited use of observations within the data. Observations of children, particularly

experiencing intimate care routines, is ethically problematic, though not impossible, and observational methods would inevitably focus on practice, rather than the rationale and motivations for carrying out practices in a particular way. This made interviews a more logical choice, but it would perhaps provide a depth of phenomenological evidence if more direct observational data had been included.

#### 10.4.2 Limitations of the researcher's dual role

Although I would argue that my ongoing role within the sector and within an active organisation gave me a unique insight into the issues, from both a researcher's and a stakeholder's perspective, there is inevitably an issue of personal bias. I have attempted to be transparent and reflexive about the way in which my interpretation of data is influenced by my position as a feminist and advocate of social justice, but the involvement of additional researchers (not possible in a doctoral research project) would have been beneficial to challenge and develop my findings.

### 10.5 Further research opportunities

#### 10.5.1 Further research using the ethics of care

Ethnographic and phenomenological research into the way in which the ethics of care is embedded within childcare practice would provide complementary evidence, and would extend the findings into a more detailed analysis of a range of childcare practices. In particular, it would be helpful to evaluate the impact of training for early years practitioners about the ethics of care and how it can be embedded in practice. The impact of organisational types and sizes could also be explored more thoroughly with a much larger data set and the use of mixed methods, to include some quantitative analysis.

#### 10.5.2 Further research using practice theory

Observational data on childcare practices could provide an insight into the specific ways in which childcare practices are routinised, and how ethical elements are either embedded or discarded. A deeper exploration of the sociomaterial elements of ethical childcare practice would be of practical use in enhancing the understanding of their impact on children and practitioners. Similarly, the ways in which situated learning takes place within communities of practice within the early years sector could have

very practical benefits, as well as contributing to the understanding of organisational learning. In relation to sensemaking, practice theory has the potential to highlight the dynamic nature of the sensemaking process, avoiding the temptation to focus on a fixed and definitive outcome, but instead heightening awareness and extending the understanding of the processes involved.

### 10.5.3 Developing the concept of ethical sensemaking

Finally, the concept of ethical sensemaking has only been introduced here within the context of early years settings and practices. It would be of potential interest within a wide range of organisations, and, just as sensemaking has been used to explore the aftermath of serious incidents, and of organisational challenges, a focus on ethical sensemaking in other sectors or types of organisations would highlight whether there are insights of use in other contexts. Sensemaking can be seen as a kind of learning, and ethical sensemaking is therefore a way of shining a light on the ethical aspect of a situation and encouraging reflection and learning about the impact of actions and decisions. Sensemaking can be used to explore causality, but ethical sensemaking can be used to encourage greater attention to be paid to the unforeseen consequences of actions and behaviours, but also to the impact of sociomaterial factors, organisational structures and routines. In doing so, it has the potential to improve awareness of ethical issues.

### 10.5.4 Developing the concept of embodied ethical sensemaking

Finally, the exploration of how sensemaking can be embodied is a potential area for further research, particularly in terms of ethical sensemaking, and the link with intuition and instinct in moral decision-making. This area could be further explored within other caring professions, but may also have wider relevance and potential. There is a growing interest in the importance of bodies and emotions in ethics, and applying embodiment to care ethics offers an avenue for further research which might yield new insights into moral behaviours within organisations.

## 10.6 Conclusion

Ethical early years practice is not a nice-to-have, but is essential to the wellbeing and healthy emotional development of future generations. The practice of caring for the youngest children in our society is a huge responsibility which requires professional

knowledge combined with a caring ethos, not only from early years practitioners, but from caring organisations and governments. A recognition of the importance of care, as a moral value and as a skilful practice is long overdue. The Covid-19 pandemic briefly raised the public awareness of the importance of caring relations, but the aftermath is continuing to demonstrate the impact of an absence of opportunities to engage in caring relationships. In order to ensure the future healthy social and emotional development of all children, much more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of the role of early years professionals, and of the importance of equal access to early years care and education. The impact of neoliberal marketisation in the early years sector needs to be understood more widely, and greater attention needs to be paid to the embodied skills and tacit knowledge of caring professionals.

By drawing attention to the embodied and granular detail of childcare practices, the organisational features, and the political choices that each influence whether early years care and education is ethical, I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating the value of combining the ethics of care with practice theory, and of the potential for ethical sensemaking in the early years sector. In particular, my model of embodied ethical sensemaking offers new insights into the way in which an ethic of care can influence sensemaking. There is much more to be done, as the value of an embedded ethic of care in many types of organisations cannot, I believe, be underestimated, in a society where mental health has become increasingly precarious. The early years sector was the lifeworld of this research project, but the underpinning theories could usefully be extended to other practice worlds. I hope that this is the beginning of further research and the development of further insights. Thank you for reading.



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## Appendices

### 1. Glossary/Abbreviations

- **APPG** All Party Parliamentary Group – in particular, the APPG for Childcare and Early Education
- **Cache** Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education – an awarding body specialising in early years qualifications
- **Ceeda** Independent research and intelligence provider for childcare providers, investors, local authorities and early years sector stakeholders. Funded and supported by early years providers, local authorities, suppliers and sector organisations
- **CEO** Chief Executive Officer – the most senior executive or officer in charge of an organisation
- **DCSF** See DfE
- **DfE** Department for Education (England) – ministerial department from 2010 responsible for children’s services and education, including early years. Previous names include Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) 1995-2001; Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2001 – 2007; and Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007 – 2010.
- **DfEE** See DfE
- **DfES** See DfE
- **Early Education** The British Association for Early Childhood Education
- **Early Years Coalition** A group of 16 early years organisations, formed in response to EYFS reforms in 2020, and creating the Birth to Five Matters as alternative curriculum guidance
- **ECEC** Early Childhood Education and Care - the acronym most frequently adopted to describe the sector by early years academics (occasionally ECCE, same words, different order)
- **ECERS** Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – a quality assurance tool used widely in the early years sector, by both researchers and practitioners
- **EHC** Early Health and Care – usually in the context of an EHC plan for children with additional educational, health or social needs, which sets out the additional support to meet those needs.
- **EYA** Early Years Alliance – Sector organisation, representing 14,000 settings, the majority of those being voluntary pre-schools. Previously known as the Pre-School Playgroups Association (PPA) 1962 – 1995; and Pre-School Learning Alliance (PSLA) 1995 - 2019
- **EYFS** Early Years Foundation Stage – the standards that must be followed by all early years providers in England (different early years standards apply in Scotland and Wales)
- **EYPS** Early Years Professional Status – a professional status for early years practitioners from 2007, replaced by EYTS in 2013
- **EYTS** Early Years Teacher Status – a postgraduate qualification intended to be broadly equivalent to Qualified Teacher Status
- **Family™** Nursery management software that enables parents to access their child’s learning journey
- **FE** Further Education (including colleges offering early years vocational training)

- **FTE** Full-Time Equivalent – a place occupied every session of the week, used as a common occupancy measure
- **Key Person** A named member of staff with responsibilities for a small group of specific children. The EYFS requires that each child is assigned a key person.
- **LA** Local Authority - previously abbreviated to LEA, Local Education Authority
- **LADO** Local Authority Designated Officer – role is to provide advice and guidance on safeguarding to early years providers and other organisations
- **LEA** See LA
- **LPP** Legitimate Peripheral Participation – a concept developed by Lave and Wenger, particularly in relation to communities of practice, and situated learning
- **MBA** Master of Business Administration
- **NDNA** National Day Nurseries Association – sector organisation which began in 1999, specifically supporting day nurseries (originally NPDNA, National Private Day Nurseries Association)
- **NNEB** National Nursery Examination Board, but the abbreviation is still probably the most widely recognised early years qualification, although it has been discontinued since 1994. It indicated that the holder undertook a two year full-time course which covered both theory and practice, and is considered equivalent to a level three. Often referred to as the ‘gold standard’ compared to current qualifications.
- **NVivo** Qualitative data analysis software
- **OBC** Ofsted Big Conversation – regional meetings for providers to discuss issues around inspections directly with Ofsted
- **OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – an international policy development organisation
- **Ofsted** Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, responsible for inspecting and regulating early years services
- **OOSC** Out-of-School Club
- **OU** Open University
- **PPA** See EYA
- **Practitioner** Term for early years practitioner, but in some settings can be called Early Years Educator, Nursery Nurse, or Teacher
- **PSLA** See EYA
- **PVI** Private, Voluntary and Independent (a term used by local authorities and the government to describe non-maintained childcare settings: those not funded and managed directly by the local authority)
- **SENCO** Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
- **SEND** Special Educational Needs and Disability
- **Tapestry** A software app that enables settings to share children’s learning journeys with their parents
- **Transitions** The moves children make between home to nursery, or within nurseries from stage to stage, or from nursery to school
- **WHO** World Health Organisation

## 2. Summary of data

### 2.1 Summary of research interviews

Ref	Pseudonym	Role	Current Organisation size & type	Prior experience	Age	Qualification level	Gender
1	Jean	Director	Large group NFP	Small settings NFP	50+	L3	Female
2	Lucy	Director	Medium group FP	Large group FP	Mid 30s	EYPS	Female
3	John	Director	Large group NFP	Finance	50+	NA	Male
4	Cara	Nursery Manager	Medium group FP	Large FP	50+	L6	Female
5	Amy	Deputy Manager	Medium group FP	Medium group FP	Late 20s	L3	Female
6	Caroline	Owner Manager	Single site FP	Commercial	40s	Montessori (L5)	Female
7	Lyn	Nursery Manager	Medium group FP	Medium group FP	Late 30s	L3	Female
8	Helen	Nursery Manager	Medium group FP	Medium group FP	Late 30s	L6	Female
9	Adam	Owner	Medium group FP	Commercial	50+	L3	Male
10	Kate	Owner	Medium group FP	Varied, extensive	50+	L3	Female
11	Sharon	Director	Large group FP	Commercial	50+	L7	Female
12	Michelle	Owner Manager	Single site FP	Commercial	40s	L6	Female
13	Peter	Director	Large group FP	Commercial	50+	NA	Male
14	Sandra	Nursery Manager	Large group NFP	Large group NFP	50+	L3	Female
15	Val	Deputy Manager	Large group NFP	Large group NFP	40s	L3	Female
16	Sinead	Nursery Manager	Large group FP	Various FP	Late 30s	L3	Female
17	Sam	Director	Single site NFP	3 <sup>rd</sup> sector	40s	NA	Female
18	Tim	Director	Small group NFP	Commercial & 3 <sup>rd</sup> sector	50+	NA	Male

19	Hannah	Director	Small group NFP	Maintained sector	40s	L3	Female
20	Paul	Director	Single site FP	3 <sup>rd</sup> sector & maintained	40s	MA	Male
21	Dan	Director	Small group FP	Large group FP	50+	L3	Male
22	Liz	Trainer	Independent	Maintained sector & FE	50+	L6	Female
23	Ros	Consultant	Large group FP	Various FP	50+	L7	Female
24	Rachel	Nursery Assistant	Acorn	Small FP	40s	Unq	Female
25	Anne	Nursery Manager	Acorn	NFP & LA	50+	L6	Female
26	Jordan	Nursery Manager	Acorn	Large FP	30s	L7	Female
27	Clare	Trainer/ Consultant	Acorn	Small FP	40s	L6	Female
28	Tara	Nursery Manager	Acorn	Small FP	40s	L7	Female
29	Paula	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	Commercial & Maintained	40s	L3	Female
30	Ashley	Senior Practitioner	Acorn	Commercial & NFP	30s	L3	Female
31	Amber	Senior Practitioner	Acorn	Large FP	30s	L6	Female
32	Peta	Senior Practitioner	Acorn	Large & Small FP	30s	L3	Female
33	Jasmine	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	Small FP	30s	L3	Female
34	Kim	Nursery Manager	Acorn	Maintained & Small FP	30s	L6	Female
35	Charlie	Forest School Leader	Acorn	Medium NFP	30s	L3	Female
36	Emily	Deputy Manager	Acorn	FP & NFP	30s	L6	Female
37	Maya	Nursery Manager	Acorn	Large FP	50+	L6	Female
38	Lauren	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	Commercial & Small FP	20s	L3	Female
39	Beth	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	FP & NFP	20s	L3	Female



40	Selina	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	FP & NFP	20s	L3	Female
41	Patience	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	FP & NFP	30	L3	Female
42	Stephanie	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	NFP	20s	L3	Female
43	Theresa	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	Commercial	40s	Unq	Female
44	Jane	Deputy Manager	Acorn	FP & NFP	30s	L6	Female
45	Gabbie	Early Years Practitioner	Acorn	FP & NFP	40s	L3	Female
46	Imogen	Deputy Manager	Acorn	LA	30s	L7	Female
47	Tamsin	Parent	Acorn	Large FP	30s	NA	Female
48	Haruki	Parent	Acorn	FP & NFP	30s	L3	Male
49	Rebecca	Parent	Acorn	Med FP	30s	NA	Female
50	Karen	Parent	Acorn	Med FP	30s	L3	Female
51	Maria	Parent	Acorn	Large FP	40s	NA	Female

## 2.2 NVivo thematic coding and examples of data

Theme A	Ethical Issues	Thesis location
Definitions	<p>“putting children first”; “doing the right thing”;  “understanding...what is right and wrong...what behaviours are acceptable”; “sort of...the right way”; “how you work..for me...I always try my best. I’m there for the children”; “I want every child to be treated how I expect my children to be treated”; “with respect for the child”; “emphasising children’s wellbeing”; “finding the balance between what can we do that is the right thing for the business and the right thing for the children and the team and the parents.”</p>	5.2.2
Dilemmas & decisions	<p>Examples mainly of dealing with parents’ requests that conflict with practitioner views of best practice, re amount of sleep needed, behaviour management, not using car seats, bottles of juice, and gendered issues, eg: “mostly with dads not wanting their boys to have babies in buggies and dressed up as princesses”.  “Do we do the best for the child, or do we do the best for the parent?”  Vignette (no 2) of armed robbery disclosure</p>	<p>9.5.1  9.5.1 9.3.5</p>
Examples of ethical practice	<p>“how a baby is being fed from a bottle, if there’s eye contact, if there’s smiling” “how they’re interacting when they’re changing nappies...is there eye contact? Is the practitioner being mindful of of cold hands?...are they talking to the child throughout” “the children were at the forefront of every decision that she made”  “supporting all children, regardless of their background”</p>	<p>8.4.2 8.4.3 8.4.4</p>
<p>Examples of unethical practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Employment practices</li> <li>- RSN</li> </ul>	<p>“I was not allowed to wear my sling at work because it would look bad for the parents”  “where I don’t think it’s very ethical, like babies being propped in a car seat with a bottle...for example”, “never turn down a full-time place even if you’ve got 18 children booked in...you weren’t allowed to challenge anything”, “if there was a child that was crying, the staff would say...’no, they’re fine. They don’t need picking up”</p>	<p>5.3.4  5.3.5</p>
Influence	<p>“I think it comes from the personality of the individual and the manager overseeing and keeping on top of practice in the setting”</p>	<p>5.2.2 7.2.4</p>
Parents	<p>“the parents...were seen as the customer”, “we do have parents that want them to be educated more than probably care for but we also have parents that like them to be care for and just learn along the way”, “we don’t just give respect or care to the children, it’s about the parents as well. They need as much of that care to them as well.”  “they felt they...were forced to go back to work with their economic position” (John)</p>	<p>6.2.2 7.4.3  6.4.2</p>

Questionable	"it felt like actually all of the effort and energy was in occupancy"	5.3.4 5.3.6 6.4.2
SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)	"didn't like to take children that needed additional help", "we weren't allowed to take ... special educational needs"	5.3.4 5.3.5
Social impact	"we're saving children's lives in some respect...We're making a huge difference", "for some of these parents, especially if they were on child protection plans they're not going to go to social services for help... We're the safe in-between", "It's about, you know, how does that work for your community and what difference can we make?"	5.2.3 6.2.2 6.4.3
Values and vision	"as long as we uphold what we believe in and our morals...we must be doing the right thing", "what drives me in terms of my involvement in early years, is the sense of service to community", "It's very trite to say we make a difference. But we do. And it's not just in those nurseries where there's the high social need...the need for nurture and love in some of our more affluent areas is actually higher than it is in the, in the poorer areas."	5.2.2 7.2.1 7.2.2
<b>Theme B</b>	<b>High Quality Practice</b>	<b>Thesis location</b>
Care	"in those days it was just about care, really...whereas now it's a lot more about education" (Sharon)	5.3.1 7.2.4
- Child-centred practice	"care drives the outcomes" (Peter) "care has been the downfall" (John) "It's completely child-centred here" (Amy)	7.4.2 7.5.2
- Attachment /key person	"the most successful early years provision really has children at the centre of everything. They are your purpose." (Cara) "we know that attachment helps to overcome adversity and we know that attachment helps to build successful people" (Cara) "You know that feeling when you get into a warm bath? That is what that child should feel when they are spending that time with you" (Amy)	5.2.3
- Embodied care	"you can see when there's real love in something" "more importantly, she was loved that day" (Lyn) "the member of staff gives themselves 100 per cent to that child in that prime time" "We ask for permission to interact to pick them up or whatever the interaction is we're going to do and we listen, it's reciprocal" (Cara)	5.2.2 5.2.3 8.4.2
- Love	Vignette (no 1) of sleep time with baby scan photo	8.4.3
Respectful care		
Relationships & connections (& family groups)	"The older ones get all this pride from looking after the younger ones and it's just the relationships that form. So like Ivan who's four, and Noah, who's two, are like super close and every day during lockdown Ivan was like, when's my Noah coming back? ... Because he can play with Noah in a different way ... because there's not an expectation for him to be, you know, better or	Not used

	competitive, he can just be with Noah, and he can just simply play” (Jordan, re vertical age grouping)	
Settling-in	“the longer the settling-in process can be, the more settled the child will be”	5.3.2
Home visits	“I think they feel more reassured that you’ve given them the time, in their home, that you’ve listened”	8.4.4
<b>Theme C</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Thesis location</b>
Career history	“I absolutely love children, always have”, “purely by accident”, “make a difference here in this community”	5.2.1
Inspiration	“I think an inspirational leader has a lot of impact on their colleagues”	7.2.4
Motivation	“I want to make a difference on a higher scale” (Hannah), “it’s about seeing my colleagues get enthusiastic” (John) “it’s inside you. It’s there.”	5.2.3 8.2.1
Personal nature/nurture	“children just gravitated towards me”, “You’ve got a really nurturing nature”, “you change a lot from your surroundings”	5.2.1
Childhood & background	“everybody...always used to tell me how good I was with children” “where’s your personal ethic come from...It’s probably from my mother”	5.2.1 8.2.2
Practitioner parents	“I can empathise with parents a lot more” “when you’ve been a mum... you have that instinct...you then change and see things differently...you’re more tuned in to the children...your senses become more heightened”	5.2.3
Professionalism & personal values	“they all laugh at me and say, why are you thanking us? We’re paid to do this job. And I say to them, no, I’m thanking you because I respect what you’ve done today...Do I expect them to do things? Yes. But I will do exactly what I’m expecting them to do...it’s about working together” (Sandra)	8.2.1
Role model	“the energy she expressed just inspired me” (Ashley) “it has to be role-modelled” (Sharon) “she was always down at their level, she always laughing and smiling with them, and it just made the children’s environment fun” “you can really tell that she cares about the staff, the children. She really takes an interest in the families as well. So they’re quite good role models to me and inspired me.”	3.3.2 9.5.3
<b>Theme D</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Thesis location</b>
Culture & type	“if you don’t invest in your staff and your children and your parents, then you can see the difference in the environments. You can feel the culture isn’t welcoming”, “I think we set the culture...and we set the expectation”, “one of the key things takes up so much of our time is how do we want the culture to be”	5.2.3 8.5.5
Empowerment & autonomy	“what was really important [to the staff]... was where their autonomy sat” (Lucy), “hopefully we give them the confidence and	7.2.3

	the agency and the empowerment to, you know, feel the ownership of what they're doing with our backing" (Adam). "My only policy with the managers was that there's no policy and there's only one policy and that's do what you think is right at the time. So they would, they were empowered to do things that any commercial organization would frown upon" (Dan).	
Finances & costs Resources	"The [funding] rate in [LA] hasn't gone up in three years....I would like to see some of the team move on to, to degrees and beyond. But that comes down to finances and there's no discrete pot that we can tap into to, to fund that" (Tim) Q re biggest challenge: "it's got to be finances, without a doubt"	7.3.3 8.5.1 8.5.4
Induction	"we really try and support staff for that first six months", "we had a week induction...and that was me blown away"	7.4.2 7.5.2
Leadership & management	"I think first and foremost it probably relates to financial sustainability... another big part of the role is about customer support... the way in which we develop our business and treat our customers. They're probably the top two areas of responsibility and I think the third...and it's the toughest area probably is maintaining integrity." (John) "Ethical leadership is absolutely key" (Paul)	5.3.1 5.3.1 7.2.4
- Board behaviours & values	Re visit by Paul: "and the thing was...he spoke to literally every member of staff", "doesn't presume to be an expert on it and will listen to the people that he thinks are" (re Peter), "now had quite a lot of dealings with the chief exec and their global chief exec...the story they tell me is very very far removed from what I know to be happening on the ground"	7.2.4
- Mgt style	"you can't walk around as a manager thinking that you are the most important person in the nursery because you're not. You know, it's the, it's the key persons, isn't it? And it's how we all support each other." (Jordan)	5.3.1
- Openness of comms	"you're the guy in charge, but actually you're dependent on everyone else" (Peter) "we do listening lunches...the people on the ground that can just talk quite openly...we're so open as a company, we want to know what are the problems"	5.3.3
Strategy	"what's good is they're willing to listen" "all the conversations seem to focus around return on capital investment, return to shareholders, return to investors where there is no balance"	5.3.3
- Line manager support	"we have to do a lot of role modelling", "I have staff that just, you know, need that bit more support", "she'll say you know I understand why you've done that, but have you tried..." "K was able to articulate that to a new member of staff... that's really a crucial skill which is far greater than a manager can offer, it's practice on the floor" "Are we allowed to do that?" ... "you do whatever's right for the child"	7.2.4 7.5.2 5.3.5
Profit focus influence	"I left my prior setting because it was KPIs, it was business plans", "they are driven by having to make a return for the shareholders"	5.3.3

Size	"my worry about big nurseries...I don't think that you can have the same quality control"	5.3.2
Structure (mgt)	"it's such a flat organization...so nobody has that hierarchy, sort of importance. People are really important. And that doesn't mean that you can't manage, you can't control." (John) "where multiple providers suggest that they allow nursery managers to make the decision on the ratio of funded to unfunded places, this is not always the reality."	7.2.3
Sustainability	"we're trying to become financially self-sufficient or sustainable"	6.5.2
Funding	"I do think the funding needs to increase", "I'd tell them we're an underfunded mess, and that we can't do what is needed for children"	6.4.3
<b>Theme E</b>	<b>Sector influences</b>	<b>Thesis location</b>
Montessori	"I think there are some really core values and principles in that philosophy that just really resonated with me. And Montessori talks about, um, care of self, care for the others and care for the environment, which just really chimed with me as a sort of overarching philosophy"	2.3.4 7.3.2
Ofsted	"we shouldn't be doing it for Ofsted. We should be doing it ... because it's the right thing to do"	7.3.1
Policy, carrot v stick	"the policy-formers firefight. They know ... we should be providing more care or education et cetera. They also know we haven't got enough money so that we sort of just play at it, and see if it will work out" (John), "we give all our staff little metal bottles, and at the same time ban plastic bottles of water"	8.5.5
Ratios	"other settings that have been extremely focused on the occupancy and on very tight staffing ratios" (Paul)	5.3.4 7.2.3
Workforce		
- Men in EY	"why haven't we got more men in early years? Because of the stigma, probably. Because of the money, probably." Vignette of male practitioner and parent objection	6.3.1
- Recruitment	"I recruit with my heart", "it tends to be a value-based process", "recruitment in the sector generally is difficult"	5.2.3
- Social impact	"if you can make a difference in a very small way, it goes a long way."	5.3.4
- Status	"they still think we're babysitters", "they're teachers...and they should be valued as such", "that old traditional servant style...mindset"	5.2.3
- Teamwork	"it's got to be more about the team"	6.2.1
Training		
- On-the-job	"we're all buzzing before we even get there...it becomes a team-building day for us"	7.3.3
- Qualifications	"it's not just a qualification...it's the experience that comes with that qualification"	8.3.2
- Training		7.3.3
Wellbeing & rewards	"everybody knows who we are, we are a name, we're not just a number in a nursery, so I think that makes us feel valued"	7.2.4

Theme F	Socio-Political	Thesis location
Education vs care	"I think they should be combined or equal, because I think if you're caring you're probably educating them anyway", "people tend to value the education side when in actual fact, d'you know what? the education comes through the care"	6.3.2
Political policies	"policy-formers firefight", "an underfunded mess" "I think sometimes with love you can't put a quantity on it. And we are driven by data in education. And if you can't get data on it, they don't value it. If they can't put up on a spreadsheet. And they can't say this is why we do it, they don't care. And also, we're controlled by politicians. What do they know about early years? What? I can't think of the last time we had like an education secretary who actually worked in early years."	6.4.1
Social disadvantage	"the children... how in many instances they were neglected sometimes just because of the economic environment in which they lived, sometimes because their parents... know no better", "the background they come from means that we're constantly at case conferences."	6.4.1 6.4.3

## 2.3 Examples of two vignettes

### 1. *Example of child-centred practice in a care routine*

In this vignette, Cara, a nursery manager with a clearly articulated commitment to respectful care, describes an example of a practitioner making a very specific effort to personalise a care routine, of settling a child for sleep, taking into account her attachment to a scan photo of her sibling-to-be. Cara is a graduate leader with many years of experience, and with a great deal of autonomy in her current nursery.

Cara: So perhaps it might be going down to bed. So um, I had a little girl recently whose mum was expecting a baby and um she was only a baby herself she's just one year old and so she found it very, the process was feeling really difficult and Mum had given her this picture and it was a scan photograph of the baby and she's walking around with it in her hand, saying baby baby, my baby, Mummy's baby, and she was really fixating on this little picture which actually to be fair was really clear of the face of the baby. And so she put it in her pocket, and then when she got undressed for bed, she was going into a sleep-bag, and she had been led down, she had comforters, the staff had prepared her, so again it's very unhurried, it's not rushed down from the table at lunch then get, you know, 'cause no-one feels like sleeping when they've just had a full meal. So it's in their time, it's unhurried, the member of staff gives themselves 100 per cent to that child in that prime time. They're not going to be talking to other staff about you know where's the paper towels, or what time are you on your lunch break, it is devoting yourself 100 percent to be in that moment with that child, and so it maybe they've had a bottle together they've sat together they have some calm time together, and then they

go towards the bed and this practitioner knew how important this, this little piece of paper was. So she had said to her, “whilst you had your lunch, I've set your bed area up” and she had her comforter, she had her sleep-bag to get into, and then she just blu-tacked her picture of her scan photo just up on the side, just right by so the little girl could lie there, she could drift off to sleep and she could look at her picture which was really important to her. And I think when you've got people who are really connected to the children, they do lots of little things like this in the moment every day to make those things easier and to go, that was, you know, that was a connection. The child won't say “well thanks so much for doing that because that meant a lot to me” but they, they know it, you know? It's like, why have beautiful things around you? Do the children come in and notice all the time. No, but it's much more guttural than that, it's a deeper level than that. You know, we know that if we put a lot of effort into our care routines and we prepare for them, we don't go and pick up a child from behind and they don't know we're coming, going right we're changing your nappy and walk off. We go to them, we go down to their level we, we offer them, we ask them, we ask for permission to interact to pick them up or whatever the interaction is we're going to do and we listen, it's reciprocal. So lots of people ask children in care routines for their perspective, by they don't listen. Listening takes more time. You have to wait for a response from the person you're interacting with. So that is important.

## *2. Armed robbery disclosure*

Lyn and Helen, both nursery managers within the same group, had asked to be interviewed together, and were also keen for the owner-managers, a married couple with very strong Christian values, to remain in the room (having just had their interview with me). Both Lyn and Helen were keen to relate examples of the commitment of the organisation to loving care, most of which featured families with difficult home backgrounds. The vignette below came in response to a question about how they dealt with situations when a decision (to do the ‘right’ thing) wasn't straightforward. The nods and body language of the others in the group of colleagues confirmed that the story was a familiar one that they had all been aware of at the time.

Lyn: I had one quite recently. Oh, it's long-winded. The dad was arrested. He'd been arrested due to armed robbery, committed multiple offences. And then he, his wife has told one of our practitioners, oh, he didn't do it, it was his brother, but we're going to keep that between us. They're a traveller community and they don't tell outside people what goes on within their group. And so she told the practitioner and the practitioner's got a particularly good relationship with this mom. And she said, 'oh, I don't think I should tell you, Lyn, what she told me'. And I said, 'you've got a duty now, you need to tell me'. And so she sort of argued with us about what she should do. And, you know, we're just thinking about this child, you know, forget everything else. And so she told me that it was the, the dad's brother that had committed this crime, but it was hearsay and nobody really knew. And we had, again, some really good



training that was delivered from [name of local authority] and some safeguarding training. And we were told, weren't we, about there's a police thing you can ring

Helen: A special number

Lyn: you can go through

Helen: Yeah

Lyn: We didn't know about any of it. And even if you hear something that's hearsay and, you know, might not be factual, there is a place that you can take that to. And Kate advised me to do it anonymously. And they were really grateful. This guy's still on the run. Nobody knows where he is or whether he did it or didn't. But it's putting all of these pieces together. And that seems to be a trend. It's just pieces that, you know, we're pieces of a puzzle and where we can try and fit them we will. But again, that's really difficult. You know, these people are not always nice people.

## 2.4 Use of vignettes as research data

### *A: Ethical Issues*

#### **Dilemmas:**

- Parent and armed robbery (Lyn, 9.3.5)
- Parent re sleep time (Emily, 9.5.1)
- Practitioner and crying baby in high chair (Tara, 5.3.5)

#### **Examples of ethical practice**

- Care routines – warm bath (Amy, 5.2.3)

#### **Examples of unethical practice**

- Lack of care of employee re accident (Rachel, 5.3.4)
- Lack of care of employee re bereavement (Maya, 5.3.4)
- Instruction not to accept funded children (Tara, 5.3.5)
- Bullying of a child (Jordan, 5.3.5)
- Poor practice not being recognised (Ros, 5.3.5)
- Example of plan for nursery with no outdoor space (Ros, 5.2.1)

#### **Parents**

- Parents not wanting to work, feeling forced (John, 6.4.2)
- Parent collecting early, witnessed lack of care (Tamsin, 5.3.6)
- Parent not wanting male practitioner to change nappy (Cara, 6.3.1)

#### **Social Impact**

- Example of child after drug raid (Lyn, 9.3.5)
- Making a difference – saving children (Jean, 6.4.3)
- Priorities re child communicating (Sandra, 6.3.2)
- Parents with difficult backgrounds (Helen, 6.2.2)

### *B: High Quality Practice*

- Warm bath analogy (Amy, 5.2.3)
- Care routine – sleep time (Cara, 8.4.3)

### *C: Individual*

- Ethical driver from childhood experience (John, 5.2.1)
- Emotional involvement in work (Hannah, 5.2.3)
- Professionalism and hands-on leadership (Sandra, 8.2.1)

### *D: Organization*

- Example of CEO visiting (Sinead, 7.2.4), (Sandra & Val, 7.2.4)
- Induction (Amy, 7.4.2)
- Nail polish victory (Sinead, 8.5.2)
- Change when venture capital took over funding (Dan, 8.2.4)
- Move into employee ownership (Peter, 6.5.2)
- Balancing quality with inclusion and affordability – taking a business perspective (Lucy, 5.2.2)

### *E: Sector Influences*

- Impact of loss of funding for neighbourhood nurseries (Peter, 6.4.1)
- Argument re benefit of EY and Heckman etc (John, 6.4.1)
- Men in early years (Cara re parent objection, 6.3.1)

### *F: Socio-Political*

- Example of policy-making at national level (Dan, 6.4.1)
- Lack of funding preventing acquisitions in deprived areas (Jean, 5.2.2)

## 2.5 Supplementary data

Diary entries referenced in thesis:

- 14/11/2020 Reflection on a colleague's observation and quick response to abnormal stomach movements/breathing noticed during a nappy change
- 19/11/2020 Reflections on a visit to a competitor's nursery and the way they organised the rooms for their funded-only children
- 05/05/2021 Account of staff meeting and the discussion after a colleague's comment about normal practice in her previous setting being to wear gloves to apply sun cream to children
- 24/09/2021 Discussion in managers' meeting about 'take-home teddies' and the surprising reaction of one manager in particular voicing strong opinions
- 09/05/2022 Comment from an Ofsted inspector on a registration visit about the multiple provider study and her observations about staff being parachuted in on inspections
- 16/09/2022 Phone calls about an uncollected child at one of the nurseries and the actions taken by colleagues

Field notes:

Observations from nursery visits as part of the interview process (dates and details not disclosed, to protect confidentiality):

- Observations of staff interaction with children within nurseries
- Observations of interaction between management team and staff
- Notes on the physical environment, both within the rooms and the staff facilities (eg the personalised display of staff photos)

Grey data (details not included to protect confidentiality):

- Company websites, social media
- Companies House accounts and annual reports
- Press coverage of interviewees and their settings
- Ofsted inspection reports
- Press coverage of the sector and reactions to government policies
- Reports by sector organisations
- Conference materials