

**The London School of Economics and Political Science**

*Trust and early years education and care:  
an exploration of parents' trust in preschool provision*

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of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Declaration**

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Jonathan J.G. Roberts

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## Abstract

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Relationships of trust are increasingly considered central to the provision of welfare services. This thesis undertakes an empirical exploration of trust within a key welfare field - early years education and care. While trust is often identified as a key dimension when parents use preschool provision, a rigorous investigation of trust - its meaning, its production and its complexity – is lacking. The thesis has in addition a subsidiary focus. Empirical research into trust in welfare services has not adequately addressed organisational form or behaviour as a location of trust production. Within the study there is, therefore, a particular enquiry into trust at the organisational level.

Empirical investigation was undertaken through in-depth interviews with parents and managers across diverse preschool organisations. The thesis identifies how parents gave prominence to their own critical determination of the trustworthiness of provision, derived from information collected from multiple sources. Parents did not, as some theorists propose, undertake a calculation of the extrinsic constraints and incentives upon providers' behaviours. Instead they constructed an inductive portrait of workers' competence and benevolence through both conscious deliberation and less conscious intuitive reasoning. Such trust construction was framed by parents' interpretations of care, quality and risk, and mediated by barriers to information which they might face. At the organisational level, *a priori* features such as organisational form or sector had little effect on trust; of significance instead were trust-producing behaviours, such as transparency, and trust-reducing behaviours, such as staff turnover.

The thesis makes an original theoretical contribution by developing explanations of parents' trust in preschool provision, by linking such explanations to literature on care and on intuitive reasoning, and by adding to the general stock of theory around trust. It also carries implications for policy and practice. There is little support for concerns that contemporary welfare service reform may undermine trust: regulatory systems provided a useful underpinning for trust; market-based provision – as long as any monetary exchange was sensitively handled - was not antithetical to parents' construction of trust. The thesis nonetheless identifies benefit in provision through an integrated centre, where parents developed trust over time prior to use of preschool provision. Such a process was especially helpful to parents who faced disadvantage.

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## List of acronyms

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CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYP	Early Years Professional
HMT	HM Treasury
NAO	National Audit Office
NDNA	National Day Nurseries Association
NESS	National Evaluation of Sure Start
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
PCT	Primary Care Trust
PVI	Private, Voluntary or Independent
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status
SSLP	Sure Start Local Programme
WTC	Working Tax Credit

### Ministries of Education

DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007-2010)
DfE	Department for Education (2010-)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (1995-2001)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (2001-2007)

## Introduction

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Over the last two to three decades trust has become the focus of considerable scholarly interest. It has been identified, for instance, as a foundation for efficient economic transactions, for economic prosperity, for organisational performance and for social solidarity (Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995; Misztal 1996; Kramer and Tyler 1996). More recently there has been a growing body of commentary upon – and concern about – trust in government and in the institutions of welfare provision (for instance, Taylor-Gooby 2006; Seldon 2009). Relationships of trust have increasingly been identified as both important and complex in the provision of services such as health or education. In such fields, quality can be difficult for the lay user (or those who purchase on behalf of users) to monitor or measure (Walsh 1995), thus creating information asymmetries between service providers and users which may obscure opportunistic or incompetent behaviour (Arrow 1963). The vulnerability of users is also high, since the costs of poor provision may be severe. In such a context of uncertainty and vulnerability, trust enables action: without trust, opportunities to participate in services may be foregone.

Recent research has, further, identified trust as a key ingredient which supports effective relationships between professionals and users across a range of welfare services. Thus trust is considered to be fundamental to good quality health outcomes by enabling patients' compliance with treatment regimes (Mosley-Williams et al. 2002; Brown et al. 2011); it is also held to be central to school effectiveness and fruitful partnerships between teachers and parents (Tschannen-Moran 2004; Angell et al. 2009; Schmidt 2010). Yet this functional importance of trust presents a conundrum. Trust is not always beneficial. Misplaced trust can be harmful and even catastrophic. The relationship between trust and the real reliability of the provider or professional is therefore problematic. In welfare services, where much is uncertain and much is at stake, assessment of the trustworthiness of a provider becomes a central dilemma.

While trust is thus increasingly recognised as important to the effective provision of welfare services, there is also anxiety that trust in such services is eroding. Concern derives in part from recognition of a societal context in which trust in professionals, expert systems and government is seen to be declining (Taylor-Gooby 2006). But there

are also proposals that institutional change in the delivery of welfare services in England – for instance, market-based approaches or the growth of top–down audit and inspection – may disrupt embedded trust relations (O’Neill 2002; Marquand 2004). There are particular criticisms that such structures impose a rational and instrumental model of human agency upon interactions between users and welfare services; in so doing they are held to crowd out the value-based or affective dimensions of interpersonal interactions which underpin a deep and resilient trust (Harrison and Smith 2004; Taylor-Gooby and Wallace 2009).

The aim of this thesis is to undertake an empirical exploration of the dynamics of trust within a key welfare transaction – parents’ use of early years education and care. Early education and childcare has taken on increasing social and political significance in England, both on account of increasing maternal employment and because of the “unparalleled attention and resources” given to early years services by the Labour Government which came to power in 1997 (Moss 1999: 229). It is also *prima facie* a rich arena in which to explore relationships of trust. In common with other welfare services, the evaluation of quality by the purchaser is held to be difficult (Krashinsky 1986); further, there can be few transactions in which the act of trust is as poignant as in the giving of a child by a parent to the care of others. It is also the case that policy-makers in England have favoured an institutional framework of service delivery which makes use of both market-based structures and multiple systems of regulation. These are precisely the components of welfare service reform which have been predicted to erode or problematize trust: empirical investigation of the preschool field thus offers a window through which to observe the effect of such policies.

Policy interest and state investment in the early years has been accompanied by a growing body of academic literature which critically examines the framework of service delivery and parents’ experiences of provision. Within such commentaries there are frequent references to trust: trust, indeed, is often invoked as an explanation of parents’ choices and as an essential component of their relationships with providers (section 1.3.2 below)<sup>1</sup>. Yet a rigorous investigation and explanation of trust itself - its meaning, its production and its complexity - remains lacking. Möllering (2006: 3) observes the

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<sup>1</sup> “Parents” is used throughout as a shorthand for children’s parents and primary carers.

tendency for authors to introduce trust as a “quick fix or catch-all solution without explaining exactly what they mean by trust”. Such a tendency is observable in such commentaries upon parents’ experiences of preschool. It is this knowledge gap which this study seeks to fill.

The study has in addition a subsidiary focus. Research into the dynamics of trust in welfare service provision has been located at, on the one hand, the institutional level and, on the other, the interpersonal level. Thus there has been consideration of public trust in the pensions system or the National Health Service (Hyde et al. 2007; Taylor-Gooby 2008), and of individual transactions between professionals and users (Alaszewski 2003; Brown 2008). Empirical research has not adequately addressed the intermediary level between institutional and interpersonal trust – namely, users’ trust in organisations. This is a significant omission for three reasons. First, there is the simple observation that, in fields such as preschool and education, users’ choices are located at the organisational level: parents choose between nurseries and schools, prospective students choose between colleges and universities. Second, organisations have been an important focus of welfare service reform: a cross-sectoral mix of state, forprofit and third sector organisations has been encouraged to provide services across fields such as social care and health. Third, as Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2) describes, organisational form is theoretically relevant to trust; there are in particular diverse propositions about the perceived trustworthiness of state, forprofit and third sector organisations. Within the broader exploration of parents’ trust which is the primary focus of this thesis, there is therefore particular enquiry into parents’ trust at the organisational level.

Two clarifications about the terms used in this thesis are necessary at this point. First, the historical split in England between early education and care services (Lewis 2003; Moss 2006) presents challenges of terminology. Terms such as ‘childcare’ or ‘early education’ are heavy with assumptions and implications around the purpose, staffing and ethos of settings. In order to capture the diversity of provision, commentators utilise phrases such as “early childhood education and care” (Moss 2008: 5) or “early years education and care” (West et al. 2010: 155). The latter term, indeed, is used in the title of this thesis. Such terms are accurate, but cumbersome for repeated use. This study instead uses the term ‘preschool provision’ as a shorthand to describe early education or childcare across diverse types of provider. The term is used to refer to group provision

which is regular, formal, and occurs outside domestic settings: it excludes informal care provided by family and friends; it also excludes childminding, in which an individual looks after children at a domestic setting.

Second, preschool provision - in terms of the substantive nature of the service, its significance to the well-being of those who use it, and the character of policy interventions applied to it - has much in common with services such as education, health and social care. “Welfare services”, the term used by Alcock (2008: 15), is preferred here as a phrase to capture this commonality. The term “public services” is avoided, since preschool provision in particular balances uneasily on the boundary of private and public. There is a universal free entitlement to early education for three and four year-olds, provided by both state and private settings; but much preschool provision remains a privately-funded market transaction, albeit regulated by the state (see p.25-27). The term ‘public service’ seems inappropriate as a descriptor. There is arguably a more general awkwardness around the term ‘public services’ in an overarching policy context where services may not only be provided by private organisations, but also increasingly funded through fees and charges.

### **Research questions**

Four research questions guide this exploration of parents’ trust in preschool provision. The questions derive from the knowledge gaps identified above, and are also informed by the conceptual consideration of trust which is presented in Chapter 2.

#### *1. On what basis do parents trust preschool provision?*

The study’s primary research question considers the production of trust in the preschool field. It explores the bases of trust which support parents’ expectations that providers will be reliable.

#### *2. What is the nature of parents’ trust in preschool provision?*

Trust is a complex and contested concept. Given debates and controversies about the nature of trust (Chapter 2, section 2.3), the study considers the process and meaning of trust as it is enacted in preschool provision.

*3. Is sector or organisational form perceived to be a significant a priori signal of trustworthiness? Are there other behaviours or characteristics of organisations which support trust?*

As has been noted, empirical research into welfare services has not sufficiently addressed the organisational level of trust production. The study, while investigating trust at multiple levels, makes a specific exploration of parents' trust in organisations.

*4. Do parents trust preschool provision?*

The questions described thus far assume that parents *do* trust preschool provision. This may not be the case. There can be functional alternatives to trust; moreover there are propositions that trust in welfare services may be increasingly problematic. The final research question therefore asks whether parents achieve a state of trust - or whether they use functional equivalents to enable participation in provision.

### **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis comprises eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the dual policy contexts in which this thesis is located. A first section explores emerging anxieties about the state of trust in welfare services, and in particular concerns about the impact of the introduction of market-based structures and top-down systems of audit and performance management. The chapter's second section provides an overview of preschool policy in England. It describes the increasing importance attributed to preschool provision, the mechanisms of service delivery which have been privileged within policy, and also attempts by policy-makers to strengthen parents' confidence in provision through regulatory interventions. The chapter concludes by considering emerging critical commentaries upon preschool provision and policy. It identifies frequent glimpses of trust as a variable which explains parents' behaviours, but little attempt at rigorous investigation of trust itself.

Despite the growing body of commentary upon trust, the concept remains elusive and contested. Such conceptual problems in turn create particular difficulties for those who wish to undertake empirical investigations (Misztal 1996; Tonkiss and Passey 1999). A first and essential task of this study was to achieve a measure of conceptual clarity about the phenomenon under investigation. Chapter 2 therefore steers a path through the varied and contrasting proposals and theoretical approaches around trust in order to

create a conceptual framework which might guide empirical investigation in the preschool field. It delineates the scope and function of trust, and sets out the specific empirical ‘trust problem’ which parents face in the preschool context. It then critically engages with ongoing theoretical debates about the nature and meaning of trust and its production. A final section focuses specifically upon the production of trust in the preschool context: theoretical proposals about trust production, empirical studies of preschool provision and understandings of the preschool policy framework are brought together to achieve conceptual awareness of the particular bases of trust which may support parents’ trust.

Chapter 3 outlines the study’s research methods. A qualitative investigation was undertaken across multiple organisations in a single geographical location in order to make an in-depth exploration of the research topic. The chapter explains the process of selecting not only the geographical area and parent participants but also, given the focus on organisational form and behaviour in this study, five diverse organisations which offered preschool provision. The characteristics of the achieved selection of area, organisations and parents are presented, and the procedures of data collection and analysis are described.

Chapters 4 to 7 present the study’s empirical findings. There was a particular distinction between parents’ trust when they chose a setting, and their trust as they used a setting over time. This distinction guides the presentation of empirical findings, so that Chapter 4 explores parents’ trust as they chose provision, and Chapter 5 considers the subsequent dynamics of trust over time. These chapters describe in detail the bases of trust which parents utilised at these stages; they therefore offer insights into the primary research question of the thesis. Chapter 6 considers specifically the production of trust at the organisational level (research question 3). It explores to what extent organisational form or sector was perceived to be a significant indicator of trustworthiness, examines the role of forprofit firms’ organisational reputation as a basis for trust, and investigates organisational behaviours which might support or hinder a trusting relationship. A final chapter of empirical findings (Chapter 7) explores in more depth the nature and process of parents’ trust (research question 2) and observes variations in parents’ approaches. Chapter 7, finally, considers whether parents do

indeed trust preschool provision or whether they make use of functional alternatives to trust (research question 4).

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by discussing the empirical findings in two parts. The first section of the chapter considers insights into the bases of parents' trust, its extent and its nature, and considers these insights in relation to the theoretical perspectives and debates about trust presented in Chapter 2. In so doing, the thesis makes an original theoretical contribution by developing explanations of parents' trust in preschool provision, by linking such explanations to literature on care and on intuitive reasoning, and by adding to the general stock of theory around trust. The second part of the chapter considers preschool policy and practice. In the light of concerns about the impact upon trust of welfare service reform, it explores how preschool institutions and practices supported or obstructed parents' trust. There is specific focus upon parents' trust in organisations. Implications for public policy and for organisational and professional practice are identified as appropriate.

## **1 Trust and preschool provision: contexts**

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This first chapter seeks to describe and to link the twin policy contexts in which this study is situated. It explores, first, emerging anxiety about the role of trust in welfare services. While trust has been identified as fundamental to the effective provision of such services, there are increasing concerns that it is under threat, both because of social change and, particularly, as a consequence of institutional reform in the delivery of services. The second section of the chapter sets out the trajectory and objectives of early years policy in England in recent years. It focuses in particular upon the institutions of service delivery, which have been characteristic of wider welfare service reform and which therefore imply similar concerns about trust; it is within this framework of service delivery that parents negotiate relations of trust with preschool providers. The chapter concludes by considering emerging commentaries upon the institutions of preschool provision and upon parents' experiences within the preschool market. It describes how trust is often invoked in such commentaries, but is rarely explored with any rigour.

### **1.1 Trust disrupted? Users' trust in welfare services**

Trust, as described in the introduction to this study, may play a significant role in supporting participation in and the effectiveness of welfare services. There is increasing concern, however, that trust in welfare services may be eroding or becoming a scarce resource. This section situates the specific investigation of trust in the preschool field within this wider context, exploring in particular suggestions that reform in the institutions of service delivery have disrupted established trust relations.

Concerns about the fragility of trust in welfare services derive in part from recognition of a wider societal context in which deferential trust in professionals and in expert systems is declining (Giddens 1990; Taylor-Gooby 2000), citizens are sceptical of authority and government (Löfstedt 2005; Taylor-Gooby 2008), and there is overarching awareness of risk and the "return of uncertainty" (Beck 1994: 10; Giddens 1994a; Taylor-Gooby 2006). The perception of riskiness has been amplified in the field of welfare services by relentless media coverage of dramatic failures in hospitals, care homes and nurseries. In such conditions of uncertainty and scepticism, trust seems at

once both more necessary and more difficult to attain. Individuals' approaches to trust in these circumstances may become less passive and taken-for-granted, and more active, engaged and critical (Giddens 1994a; Taylor-Gooby 2009).

There are particular warnings that institutional change in the delivery of welfare services may disrupt embedded trust relations. The post-war period between 1945 and 1979 is described as a period of high trust in welfare professionals and administrators, especially in fields such as health and education (Le Grand 2003; Rowe and Calnan 2006). Such trust was founded upon an assumption of the competence of professionals and their commitment to the public good, underpinned by an ethos of public service and by professional self-regulation (Le Grand 1997; Clarke and Newman 1997; Rowe and Calnan 2006). Increasingly, however, such trust in, and reliance upon, professionals working within bureaucratic and monopolistic state organisations was questioned. Identified deficiencies included producer dominance, inadequate cost control, poor quality and lack of responsiveness to users (Niskanen 1971; Le Grand and Bartlett 1993; Clarke and Newman 1997; Timmins 2001). Thus recent policy developments in welfare services have, by contrast, been based upon an assumption of self-interest, rather than altruism or professional ethics, as the primary motivation of professionals who provide services (Le Grand 1997, 2003; Taylor-Gooby 1999). Institutional reforms have attempted to direct professionals' behaviours through extrinsic constraints and incentives which appeal to self-interest, rather than rely upon intrinsic motivations such as altruism or professional obligation<sup>2</sup>: thus market-based structures of service delivery seek to align providers' motivations of self-interest with the public good (Le Grand 2003); mechanisms of audit and monitoring control professionals' behaviours and imply an "institutionalized distrust" in professionals' self-regulation (Power 1997: 135).

These policy developments indicate a recalibration of the relationship between government and the professionals who provide welfare services; they do not necessarily

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<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, a simple conception of 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivations and their relationship to self-interest. The boundaries between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation are imprecise (Le Grand 2003): an intrinsic motivation, such as a sense of professional duty or pride, may be supported by extrinsic and self-orientated incentives, such as a desire for professional recognition. Nor are intrinsic motivations necessarily selfless, the psychological pleasure derived from helping being a typical example.

carry implications for the relationship between users and professionals or providers. Nonetheless there are various propositions that institutional reform may compromise users' trust in services. Three themes can be identified: the impact of market-based structures and relationships; the effect of audit and regulation; and the 'de-moralisation' and 'de-valuing' of trust.

### ***1.1.1 Market-based structures and trust***

Successive governments have looked to the market or quasi-market as the institutional framework within which welfare services are provided (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993; Deakin and Walsh 1996; Stevens 2004; West 2007). Components of this approach include competition, a mixed economy of providers from state, forprofit and third sectors, user choice and a discourse of welfare consumerism (Stewart and Walsh 1992; Clarke and Newman 1997; Clarke et al. 2006; Alcock 2008). There are varied warnings about the impact of such market-based mechanisms upon trust between users and professionals. In particular it is implied that there may be a detrimental erosion of perceptions of professionals' benevolence, whether such benevolence is conceived as the product of a public sector ethos (Marquand 2004) or of professional ethics (Hunter 2009). Extrinsic incentives may crowd out intrinsic motivations (Frey 2000), including specifically the public sector ethos (Moynihan 2010); providers' focus may move from the needs of the user to the demands of the market, a switch which may damage trust (Taylor-Gooby 2009); extrinsic and self-interested motivations such as profit-making may be regarded with suspicion (Arrow 1963). Marquand argues passionately against the intrusion of the market into the public sphere, and against the metamorphosis of citizens into consumers. Trust is central to his argument: "the public domain is... the domain of trust": it is the state's "service ethic which is the true guarantor of quality", and which is seen to contrast with the processes and language of the market (Marquand 2004: 135). As Le Grand (2003) indicates, however, the apparent loss of altruistic motivations does not necessarily preclude trust. Trust is, after all, essential to market transactions (Walsh 1995). Instead, the coming together of the mutual interests of provider and consumer in a market or quasi-market may be a powerful basis of trust: this understanding of trust as an alignment of provider and consumer interests is further discussed in Chapter 2.

Other commentators have focused on the meaning and enactment of the consumer relationship. It is suggested that decisions about trust become individualised: such decisions, based previously upon a collective and taken-for-granted assumption of professionals' trustworthiness, become the active responsibility of individuals as consumers (Gunter et al. 2010). Alternatively it is proposed that consumerism replaces trust (Dean 2003), so that, for instance, trust in experts is replaced by a mechanistic system of consumer rights (Barnes and Prior 1998).

### ***1.1.2 Audit, targets and trust***

A second feature of welfare service reform which is held to disturb trust is the emphasis on top-down performance management, characterised by rapid expansion of audit and inspection, performance targets and monitoring (Dunleavy and Hood 1994; Power 1997; Martin 2002). It is suggested that such systems may, in common with market structures, impede or distort professionals' benevolent motivations. Professionals may be demotivated by their lack of autonomy (Le Grand 2007a). Alternatively audit and other regulatory mechanisms may create perverse incentives, so that professionals strategically align their behaviour with the demands of auditors and targets, rather than with the needs of users (Power 1997; O'Neill 2002); there is empirical evidence of such 'gaming' behaviour (Bevan and Hood 2006). Of course, these are *prima facie* claims about trustworthiness rather than trust. Perverse incentives and resultant gaming behaviour imply that professionals may behave in an unreliable or untrustworthy manner: trust, however, will be damaged only if the possibility of such unreliability is perceived by users.

The growth of state audit and targets may undermine trust in a further way. Such surveillance may be interpreted as a signal that professionals are neither benevolent nor especially competent. Systems of regulation, introduced to protect users from poor services and taxpayers from financial waste, may ironically reinforce a "discourse of failure" (Newman 2002: 84) - the very act of audit and evaluation may become a public symbol of professionals' untrustworthiness:

Evaluation and inspection are public assertions of societal control which violate the assumption that everyone is acting with competence and in good faith. (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 359)

Users' trust in services may not flourish when there is transparent institutional and political suspicion of the motivations of professionals or providers.

*The de-moralisation and de-valuing of trust*

There is a final suggestion that welfare service reform is weighted towards particular conceptions of trust or confidence, with the negative outcome that essential dimensions of trust are overlooked or discouraged. Clinical governance regimes in health, for instance, are held to prioritise impersonal systems of audit, bureaucratisation and consumerism in an attempt to provide reassurance about the quality of care (Harrison and Smith 2004). Trust produced within individual relationships between users and practitioners is neglected (Harrison and Smith 2004; Brown 2008). For Harrison and Smith (2004), trust is essentially a moral commitment between two actors; policy focus on impersonal systems denies such moral motivation. Brown (2008: 351) contrasts the 'instrumental' trust created through institutional systems with the 'communicative' trust produced through interpersonal interactions: it is only through such interactions that a patient can receive some affective sense that the professional is committed to his or her best interests. In this case it is the affective dimension of trust which is overlooked. Key to these accounts is the prediction that impersonal systems impinge upon interpersonal trust: systems may create distance between professionals and users (Harrison and Dowswell 2002; Brown 2008); confidence in systems may reduce the requirement for personal trust (Smith 2001). How far there is such a substitution effect between systems and interpersonal trust is unclear, and is explored further in Chapter 2.

Taylor-Gooby and Wallace (2009: 407) similarly identify as problematic the 'individual, rational and instrumental' model of human agency which is held to underpin policies such as market competition, consumer choice and regulatory control. Such an approach neglects the 'normative/expressive' dimension of trust, whereby expectations of reliability are established within a shared normative framework through value-based commitments and understandings. Current policy structures may obstruct the expression of such commitments: market incentives, it is suggested, do not encompass care and ongoing commitment to the other (Taylor-Gooby 2009). Further, the instrumental rationality and rhetoric of the market and of efficiency-based policy may contravene the normative assumptions upon which public trust in institutions is founded: hence citizens express distaste for and suspicion of monetary incentives,

competition and managerialism in the NHS (Taylor-Gooby and Wallace 2009). The focus here is upon citizens' trust in overarching institutions, and not upon users' trust during transactions with welfare services. Nonetheless, inasmuch as citizens are also potential service users, negative perceptions of institutions are not irrelevant: as one respondent suggests in Taylor-Gooby and Wallace's study (2009: 415), concern about the institution creates, during treatment, a "question mark at the back of your mind".

### ***1.1.3 Trust and welfare services: summary***

The institutional frameworks within which trust is established appear to be shifting. Wider social trends, such as a decline in deference and increasing scepticism of professionals, imply that trust relations are changing and, perhaps, problematic. There are varied predictions of the effect upon trust of recent welfare reforms. Competitive markets or quasi-markets may enable trust through the coordination of the interests of provider and user. Alternatively, market-based structures and top-down audit and regulation may undermine belief in the benevolence of professionals' motivations; such institutional structures are also proposed to eviscerate trust by denying its essential moral, affective or normative content. Central to such debates are contrasting conceptions of the nature of trust and its production. These differing understandings are considered in more detail in the next chapter.

## **1.2 The institutions of preschool provision**

It is suggested, therefore, that the institutions established or encouraged by policy-makers may affect the dynamics of trust in welfare services. In the following sections the focus narrows onto the institutions of preschool provision. The purpose is twofold: first, to describe the trajectory and objectives of policy, especially since the advent of the Labour Government in 1997<sup>3</sup>; second, to set out the institutions and mechanisms of service delivery through which such policy interest has been channelled, and which provide a setting for the relationships of trust between parents and preschool providers.

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork in this study took place between 2007 and 2010 during the third Labour administration. The discussion here focuses on policies in place at that time. In 2010 a coalition of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties took power; references are made as appropriate to the Coalition's emerging early years policies.

### *1.2.1 Preschool policy in England<sup>4</sup>: an overview*

Preschool provision has acquired increasing economic, social and political importance. Driven by increasing rates of maternal employment, it has become a common shared experience for young children in the UK: 96% of children followed by the Millennium Cohort Survey had some experience of formal preschool provision between the ages of three and five (Roberts et al. 2010: 136). Emerging policy interest in preschool provision can be identified in the latter stages of the Conservative Government (1979-1997), which promised a publicly-funded preschool place for every four-year-old (Major 1994); a voucher scheme for four-year-olds was established during 1995 and 1996 to fulfil this commitment, albeit supported by only small amounts of extra funding (Sparkes and West 1998). From the early stages of the subsequent Labour Government policy interest in the early years was significant and supported by substantial investment (Moss 1999; Lewis 2003). Government funding of preschool provision nearly trebled in real terms between 1997 and 2007, enabling a substantial increase in preschool places (Stewart 2009).

Such attention to the early years has been described as a ‘watershed’ (Lewis et al. 2003: 18). Preschool provision in England had historically been a private responsibility – state-funded institutional provision had been minimal and generally limited to families considered to be in need (Randall 2000). The Government’s introduction of a ‘National Childcare Strategy’ (DfEE 1998) and of a universal free entitlement to early education for three and four year-olds marked a shift towards collective public responsibility for preschool provision (Lewis 2003). The continuance of substantial elements of this programme by the Conservative / Liberal Democrat Coalition implies that preschool provision has, at least to some degree, become embedded as a mainstream government responsibility<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> This description of policy refers to England. Some elements of policy – for instance, inspection regimes – have followed different trajectories in the devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> The Coalition has, for instance, retained the entitlement to free part-time early education for three and four year olds. It has also maintained and plans to expand the coverage of the Labour Government’s emerging provision of free early education places to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, which will become a statutory entitlement for eligible children from September 2013 (DfE 2011a; DfE 2012).

The Labour Government's attention to preschool provision was founded upon twin policy objectives: first, improved early learning opportunities for children; second, increased labour market participation by mothers to improve children's material well-being (Lewis 2003). Such policy objectives particularly focused upon disadvantaged families and the social exclusion which they faced (Glass 1999; Lewis et al. 2003). Maternal employment, facilitated by childcare, was seen to be central to efforts to reduce child poverty (HMT 2004; DCSF 2009). In addition, there was growing recognition of the beneficial impact of high quality preschool provision upon the developmental outcomes and school readiness of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (for instance, Sylva et al. 2004; Waldfogel 2004): increased investment in preschool provision was therefore repeatedly identified as a means to reduce the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, and hence to improve social mobility and equality of opportunity (HMT 2004; DfES 2005a; DCSF 2007). Recent policy reviews and emerging policy statements from the Coalition Government have also emphasised early intervention and preschool provision as an essential means of tackling disadvantage (Field 2010; DfE 2011a).

### ***1.2.2 The structures of preschool provision***

Policy interest and investment has, in general, been channelled through mechanisms characteristic of contemporary welfare services reform – a market or quasi-market, a mixed economy of providers, and top-down regulation. In addition, preschool provision has been offered within the framework of the Government's children's centres programme. These developments in the structures and delivery of provision are explored in the following sections.

#### *A preschool market*

The dominant institutional mechanism for the delivery of preschool provision has been the market (or quasi-market) and parental choice of provider within a mixed economy of organisations (Lewis 2003; DCSF 2009). The "cornerstone" of the Labour Government's childcare strategy was the establishment of an entitlement to free part-time nursery education for all four-year-old children from 1998 and for all three-year-

old children from 2004 (Hughes 2006: 4)<sup>6</sup>. This entitlement was enacted through a quasi-voucher system whereby parents selected between providers from state, third or forprofit sectors (West 2006). There was no automatic right to a place at a specific provider; it was the responsibility of parents to find and secure provision within this quasi-market<sup>7</sup> (West 2006). The extent of this entitlement was limited: initially funding supported 12.5 hours per week for 33 weeks per year; in 2006 the entitlement was extended to 38 weeks per year<sup>8</sup> (HMT 2004). A second key initiative, the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit (WTC), supported working parents on low to middle incomes to purchase additional provision by meeting a maximum of 80% of childcare costs<sup>9</sup>. Again, this initiative was market-based: parents were required to search for, select and make arrangements with providers in the marketplace. For those parents who required provision beyond the limited free entitlement, but who were not eligible to receive the childcare element of the WTC, the purchase of provision remained a private transaction in a conventional market.

Policy documents used the language of consumerism. Parents were described as ‘consumers’ (HMT 2004: 47; DCSF 2009: 51); the initial decision in 1998 to set the childcare element of WTC at 70% was justified as a ‘shopping incentive’ which would encourage parents to seek out good value (HMT 1998: 10). The role of government was interpreted to be facilitation of the consumer relationship, whether through stimulation of the market to maximise the choices available to parents (DfEE 1998; DfES et al. 2002; Lewis 2003), or through ensuring the availability of information so that parents might make well-informed consumer decisions (DCSF 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> In addition free nursery places of between 10 and 15 hours per week were made available to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds from 2009 following a number of pilot schemes (DCSF 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘quasi-market’ is used here, following Le Grand (1991), to recognise that, in contrast to a conventional market, parents were not using their own money to purchase services, but quasi-vouchers funded by the state.

<sup>8</sup> Subsequent to the empirical phase of this study, the free entitlement was extended to 15 hours per week.

<sup>9</sup> Maximum costs against which the discount could be applied were, in 2009, £175 per week for one child and £300 per week for two children (HMRC 2009). The Coalition’s 2010 spending review reduced the discount to 70% (HMT 2010); the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit is currently under review as part of the development of the new Universal Credit (DWP 2010).

Responsibility for ensuring the sufficiency of both preschool places and of information was in turn delegated to local authorities as statutory duties (Childcare Act 2006).

This emphasis upon market-based structures is not unusual in contemporary welfare services in England. The preschool transaction, however, remained distinctive for the extent to which it might involve a direct monetary payment from parent to provider. Some provision was, of course, free. The entitlement to early education for three and four-year-olds was intended to be free at the point of delivery. Daycare for children in need was also free: in this case social services departments provided or purchased places for vulnerable children. But there were numerous contexts when parental fees were required. Provision for children under three generally required a parental payment; so too did provision for three and four-year-olds beyond the limited hours of the early education entitlement. Further, despite the Government's intentions, the early education entitlement itself was not always provided free at the point of delivery: in some cases nurseries did not provide the entitlement as a 'stand-alone' offer, but required parents to purchase additional hours (West et al. 2010); there is evidence that some private providers sought 'top-up' payments from parents because government funding of the entitlement was considered insufficient (NDNA 2006). Fee payments were thus central to the experiences of many parents when using preschool provision.

#### *A mixed economy*

Preschool provision in England had historically been provided by a mixed economy of organisations (Sparkes and West 1998; Lewis 2003). As a corollary of choice, the Labour Government, in common with the Conservative administration which preceded it, emphasised the benefits of maintaining a diverse range of provision (Sparkes and West 1998; DfEE 1998). Policy initiatives sought to expand provision in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors. Start-up funding, through programmes such as the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, targeted the development of PVI settings in deprived areas (Evers et al. 2005); most of the expansion in places for three-year-olds took place in the PVI sectors (DfES 2000; NAO 2004). Subsequently the Childcare Act (2006) established a statutory presumption against state provision and in favour of PVI organisations (although there was no presumption against provision arranged by maintained schools). There has been particular rhetorical support, from both the Labour and Coalition Governments, for provision by third sector organisations, including 'new'

organisational forms such as social enterprises and mutuals (DfEE 2000; Office of the Third Sector 2006; DfE 2011a). Third sector advocates have also proposed that the preschool field is well-suited to the development of social enterprises, including consumer or worker cooperatives (Social Enterprise London 2006).

**Table 1.1: Use of types of preschool provision by age of child (2008)**

<b>Type of provider</b>	<b>Children aged 0-2 (as % of 0-2 population)</b>	<b>Children aged 3-4 (as % of 3-4 population)</b>
Nursery school	3	14
Nursery class	1	22
Reception class	0	17 <sup>i</sup>
Day nursery	21	17
Playgroup or preschool	6	17
Childminder	5	6
Nanny or au pair	2	1
Other	-	5
<b>Use of any formal provision</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>86<sup>i</sup></b>

Source: Speight et al. 2009 (Table 2.2, p. 23)

Notes:

- i. There may be under-reporting of the number of children using reception classes, and therefore also of the total number using formal provision.

The interaction of such policies with the pre-existing patchwork of organisations created a complex and differentiated web of provision. Providers used by parents varied across both type and sector of organisation – and the availability to parents of both type and sector of organisation was contingent upon the age of their child and the amount of provision required. Table 1.1 (above) shows the types of provision used by children at different ages at the moment when the empirical phase of this study was undertaken. Provision for children aged birth to two years was primarily in daycare nurseries and, to a lesser extent, in preschools<sup>10</sup> or with childminders. At ages three to four many more

<sup>10</sup> ‘Preschool’, as a noun which identifies a type of group provision, tends to describe settings which offer sessional provision rather than full daycare. Typically, provision is offered across morning and afternoon sessions of two to three hours; often settings are open termly rather than all year.

children attended provision; this increase was taken up largely in school-based early education settings and in preschools.

In addition to diversity in the type of provision used, there were also variations in the sectoral balance of provision at different ages. Provision of free early education for four-years-olds was dominated by maintained schools; but over 50% of three-year-olds received free early education in PVI organisations in 2008, reflecting the Government's encouragement of PVI provision for this age group (DfE 2011b). There was a contrasting picture where provision was for children under three or where parents required full daycare. The state, with the exception of some provision within children's centres, had largely withdrawn from the delivery of full daycare and sessional care (Lewis and Lee 2002; Phillips et al. 2009). Expansion of daycare had been driven by the forprofit sector (Land and Lewis 1998; Ball and Vincent 2005), including an increasing presence of corporate chains (Penn 2011a). Despite a decline in the number of its preschools and playgroups (DfES 2001), the third sector remained a significant provider of sessional care (Phillips et al. 2009).

### *Regulation*

The Government's investment in preschool provision was accompanied by the development of top-down regulation in order to improve quality or, at least, to ensure "minimum quality standards" (HMT 2004: 24). Such regulation had four strands. First, the Government sought to standardise preschool practice. The Foundation Stage curriculum for children aged three to five-years-old was introduced in September 2000, and established as part of the statutory National Curriculum by the Education Act 2002 (West 2006): all organisations which provided state-funded early education were required to implement this curriculum. While there was initially no statutory curriculum for children under 3, mandatory national standards were introduced in 2001 as "a baseline of quality below which no provider may fall" (Sure Start 2003: 1); in addition detailed guidance about effective practice was published through the *Birth to Three Matters* framework (DfES 2002). The Childcare Act 2006, however, introduced a single statutory curriculum, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), for the entire period from birth to five: the Act established for all providers a legal responsibility to

comply with EFYS requirements from September 2008 (DCFS 2008; West et al. 2010). The empirical investigation in this study thus straddled the introduction of the EYFS<sup>11</sup>.

Second, the Government sought to strengthen the inspection of provision. The Care Standards Act 2000 transferred responsibility for inspecting preschool settings from local authorities to the education regulator, Ofsted; in addition Ofsted was given a separate statutory responsibility to inspect those providers who offered funded early education (under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998), and continued to inspect maintained schools which provided nursery education (initially under section 10 of the Schools Inspections Act 1996; subsequently under section 5 of the Education Act 2005). Although consolidated under the oversight of Ofsted, inspection therefore remained fragmented between care, early education and schools regimes. Eventually, as a complement to the EYFS, the Childcare Act 2006 introduced an integrated framework which merged care and nursery education inspections; inspections of maintained schools remained distinct. As well as such amendments to overarching structures, there were changes to the inspection process. During the second cycle of inspections (2003-2005), prior notification of inspection was withdrawn for group preschool providers (HMT 2004; Ofsted 2011). There were particular attempts to improve the accessibility of inspection reports for parents. From 2003, a simple 3-point rating system was introduced for care inspections, and a 4-point system for nursery education; these were subsequently merged into a four-point grading scale (Ofsted 2011).<sup>12</sup> Also from 2003, all inspection reports of group provision were published online (Ofsted 2011); the Education Act 2005 enabled Ofsted to require that providers disseminated inspection reports to parents who used a nursery.

A third dimension of regulatory intervention was the Government's attempts to improve the early years workforce. Policy documents expressed concern at the quality and status of preschool workers (DfEE 1998; HMT 2004; DCFS 2009). The national standards implemented in 2001 established that all managers and supervisors should have at least

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<sup>11</sup> Following a review of the EYFS (Tickell 2011), the Coalition Government has chosen to maintain a 'slimmed down' birth to five curriculum (DfE 2011c).

<sup>12</sup> The 3-point rating system was comprised of 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory' grades; for the 4-point system, the grades were 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory' and 'inadequate'.

a level 3 qualification, while half of remaining staff should have at least a level 2 qualification (Sure Start 2003)<sup>13</sup>: between 2000 and 2006 over 100,000 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)<sup>14</sup> certificates in childcare and early years care and education were awarded in England (LGA 2007). Such a framework, nonetheless, permitted unqualified staff to remain in the workforce. From 2004 policy shifted to favour graduate leadership in preschool settings (HMT 2004). A new category of early years graduate worker – the Early Years Professional (EYP) – was established, with the intention that such a professional should be in a leadership post at all children’s centres by 2010, and in every full daycare setting in England by 2015 (DfES 2005b, 2006a). The first EYPs qualified in 2007 (Owen and Haynes 2008).

**Table 1.2: Legal requirements for ratios of staff to children**

<b>Age of children</b>	<b>Type of early years provider</b>	<b>Adult to child ratio</b>	<b>Qualification requirements for highest qualified member of staff<sup>i</sup></b>
Under 2	Any	1:3	Full & relevant level 3 qualification (e.g. NVQ Level 3)
2	Any	1:4	Full & relevant level 3 qualification
3 and over	Registered provider or independent school	1:8	Full & relevant level 3 qualification
3 and over	Registered provider or independent school	1:13	Qualified Teacher Status, Early Years Professional Status or other suitable level 6 qualification
3 and over	Maintained schools and nursery schools (except for children in reception classes)	1:13	Each class must be led by a ‘school teacher’ (legally defined)
Children will reach the age of 5 in school year	Reception classes (infant classes) in maintained schools	1:30	No more than 30 pupils in an ordinary teaching session conducted by a single school teacher

Source: West et al. 2010 (Table 3, p.161); adapted from DCSF (2008)

Notes:

- i. Additional legal requirements relate to the qualifications and experience of other staff.

<sup>13</sup> A level 2 qualification, according to the National Qualifications Framework, is equivalent to GCSE grades C-A\*; a level 3 qualification is equivalent to an A-level (QCA 1999; Ofqual 2012).

<sup>14</sup> National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were established in 1986, and NVQs in the preschool field in 1991 (Calder 1995). NVQs were awarded at different levels which corresponded to the National Qualifications Framework - hence an NVQ2 was a level 2 qualification.

Nonetheless there remained significant variations across different types of setting. Staff at full daycare and sessional provision remained lower paid and less qualified than those in maintained education settings; indeed, the pay of non-supervisory staff in private daycare settings was close to the minimum wage (Phillips et al. 2010). Such differences were institutionalised through regulation. Qualified teachers were mandatory in nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes, but not in other settings (West 2006); as table 1.2 (above) indicates, different staff:child ratios were expected at different settings, and were linked to staff qualifications. Graduate-level workers were thus concentrated in maintained schools; less than one in five full daycare and sessional settings were led by a graduate or equivalent in 2008 (Phillips et al. 2010).

Fourth, the Government sought to strengthen arrangements for vetting adults who wished to work with children. The Protection of Children Act 1999 required preschool providers to check potential staff against government lists of those considered unsuitable to work with children. In practice, such checks were undertaken as part of enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) disclosures, which also revealed spent and unspent criminal convictions, cautions and warnings, and any other information held on local police records which might be considered relevant to the job application (DfES 2005c). Any staff member without a CRB check could not be left unsupervised with children; it became a criminal offence knowingly to employ in childcare posts any person who was barred from working with children (DfES 2005c). Similar regulations applied to schools<sup>15</sup>, which were additionally under a statutory obligation to check applicants' status as qualified teachers as appropriate (DfES 2006b)<sup>16</sup>.

These extensive regulatory interventions were intended not only to improve quality, but also to strengthen parents' confidence in provision. The two objectives were linked: the Government identified the need to "[win] parents' confidence through improving the quality of childcare places" (HMT 2004: 28). The establishment of the EYFS and other

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<sup>15</sup> Schools were not required to request a CRB disclosure if the new staff member had been employed in the educational workforce within the previous three months. There remained an obligation to check against the government's List 99, which recorded those barred from working in educational settings.

<sup>16</sup> A review of the vetting and barring systems has subsequently been undertaken by the Coalition Government. A number of recommendations to improve the administration of the CRB regime have been accepted (Home Office 2011; HM Government 2012).

regulatory amendments in the Childcare Act 2006 were the occasion of especially unequivocal assertions about the confidence which parents should have in provision:

Mothers and fathers will have the certainty of knowing that, whatever their background, high quality local early years education and childcare will be available to support them and their children. (Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, quoted in DfES 2005a)

... wherever they send their children, parents can be assured that essential standards of provision are in place. (DCFS 2008: 10)

However, as described above (section 1.1.2), there remained the possibility that attempts to build confidence through regulation might be counter-productive. The extent to which curricula were specified and detailed, for instance, has been held to signify distrust of professionals (Penn 2011a). Vetting procedures have been criticised not only for perceived ineffectiveness, but also for creating a climate of distrust towards adults who work with children (Furedi and Bristow 2008; McAlinden 2010). Finally, Ofsted's identification of unsatisfactory nurseries has been represented as an indication of a widespread failure of provision and of a consequent risk to children (for instance, Cecil 2008).

### *Preschool provision and children's centres*

The principal mechanism for the delivery of preschool provision was, therefore, the market and quasi-market, supported by a range of regulatory instruments. Provision was, however, also offered within the apparently contrasting framework of the children's centres programme. Children's centres had grown out of the Government's flagship Sure Start early intervention programme<sup>17</sup>. An initial policy proposal of a children's centre in the 20% most disadvantaged wards in England (DfES et al. 2002) was swiftly superseded by a promise of a centre 'in every community' by 2010 (HMT 2004: 35). In common with Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), children's centres in the most disadvantaged areas were expected to provide a range of integrated services to parents of preschool children, including integrated early education and daycare, parental outreach, family support, health services, information about other early years services, and links with employment services (Lewis et al. 2011; Eisenstadt 2011); in

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<sup>17</sup> Whether the move from Sure Start Local Programmes to children's centres represented organic growth, or was an explicit change in policy direction, is debated (Lewis 2011).

other areas the role of children's centres was to be information provision and directing parents to services (DfES 2006c). Especial prominence was given to the accessibility of services for disadvantaged and hard-to-reach families (DfES 2006c) – a focus driven in part by disappointing initial evaluations of SSLPs' ability to reach and to benefit such families (NESS 2005; Lewis 2011).

Children's centres were also characterised by a more concentrated emphasis on early education and full daycare provision (HMT 2004; Lewis 2011). Centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas were required to offer such provision, although not for free (DfES 2006c)<sup>18</sup>; a proportion of the planned expansion in preschool places was thus to be provided within the children's centres framework (DfES 2003). There was an expectation that early education and full daycare within children's centres would be fully integrated, so that there was continuity of staffing and support for families throughout the birth to five period (DfES 2003); all children's centres were required to employ a graduate Early Years Professional by 2010, and preferably a qualified teacher (DfES 2006c).

Two caveats are necessary with regard to this policy focus on integrated services. First, there remained an emphasis on a mixed economy of provision. The Government encouraged a range of preschool providers within the children's centres framework (DfES 2003); where the supply of places was insufficient, local authorities were required to favour PVI providers (DfES 2006c). Perhaps as a result, managers of children's centres reported links to PVI providers over whose work they had no control (Lewis et al. 2011). Notwithstanding this injunction to favour PVI providers, in 2008 nearly 60% of full daycare offered onsite at children's centres was provided by the maintained sector (Phillips et al. 2009). Second, despite the terminology of 'centres' and 'co-location' of staff and services (DfES 2006c), 'integrated' services were frequently dispersed across multiple geographical sites (Lewis 2011). A 'hub and spokes' model was common, whereby a 'lead setting' was supplemented by other sites which provided elements of the core offer (Lewis et al. 2011). Children's centres might offer, therefore, a virtual framework of integrated services rather than a physical reality.

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<sup>18</sup> The Coalition Government has removed this requirement (DfE 2010).

### ***1.2.3 The institutions of preschool provision: summary***

Preschool provision was, therefore, the object of significant policy interest and investment during the Labour administration. The utilisation of market-based mechanisms of delivery and of a mixed economy of providers showed a certain continuity with the historical arrangements of preschool provision in England. Such market-based structures, and the multiple regulatory mechanisms to which the preschool field was subjected, also had a strong fit with contemporary trajectories of welfare reform. The institutions of preschool delivery are indeed precisely those which have been predicted to erode or problematise trust (section 1.1).

## **1.3 The institutions of preschool provision: emerging commentaries**

As policy interest and investment in the early years has developed, a growing body of literature has critically considered the institutions of preschool provision and parents' experiences of early education and care. Significant themes from this literature are considered in section 1.3.1. Within such commentaries, trust is sometimes invoked as a dimension of parents' experiences and as an explanation of their choices; but it is not itself explained or interrogated in any depth. These empirical glimpses of trust are described in section 1.3.2.

### ***1.3.1 The institutions of preschool provision: themes and criticisms***

Developments in the structures and delivery of preschool provision have been challenged on numerous grounds. There are concerns about the affordability and availability of preschool places (West 2006; Waldfogel and Garnham 2008): fees remain very high (Daycare Trust 2007, 2011); there are doubts about the financial sustainability of private provision in disadvantaged areas (NAO 2004; Lewis 2009). Concerns have been especially raised about the quality of provision, the level of qualifications and the extent of funding in PVI settings (Sylva et al. 2004; West 2006; West et al. 2010). Contrasts between the qualifications and pay of staff in PVI provision and of qualified teachers in maintained education settings are considered significant, since studies have indicated that higher staff qualifications (in particular qualified teacher status) are associated with better outcomes for children (Sylva et al. 2004; West 2006). Notwithstanding stated policy intentions to integrate care and

education, the historical divide between these two strands of preschool provision has continued.

Particular challenges have been identified for disadvantaged parents and children. The high cost of private nurseries and the limited availability of places present significant barriers to low income families, so that their choices of provision are constrained (NAO 2004; Ball and Vincent 2005; West 2006). The preschool market is thus construed to be inequitable (Vincent and Ball 2006). It is also segregated, so that higher and lower income families may use different types of provision (Vincent et al. 2008; West et al. 2010). Parents using private day nurseries have a higher socio-economic and educational profile than users at other settings (Melhuish et al. 1999; Kazimirski et al. 2008); state integrated centres, by contrast, offer provision to a relatively high proportion of workless families, lone parents and children from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (Melhuish et al. 1999). Further, participation in any kind of formal provision is lower amongst low income households (West 2006; Smith et al. 2010); fewer children from lower income and workless households take up the free early education entitlement (Smith et al. 2010). For some low income families, the use of paid childcare may be uncomfortable or considered inappropriate (Vincent et al. 2004; Dean 2007). Given the political focus upon formal preschool provision as a means to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, such evidence of barriers to participation is problematic. There have been related concerns about the capacity of SSLPs and children's centres to reach vulnerable families (House of Commons Select Committee on Public Accounts 2007; Ball and Anning 2007).

In addition to such doubts about the quality, equity and sufficiency of provision, there have been overarching normative criticisms of the suitability of policy institutions and, in particular, of market structures. There has been discomfort at the treatment of preschool provision not as a public good, but as a private commodity to be bought or sold; for Moss (1999), the preschool institution becomes akin to a factory. Associated with such concerns about commodification is disquiet about the growing presence of profit-making organisations (and especially corporate chains) in the field: profit is predicted to drive out benevolence and moral obligation (Penn 2011b).

It is suggested, further, that both the market-based delivery of preschool provision and also wider family policy have inappropriately privileged individualised economic rationality and the structures of financial exchange. For Duncan et al. (2003: 310), this is “a rationality mistake”: taking a gender-based perspective which focuses on mothers’ central role in family and childcare work, they describe how decisions around mothering, childcare and employment are not reducible to individualised and self-interested rationality, but are embedded within mothers’ social ties, moral contexts and negotiated understandings of appropriate behaviours (Duncan et al. 2004). Vincent and Ball (2001, 2006) draw similar inferences from one of the few empirical investigations of parents’ experiences within the preschool market. The relationship between providers and parents is infused with emotion; mothers in Vincent and Ball’s initial study (2001: 650) strove to minimise the monetary aspects of the transaction and to “bring care and love to the forefront”. Vincent and Ball (2006: 48) therefore identify an irreconcilable tension between the respective paradigms of the market and of preschool provision: the market, as an “exchange relationship rather than a shared practice based on shared values”, is held to deny the very qualities of care and love which parents seek when they purchase provision. There is an obvious resonance between such accounts and the concerns described earlier about the impact of policies derived from assumptions of instrumental rationality upon the normative, affective and moral dimensions of trust; however, commentaries on preschool provision have not considered the specific impact upon trust of this implied ‘rationality mistake’.

### ***1.3.2 Empirical glimpses of trust***

Within emerging explorations of preschool provision, trust is frequently glimpsed. Often, indeed, it is identified as a key explanatory factor when describing parents’ approaches to provision and their selection of settings. Speight et al. (2009: 91, table 7.2) report that trust was second only to reputation as a reason offered by parents for their choice of preschool providers. Leach (2009: 206) finds that “the issue of trust overrode all others for many parents” and was a source of considerable anxiety; for Vincent and Ball (2006: 43), the central question for mothers, as they sought information through their social networks, was “can I trust my child with this person, this organization?”

Numerous studies propose trust as an essential explanation for the *type* of preschool provision which parents choose. Himmelweit and Sigala (2004: 462) attribute parents' different choices to contrasting beliefs about whom might be trusted:

Some did not trust anyone who was not a family member to look after their children; others would trust only childminders who had been personally recommended; yet others would trust nurseries but not individual childminders.

Trust is typically seen to underpin the preference of some parents for informal childcare provided by friends or family (Wheelock and Jones 2002; Harries et al. 2004; Bryson et al. 2006; Lie 2006). As a corollary, lack of trust may be a barrier to parents' use of formal provision (Garbutt et al. 2003; Roberts 2008), or at least a source of discomfort when using such provision (Vincent et al. 2010). Trust is considered to be elusive and challenging within the institutional setting of the preschool market and the wider context of social change (Ball and Vincent 2005). There are suggestions that low income parents in particular distrust provision which is offered outside the family (Roberts 2008); Harries et al. (2004: 2) describe "an ingrained culture of distrust of formal childcare" in disadvantaged areas where historically there has been limited provision. Vincent et al. (2008) find that the approach of working class parents is nuanced: in their study childminders are distrusted, but parents are unexpectedly positive about nurseries. Given that policymakers have sought to encourage disadvantaged families to engage with formal provision, any barrier to engagement on account of distrust is a policy concern. "Winning parents' confidence" was indeed one of four key themes in the Government's 2004 childcare strategy paper (HMT 2004: 28).

Trust therefore has frequently been used as an independent variable to explain parents' behaviours. Yet, despite this attributed significance, there has been no attempt to undertake a comprehensive explanation or interrogation of trust itself in the preschool context (Rutter and Evans 2011). Further, accounts which refer to trust often lack conceptual clarity. Surveys of preschool use, for instance, have usefully drawn attention to the significance of trust in parents' decision-making, but suffer from conceptual blurring. As an example, trust, recommendation and providers' reputations are presented as alternative explanations for parents' choices (Bryson et al. 2006; Speight et al. 2009) - but reputation and recommendation are more accurately conceptualised as mechanisms which underpin trust, rather than as factors which

compete with trust as an explanation of preschool choice (section 2.3.1 below). Similarly, the same surveys create false oppositions between the quality which parents desire from a provision (such as educational content) and the belief that such quality will reliably be provided (trust).

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

There has been increasing recognition of the importance of trust in the provision of welfare services. It is perhaps not coincidental that this recognition of trust's significance has been accompanied by concerns about its health. There are eloquent proposals that institutional reform of welfare services has disrupted embedded trust relations. Three concerns have been identified here: the impact of market-based structures and their implicit assumptions about providers' motivations; the effect of regulation on providers' behaviours and upon perceptions of their trustworthiness; and a policy framework which, being grounded in assumptions of instrumental rationality, fails to accommodate the moral, affective and value-based content of trust. Such concerns are situated within a wider societal context of uncertainty in which trust in professionals, expert systems and government is seen to be declining.

Recent policy interest and investment in preschool provision in England has been primarily channelled through institutional mechanisms characteristic of contemporary reform: parents act as consumers within a market or quasi-market; there is a mixed economy of provision; preschool providers are subject to a complex set of regulatory interventions. This institutional framework consists of precisely those structures which, it has been proposed, may disrupt trust. Emerging commentaries have thus far criticised the quality, sufficiency and equity of provision; there has been concern about the appropriateness of reducing the parent / provider relationship to a market-based financial exchange. Trust in preschool provision has, however, as yet received little attention. It is often glimpsed in emerging accounts of parents' experiences, both as a significant factor in parents' choices of preschool providers and also, when it is lacking, as a barrier which may discourage the use of formal provision. But there has been little empirical or analytic investigation of the role and dynamics of trust, and no attempt to engage with wider scholarly insights into its nature and production.

The general discussion of trust in welfare services, and the specific glimpses of trust in accounts of preschool provision, imply that trust is likely be both fundamental and challenging for parents as they seek and use preschool services. An investigation of the dynamics of trust offers an important contribution to overall understanding of parents' experiences and choices in the preschool market. Such an investigation also supports understanding of how trust works in a market-based, state-regulated welfare service.

## 2 Trust and preschool provision: a conceptual framework

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Trust has variously been described as a “promiscuous concept” (Newman 1998: 36), a “verbal and conceptual morass” (Barber 1983: 1) and an “imprecise and confusing notion” which is poorly understood (Misztal 1996: 9). Nor has increased academic interest necessarily resolved conceptual confusion (Das and Teng 2004; Zinn 2004), perhaps because trust has been investigated through the theoretical lenses of different disciplines, in different fields and at different levels of analysis. The lack of conceptual clarity is in turn problematic for empirical research (Misztal 1996; Tonkiss and Passey 1999). This chapter seeks to navigate diverse perspectives and theoretical approaches in order to create a conceptual framework which can guide empirical study of trust in the preschool field. The purpose is not an exhaustive immersion in scholarly accounts of trust: as Möllering (2006: 1) warns, there is an “infinite amount of issues... around trust one can get drawn into”. Nor is there an attempt to achieve some definitive account of trust’s meaning or production: the lack of academic consensus renders such an exercise fruitless and inappropriate; to create such an account in any case risks prejudging empirical study. The objective instead is a conceptual framework which emerges from a rigorous critical summary of theoretical insights into trust, and which can provide a foundation for the task of investigating trust empirically in a social policy context.

The chapter draws eclectically upon insights from diverse disciplines, including economics, sociology, psychology and organisational studies. Such insights are not presented discretely, but are brought together in thematic sections. The chapter begins by presenting a basic framework of the key concepts, functions and dimensions of trust (section 2.1); insights from this framework are then utilised to depict the ‘trust problem’ which parents face when using preschool provision (section 2.2). Subsequent sections consider in more detail propositions about how ‘trust problems’ are resolved. Section 2.3 explores theoretical themes and debates about the nature and meaning of trust and its production. Section 2.4 focuses specifically upon how trust might be produced in the preschool setting; it proposes a multi-level understanding of trust production across institutions, organisations and interpersonal relations. Drawing upon such insights and also upon the gaps in knowledge around trust and preschool provision identified in Chapter 1, the chapter concludes by confirming the study’s research questions.

## **2.1 Trust: key concepts and dimensions**

As an initial step, this section draws on literature from a variety of disciplines to propose a basic framework of trust. Such a framework usefully sets out the boundaries of the phenomenon – and the types of empirical situation - which are under consideration. The framework is built incrementally, so that each dimension of the structure is clearly presented - trust as a psychological state, its function (and functional equivalents), its production, and, importantly, the dimensions of reliability or trustworthiness which are desired from another actor. These general characteristics remain, however, a starting point. The specific meaning and practical actualisation of trust remains, as discussed in section 2.3, a subject of considerable debate.

### ***2.1.1 Trust as a psychological state: expectation, reliability and vulnerability***

Barber (1983) suggests that actors' expectations are the starting point for a consideration of trust. Within academic literature trust is indeed recurrently identified as, or associated with, expectation (for instance, Luhmann 1988; Fukuyama 1995; Mayer et al. 1995; Möllering 2006). Moreover, it is expectations of a certain kind which trust conveys: there is an anticipation that an obligation will be met (Misztal 1996), a sense of security in “expected futures” (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 968), an expectation of “regular, honest and cooperative behaviour” (Fukuyama 1995: 26). These expectations can be summarised as an expectation of reliability<sup>19</sup>, the term used by Giddens (1990: 34). The object of this expectation of reliability – in other words, who or what is expected to be trustworthy - may be other members of the community (Fukuyama 1995), a person (Misztal 1996) or a system (Giddens 1990).

Within a relationship of trust, however, reliability is not guaranteed: a second characteristic of trust is the vulnerability of the person who trusts to disappointment or harm through the actions of another person or a system (Gambetta 1988; Mayer et al. 1995; Möllering 2006). In a situation of trust, an actor depends on the performance of another (Luhmann 1979; Coleman 1990); if there is no possibility of disappointment, then the concept of trust becomes redundant, since reliability is assured. The notion of

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Reliability’ is sometimes used as a synonym for consistency. Given this meaning, an actor might be reliably dishonest or reliably incompetent. ‘Reliability’ is used here, however, to convey behaviour which is consistently beneficial (or at least not harmful) and which matches undertakings made.

trust is thus bound up with the freedom of the other to disappoint (Gambetta 1988; Misztal 1996); it is the very notion of the freedom of the other, defined as “people’s uncontrollable power to act”, which creates the need for trust (Luhmann 1979: 41).

These components are adequately captured by the definition of Rousseau et al. (1998: 395), who sought a common understanding of trust across the disciplines (economics, sociology, psychology) which operate within the field of organisation science:

Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another<sup>20</sup>.

Trust, therefore, is a psychological state; it is distinct from its antecedents (the factors which produce or enable trust), its focus (trustworthiness - the attributes of the actor who is trusted) and its behavioural consequences (trusting behaviour).

### ***2.1.2 The function of trust: leaping into uncertainty***

In what conditions are such positive expectations of reliability necessary? The prominent functional analysis of Luhmann (1979: 5) identifies “unmanageable” social complexity as the fundamental problem for which trust is a solution. Multiple contingencies create uncertainty for actors. Trust can cut through this uncertainty: it “creates a connotation of reliability in the face of contingent outcomes” (Giddens 1990: 33), a “springboard for the leap into uncertainty” (Luhmann 1979: 33). This context of uncertainty is essentially related to the autonomous agency of other actors which has already been observed: trust is a response to the contingent and unpredictable choices of others (Sitkin and Roth 1993; Sztompka 1998).

Uncertainty is commonly presented in terms of informational difficulties. Trust is conceived as a solution to situations in which information is lacking (Luhmann 1979), whether on account of barriers which prevent full monitoring of others’ actions, or on account of ignorance of the will or behaviour of other people (Gambetta 1988; Seligman 1997). Underlying such informational difficulties is the notion, implied by the description of trust as ‘expectation’, that trust relates to future prospects (Luhmann

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<sup>20</sup> Such a definition is not universally accepted. Hardin (2006: 33), for instance, criticises accounts which reduce trust to “mere expectations”: to trust is to hold expectations “for the right reasons”. For Hardin, indeed, trust is not so much a state of mind as a form of knowledge.

1979). Thus Coleman (1990: 91, 98) focuses on “time lag” within a transaction: an investment is made prior to the delivery of goods and services, or to the performance of other actions by the trusted person. The transaction’s outcome is therefore unknown and uncertain; trust “bridges the present with the future” (Brown et al. 2011: 291). Moreover, in some contexts the desired action is not only subject to time lag, but is beyond the capacity of the trusting individual to evaluate at any stage (Dasgupta 1988).

Ultimately trust, through enabling tolerance of uncertainty, facilitates trusting behaviour – the “leap into uncertainty” which Luhmann describes. Such trusting behaviour involves risk-taking (Mayer et al. 1995; Rousseau et al. 1998), since the decision to trust implies the acceptance of some kind of vulnerability to harm. There are far-reaching claims about the significance of trust in thus facilitating action: Luhmann (1979) argues that without trust only the most simple on-the-spot transactions would be possible; for Simmel (1900/1978: 178), in the absence of trust “society itself would disintegrate”.

Despite these emphatic statements, there can be alternative psychological states which respond to the dilemma of action under conditions of uncertainty. In seeking to understand how actors approach a trust-like problem in a real world setting, awareness of the possibility of such functional equivalents is important. Distrust is one such functional equivalent, being proposed as a strategy which may achieve a reduction of uncertainty (Luhmann 1979; Lewis and Weigert 1985). While a trusting actor will expect that his/her vulnerability will not prove problematic (Möllering 2006), a distrusting actor will maintain the presumption of possible harm (Luhmann 1979; Lewicki et al. 1998) and take precautions against predicted risks (Elster 2007). The practical operationalisation of distrust – whether through vigilance, monitoring or contract enforcement – may, however, be financially or psychologically costly. Alternatively distrust may, of course, cause withdrawal from the desired activity<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> There is disagreement about the meaning of ‘distrust’. For Lewicki et al. (1998: 439) it implies “confident negative expectations” regarding another’s conduct: harm is expected. Schoorman et al. (2007) have a broader understanding: distrust is simply the absence of trust. There would at least appear to be a conceptual distinction between an expectation that the other party is likely to inflict harm, and a neutral position which holds no particular expectation of harm or the absence of harm.

Consideration of the functional role of trust raises a final possibility. What if there is an urgent need to act, but evidence to support a judgement of trustworthiness is not available – or evidence even implies that distrust is more appropriate (Gambetta 1988)? Distrusting action such as monitoring, as noted above, is a possible way forward. Gambetta (1988: 223-224) alternatively proposes that the tension between the estimate of trustworthiness and the intense need to act may cause “a deceptive rearrangement of beliefs” in order to reduce cognitive dissonance and enable action. Trust in such a situation is held to be ‘irrational’ or ‘fideistic’; it is founded upon wishful thinking.

### **2.1.3 Trust – in what? The dimensions of trustworthiness**

Trust can thus be broadly defined as an expectation of reliability or good behaviour by another. Numerous commentators have, however, suggested that this desired reliability is multi-dimensional. Barber (1983), for instance, proposes that the concept of trust hides three distinct expectations: expectation of the persistence of the natural and social moral order, expectation of technical competence, and expectation of fiduciary duty. Renn and Levine (1991: 179-180) identify five components: competence, objectivity, fairness, consistency and faith.

This multidimensionality is often labelled as the dimensions or components of trust (for instance, Renn and Levine 1991; Nooteboom 1996; Siegrist et al. 2005). It is more accurately described as the dimensions of *trustworthiness* – the attributes of another about which an actor seeks reassurance of reliability. Mayer et al. (1995), on the basis of a review of recurring themes in commentaries on trust, identify a parsimonious and widely cited three-part classification - ‘ability’, ‘integrity’ and ‘benevolence’. *Ability*, akin to Barber’s (1983) technical competence, is the “skills, competencies and characteristics” necessary to achieve the current task (Mayer et al. 1995: 717). *Integrity* is the adherence “to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable” (Mayer et al. 1995: 719). This dimension includes honest conduct, and is also extended to a wider idea of shared values: ‘value congruence’ is indeed the term preferred by Sitkin and Roth (1993: 371), who suggest that distrust is a probable consequence of situations in which essential cultural values are not held in common. *Benevolence*, finally, is described as “the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor” or cares for the trustor (Mayer et al. 1995: 718). This ‘positive orientation’ is explicitly distinguished from “an egocentric profit motive” (p.718). That is not to say, however,

that self-interested or ‘egocentric’ motivations are necessarily inimical to trust. How far actors seek out benevolence as a dimension of trustworthiness may depend on context: a doctor, for instance, may be expected to show a benevolent concern for a patient which is not necessarily expected in interactions with other trades (Arrow 1963). There are, further, significant propositions that it is precisely the alignment of the respective self-seeking interests of the parties in a transaction which enables predictions of reliability - and hence the attainment of trust. Such propositions are considered below (p.54ff).

There is sometimes a tendency to focus exclusively on trust as an expectation that the other will not act malevolently or opportunistically (for instance, Williamson 1985; Bradach and Eccles 1989; Madhok 1995): attention is fixed upon integrity / benevolence, and not competence. In the same vein, O’Neill (2002: 70) describes those actors who undertake to perform tasks which are beyond their competence as merely ‘irritating’; her focus is upon those who deliberately deceive. Such approaches are, however, too narrow. The ability of the other is likely to be an essential consideration in welfare services. A failure of competence in preschool provision is likely to be construed as more than irritating; its possibility may be hugely concerning to parents.

For an actor to engage in trusting behaviour, therefore, there may need to be assurance of trustworthiness across multiple dimensions. Each dimension may indicate the need for a subtly different basis of trust production: the bases for trusting in the benevolence of another may differ from those which enable trust in his/her ability (Mayer et al. 1995). Different dimensions of trustworthiness may, further, be more or less relevant in different contexts (Chen et al. 2011). There may, finally, be interrelationships between assessments of these different dimensions of trustworthiness. Thus, in situations where skills cannot be evaluated by the layperson, trust in integrity or benevolence may be a proxy for trust in ability (Barber 1983; Siegrist 2010). Despite suggestions that the dimensions tend to be positively correlated (Mayer et al. 1995), there may be tensions: an actor who admits to mistakes, for instance, may discover that his/her ability is trusted less, but trust in his/her integrity is strengthened (Johnson 1999).

#### ***2.1.4 Production of trust***

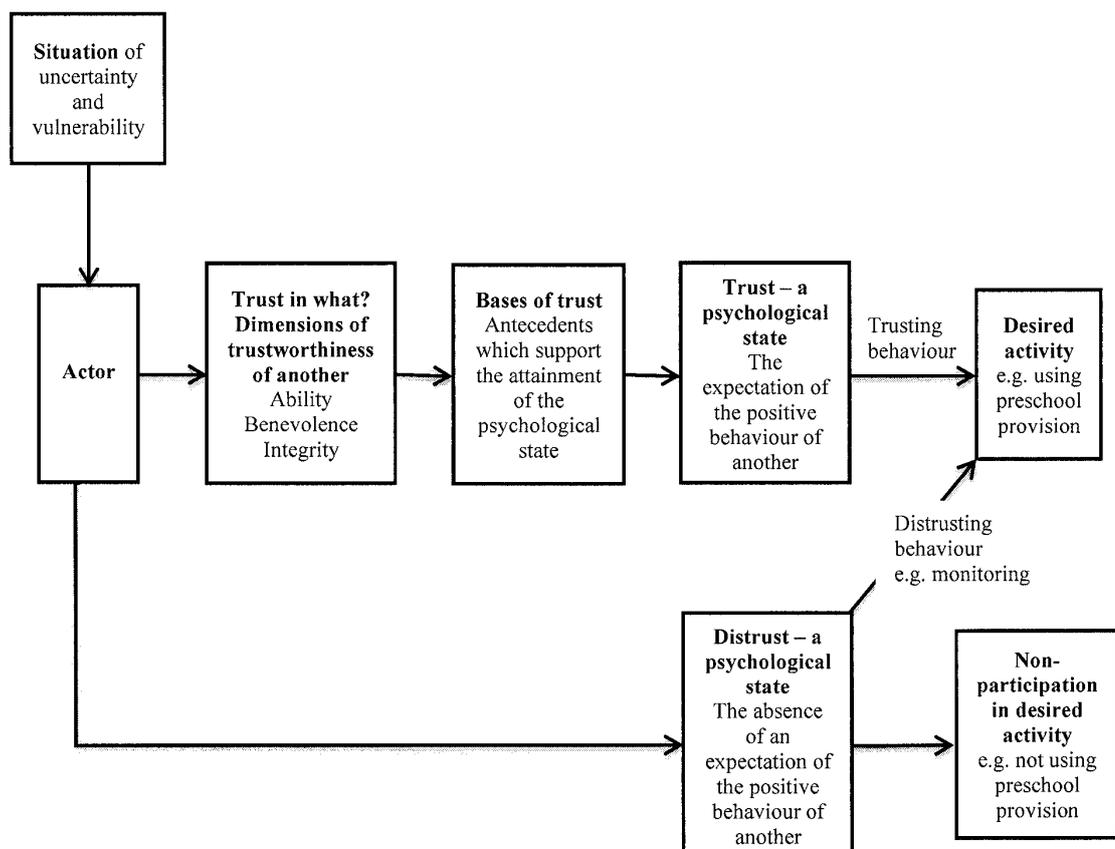
Trust, then, is an invaluable resource. Of central interest in empirical and policy research is the movement from a situation of uncertainty to a psychological state of

positive expectation. What conditions lead to the production of trust? On what basis do actors trust? These processes and factors can be conceived at two levels. First, there are the specific bases of trust – does one trust on account of professional certification, a person’s appearance, a reputation? Specific bases of trust in the preschool setting are explored in section 2.4. Second, there are differing understandings of the production of trust as a process. Does the actor make a calculation or a normative assessment? Is trust an active choice or a taken-for-granted presumption? For this reason consideration of the production of trust cannot be separated from wider debates about the meanings and nature of trust itself, which are explored further in section 2.3.

### 2.1.5 Summary

This brief discussion enables the creation of a basic framework of trust which can inform empirical study (figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: a basic framework of trust**



The framework sets out the problematic situation - a condition of uncertainty in which an actor, if he/she pursues a desired behaviour, will be vulnerable to the autonomous actions of another. Trust, as a psychological state of expectation that the other will act reliably, is a response which enables the desired behaviour to be undertaken.

Antecedent to this psychological state are bases of trust which somehow support this movement from uncertainty to trust. The nature of these antecedents, and perhaps of the psychological state of trust itself, may be affected by the particular attributes of trustworthiness which are required. Finally, actors may use alternative functional responses to manage the situation – in particular, distrust.

## **2.2 The trust problem: the importance and function of trust in preschool provision**

Chapter 1 noted frequent glimpses of trust in empirical accounts of preschool provision. The basic framework set out above enables the elaboration of more focused conceptual proposals about the empirical situation or ‘trust problem’ which parents face. In particular, by focusing on the concepts of uncertainty and vulnerability and their relationship with trust, the likely function and significance of trust in the preschool field can be drawn out (sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2). Further, it has been observed that trust is the positive expectation of the reliability of another. But what is the trusted actor reliably expected to do? In the preschool context, the notion of ‘quality’ is contested and multidimensional; thus the reliable performance expected within a trusting relationship may also be multidimensional, with possible consequences for the dynamics and production of trust (section 2.2.3).

### ***2.2.1 Preschool provision, uncertainty and trust***

Trust, as discussed above, enables action in a situation of uncertainty. Particular barriers to information in the preschool field imply that uncertainty for parents may be pronounced. It has long been recognised in economic literature that there are problematic informational difficulties for purchasers of certain welfare services. In such fields information about the quality of the product may be known to the provider but not to the purchaser: such asymmetric information creates a condition of uncertainty for which trust is a potential remedy (Arrow 1963). Ben-Ner and Van-Hoomissen (1993) identify three situations in which information asymmetry disadvantages purchasers, all

of which are apparently present in preschool provision. First, it is an ‘experience’ good (Nelson 1970: 312): users cannot evaluate the quality of the service until after it has been purchased and used. Much of the quality of provision inheres in the relationships between children, parents and staff. Such relationships can only be assessed as they develop during the preschool placement (Pestoff 2009). Moreover, the impact of provision on children’s developmental outcomes may not be observable for some time. There is thus an apparent time lag between a decision to use provision and a meaningful assessment of its quality.

Second, preschool provision is characterised by third party purchasing: purchaser<sup>22</sup> and user are not the same. The users - preschool children – are considered unable to evaluate adequately the quality of provision (Nelson and Krashinsky 1973; Nelson 1977; Krashinsky 1986), or even communicate to their parents much useful information about quality (Hansmann 1980; Penn 2011a). Parents, even after their child has attended provision for some time, may lack ‘meaningful information about life in care settings’ (Vincent and Ball 2006: 49).

Preschool provision is, third, a complex service (Mauser 1998), the quality of which may be inherently hard-to-measure. Parents may lack the skills or knowledge to make an appropriate evaluation (Morris and Helburn 2000; Cryer et al. 2002): empirical studies in the United States suggest that, compared to evaluations by professional observers, parents substantially overestimate the quality of care which their children receive (Cryer and Burchinal 1997; Cryer et al. 2002). Lack of expertise may be compounded by lack of experience - using a preschool setting is an infrequent transaction which parents may rarely undertake (Penn 2011a). Parents, therefore, may be relatively ignorant about the expertise which they purchase (Vincent and Ball 2006). This, together with the barrier to information created by third party purchasing, suggests that preschool provision may resemble a ‘credence’ good (Darby and Karni 1973: 68) – a good of which the quality cannot be adequately assessed even when it is used.

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<sup>22</sup> The term ‘purchaser’ is used as shorthand to describe parents’ role in choosing and monitoring provision. It is applied here both to transactions in which there is an actual monetary exchange between parents and providers, and also to situations where provision is free at the point of delivery in a quasi-market arrangement.

Parents, then, are predicted not only to face difficulties in evaluating the quality of provision before a child has enrolled (Pestoff 2009), but also perhaps to remain unaware of quality even when settings have been used over time (Walker 1991). There is an obvious principal-agent problem. Providers, shielded by information asymmetry, may engage in opportunistic behaviour - what Williamson (1985: 47) terms “self-interest seeking with guile” – by skimping on promised quality; opportunistic providers may create information asymmetries for their own benefit by deliberate failure to disclose information (Williamson 1985). There is indeed empirical evidence of such behaviour among US for-profit preschool providers, which sought to boost perceptions of their care by investing in easy-to-observe but relatively trivial items at the expense of hard-to-observe (and costly) substantive quality (Morris and Helburn 2000). Incompetent behaviours may also be hidden – while not necessarily deliberate or opportunistic, such behaviours will also be detrimental to the well-being of child and parent. Both the integrity and competence of providers are, in other words, problematic and uncertain.

An obvious response to insufficient information and a resultant principal-agent problem is direct observation of the agent by the principal (Holmström 1979). The cost of comprehensive monitoring, however, is likely to be prohibitive, effectively requiring a parent to be more or less permanently present at the preschool setting. Such monitoring would in any case tend to contradict the purpose of provision – whether it is to enable parental employment, provide parental respite or encourage children to move away from dependency on parents. Parents are thus faced with a dilemma. Monitoring is costly or counter-productive; yet, in the absence of monitoring, there are substantial informational difficulties and, consequently, threats of hidden opportunism, incompetence and poor care. In this context of uncertainty, evaluations of the trustworthiness of a provider are likely to be central.

### ***2.2.2 Preschool provision, parents’ vulnerability and trust***

Vulnerability, as observed above (p.42), is a central characteristic of trust: the actor who trusts has something invested in the relationship (Mayer et al. 1995); there is a risk of harm or loss. The extent of vulnerability varies according to the nature of the investment; for Heimer (2001: 43-44), it is related to “the proportion of the actor’s total assets that are at stake”. Where vulnerability is pronounced – in other words, where the items entrusted to another are of high value - then the need for uncertainty to be reduced

is powerful. In these circumstances, trust (or some functional equivalent) is likely to be of particular significance.

The act of entrusting a young child to the care of others carries a particular and pronounced set of vulnerabilities. The costs of poor quality care may be extremely high: Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) describe parents' fears that a wrong choice of provision might place a child in danger, restrict a child's development or adversely affect parent / child relationships. Such anxieties may be accentuated by media representations of hazards associated with preschool provision – whether of horrific abuse, accidents, or children's development of antisocial behaviours<sup>23</sup>. Such media coverage may not only emphasise the depth of possible harm, but also create a misleading sense of its likelihood. At stake, then, is not simply or mainly a material investment (although the monetary investment can be high), but the well-being of one's child. In consequence, parents' use of preschool provision may be riddled with emotions, norms and moral obligations around good parenting or, more commonly, good mothering (Duncan et al. 2003; Vincent et al. 2004). There are powerful feelings of fear, anxiety and guilt (Vincent and Ball 2001); Leach (2009: viii) describes “parents' desperate desire to do the best for their children”. The investment, and hence vulnerability, of parents seems profound. The need for reassurance about the reliability of provision consequently appears acute, and implies again the centrality of trust (or some equivalent) in parents' interaction with providers.

The likely intensity of parents' need for reassurance about their children's well-being suggests a further possibility – that there are incentives for wishful thinking. Parents may have limited choices: there may be a lack of affordable or convenient preschool places; alternatively exit from a setting may be costly, since the move may disrupt a child – and perhaps a parent too - emotionally and socially. In such cases, where parents are in some sense compelled to use a given provider, but retain a profound need for reassurance about the quality of provision, there are incentives to exaggerate

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<sup>23</sup> Example headlines include: “Cruelty at the nursery” in the *Daily Mail* (Harris 2004); “Entrusting their baby to a nursery was to have an outcome that this couple could never have imagined” in the *Evening Standard* (Levin 2003); “How nurseries 'still breed aggression'” in the *Daily Telegraph* (Womack 2007).

positive evidence of a provider's reliability. There are indeed suggestions that wishful thinking may infect parents' evaluations: it would be psychologically painful for parents to criticise a setting, since this would be an admission that they willingly submit their child to poor or imperfect provision (Leach 2009; Goddard and Groucutt 2011). Cryer et al. (2002: 275) attribute parents' tendency to overestimate preschool quality to an emotional bias of this kind:

what parents could admit to themselves... that they had knowingly placed their children in a program that did not provide what was important for their children?

### ***2.2.3 Trust to do what? The desired outcomes of preschool***

Given the extent of uncertainty and of parents' vulnerability, it seems likely that trust is functionally important to parents as they use preschool provision. There is, however, a significant contingency which may influence the focus of trust and hence its production. Trust is an expectation of the reliable behaviour of another – but, when a parent entrusts a child to a preschool setting, what is it that the provider is reliably expected to do?

'Quality' in the preschool field, as in many welfare services, is an elusive and multidimensional concept (Mooney and Munton 1998). Definitions of quality may be value-based, context-specific and dependent upon varied understandings of the child and of childhood (Mooney and Munton 1998; Tanner et al. 2006; Vincent and Ball 2006). Academic and professional evaluations of preschool quality tend to focus on children's cognitive or social development (for instance, Sylva et al. 2004). There is evidence that parents too may desire provision which develops children's social or cognitive skills, through either play activities or more structured acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills (Sharp and Davis 1997; Duncan et al. 2004; Tanner et al. 2006). Emphasis on educational outcomes is more prominent for older children as they prepare for school (Smith et al. 2010). But there is a wider range of outcomes which parents may value (West 2006) – for instance, the safety of children from accidental or intentional harm (Sharp and Davis 1997; Foot et al. 2000), children's emotional well-being and happiness (Sharp and Davis 1997; Lewis et al. 2003; Duncan et al. 2004), or the socialisation of children into a set of values (Uttal 1997). There are suggestions that distinctions in parents' preferences are associated with social class: Vincent et al. (2008) find that working class parents are concerned above all with their child's safety, while

middle class parents privilege their child's emotional well-being. Parents from higher socio-economic groups may also focus more on educational and social development (Melhuish et al. 1999; Duncan et al. 2004).

This multidimensionality of desired outcomes creates a complicated environment for the development of trust. It raises the empirical possibility that trust may itself be a multidimensional and outcome-specific phenomenon, so that, for instance, definitions of quality as child development, care or safety may each demand qualitatively different trust solutions. Further, Luhmann (1979) and Lewicki et al. (1998: 440) propose that actors may trust and distrust simultaneously according to different 'facets' of a relationship. Parents, therefore, may at once trust and distrust a provision according to different definitions of quality.

#### **2.2.4 Summary**

Application of the concepts of uncertainty and vulnerability enables a broad delineation of the empirical 'trust problem' which parents face. Preschool provision is apparently riddled with information asymmetries which obscure practice from parents: uncertainty is high. Yet the potential harm of a poor placement is significant, and in the worst case catastrophic. Given this powerful combination of vulnerability and unknowingness, the need for trust (or some functional equivalent) seems urgent and fundamental. Finally, since the outcomes desired from provision are often multiple, it may be that trust in the preschool context is correspondingly multidimensional.

### **2.3 Resolving the 'trust problem': debates about the meaning and production of trust**

The chapter thus far has set out the scope of trust and identified the empirical 'trust problem' which parents may face. But what trust is - and how it remedies such problems - is subject to contrasting understandings, often founded upon very different conceptions of human action and decision-making. In this section theoretical debates and proposals about the nature of trust, its production and the role of individual agency are discussed. The purpose is not to resolve these disputes, but to create an awareness of contrasting perspectives which can be carried into the empirical setting. Nor are the themes here an exhaustive overview of controversies around trust: they are identified for

their relevance to the interpretation of actors' behaviour as they negotiate interactions with a welfare service such as preschool provision.

### ***2.3.1 Trust and rationality***

Perhaps the most significant dispute about the nature of trust concerns its relationship to rationality. Rational choice theorists propose that trust is a calculation of costs and benefits undertaken by an individual actor; for others this notion of calculation contradicts the essence of trust, which is instead conceived to be a belief or presumption situated within a social and institutional environment of norms, taken-for-granted meanings and rules. There are, further, proposals of an affective component to trust. These varied views are set out below.

#### *Trust and the rational actor*

The concept of the rational actor, central to economic and social exchange theory, has been adopted to explain trust or trust-like phenomena. The rational actor can be briefly described through four characteristics: first, an actor is instrumental in fulfilling his/her interests (Scott 2000); second, the actor seeks the maximum fulfilment of such interests (Misztal 1996; Scott 2000); third, to achieve this maximum utility actors make rational calculations of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action (Goldthorpe 1998; Scott 2000); finally, rational choice is conceived at the level of individual decision-making - social life is reducible to or explained by individual action (Scott 2000).

Rational actor approaches to trust have three central dimensions. First, there is emphasis on calculative evaluation of costs and benefits by the person who trusts. Trust is synonymous with a bet (Sztompka 1998): it is a calculation of the probability of winning related to the amount that can be won or lost (Gambetta 1988; Coleman 1990; Das and Teng 2004). Even trust in a person becomes, in a commercial setting, a calculated "estimate of integrity" (Williamson 1993: 470)<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Williamson (1993) does not favour the term 'trust' to describe calculative assessments, suggesting that "calculative trust is a contradiction" (1993: 463): 'trust' should be reserved for non-calculative interpersonal relations. Coleman (1990), by contrast, uses 'trust' to describe a calculation of probabilities. This is, however, a terminological rather than analytic dispute, for both regard most trust-like relations to be a matter of calculation.

Second, the focus of such estimates are the constraints and incentives to which the other party is subject. The motivations of the other are assumed to be instrumental and self-interested: decisions by an actor about whether to break or respect trust are themselves a calculation of cost and benefit with the ultimate goal of utility-maximisation. There is much in common with the theories of motivation (and implicitly of trust) described by Adam Smith (1776/1852: 6-7):

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love...

This emphasis on self-interested action does not obviously allow for motivations of fiduciary duty or care for the other (unless self-interest is construed to include psychological benefits which accrue from altruistic acts). There appears to be limited space here for those who trust to seek 'benevolence' as a dimension of trustworthiness.

Hardin (2006:19) thus presents trust as an evaluation of "encapsulated interest".

Trustworthy behaviour is predictable when the interests of the two parties are aligned, so that the interests of the actor who trusts are 'encapsulated' within the interests of the actor who is trusted. The former's task is to evaluate whether such alignment of interests exists, and whether it is sufficient to outweigh other interests which may affect the trusted party. Hardin (2006) identifies conditions in which, because untrustworthy behaviour may be especially costly, interest alignment is probable. An ongoing relationship is one such situation – the actor who is trusted may not wish to jeopardise future beneficial interactions by unreliable behaviour. Similarly, an actor's reputation is an incentive to trustworthiness: an actor who is unreliable risks "the penalty of never being trusted again" across a wide network (Hume 1740/2000: 335; Coleman 1990; Hardin 2006). In these cases it is rational to trust, since it is predictable that the other party cannot afford to risk untrustworthiness. This conception of trust as an alignment of interests has obvious resonance with the policy structures described in Chapter 1. Market-based mechanisms of delivery seek to align the interests of providers and users precisely in this fashion. As Hardin's account makes clear, however, it is not enough that interests are aligned: such alignment must also be perceived by users if a state of trust is to be attained.

Third, rational actor accounts attribute a restricted role to social context. Normative sanctions against those who breach trust, such as social ostracism or even a feeling of guilt, merely broaden the set of incentives and constraints to which actors are subject (Blau 1964); they may therefore be included as further elements within the probability calculation (Craswell 1993). Similarly, social relationships are acknowledged only as resources producing knowledge with which more sophisticated calculations of trust can be undertaken (Hardin 2006). Evaluation of trustworthiness is fundamentally a calculation by an individual actor.

The rational actor model of trust has been subject to amendment. Elster (2007: 347) allows for a more socialised process of deliberative evaluation, so that trustworthiness is estimated not simply in terms of incentives and constraints, but also through consideration of “past behaviour..., signs and signals”. Granovetter (1985: 490) similarly proposes that decisions about trust are embedded in social relations: reputation, therefore, is not generally interpreted as “a ratio of cheating to opportunities for doing so”; instead, individuals seek information from trusted informants within a social network who have had dealings with an individual or organisation.

Rational actor accounts of trust, further, encounter an apparent problem of ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon 1997: 89): actors may intend a rational pursuit of utility maximisation, but are thwarted by a lack of information and by their own deficient computational abilities. Luhmann (1979) is explicit that trust cannot be conceived as calculated prediction or reduced to a probability value, since trust is required precisely because of the limited effectiveness of these processes in a condition of complexity. Similarly Gambetta (1988), although maintaining that trust for an individual actor remains a probability assessment, acknowledges that evidence alone cannot solve the problem of trust. For both Luhmann and Gambetta the rationality of trust lies instead at a systems-level: it is rational “to trust trust”, because such a policy enables action and allows development of trust as a resource or public good (Gambetta 1988: 234).

Such approaches bring into question the process which underpins a state of trust. If bounded rationality renders calculation ineffective, how then is trust attained? Good (1988: 42) suggests that, as a strategic response to bounded rationality, individuals make use of “habits we have developed for ourselves, or the routines which are offered

by our culture and society”; Gambetta (1988: 230) acknowledges that trust may be a “by-product of moral and religious values”. These proposals begin to move trust away from the individualised rational actor model towards something more social, something which is a product of belief rather than calculation.

### *Trust, social relations and social institutions*

A second group of approaches indeed present trust not as a rational calculation, but as a belief or presumption embedded within a social environment of norms, taken-for-granted meanings and rules. Such approaches to trust assume that actors operate within shared social frameworks which influence action; decision-making is infused with “situational elements” – “norms, rules, beliefs, resources” (Scott 2001: 67).

Thus Sztompka (1999: 53-54), while maintaining that trust is a bet, acknowledges that the bet may extend to the expectation of some kind of moral or value-based behaviour by the other. He warns of the dangers of such “axiological trust”, for “betting on the moral virtues of others is more risky than believing in their basic rationality”. Within commentaries on welfare services, and especially healthcare, there has been particular focus on normative dimensions of trust. From this perspective, trust is supported by actors’ perceived conformance with or embodiment of norms or values. Thus Brown et al. (2011: 285) describe how doctors are trusted because of their perceived embeddedness in “normative frameworks of professionalism and social interaction”; trust is maintained or diminished by the extent to which doctors’ behaviours sustain these normative expectations. Similarly Taylor-Gooby and Wallace (2009: 415) conclude that trust arises from the “values embedded in the framework of provision and expressed in encounters with [medical] staff.” Concerns about the impact upon trust of welfare service reform arise precisely because such value-based commitments are perceived to be obstructed (Taylor-Gooby 2009).

Other accounts of the relationship between social institutions and trust focus less on conscious evaluation of norms and values, and more on taken-for-granted routines and shared cognitive assumptions. Giddens (1991: 19) describes trust as a “generalised attitude of mind”; there is no presumption of a “conscious act of commitment” (Giddens 1990: 90). Trust in this sense underpins everyday life and day-to-day decisions as a “tacit acceptance of circumstances” (Giddens 1990: 90). As Misztal (1996) observes,

this approach resembles the conceptualisation of trust proposed by Garfinkel (1967/1984), for whom the very ability to act rationally is dependent upon “the person being able to take for granted, *to take under trust*, a vast array of features of the social order” (Garfinkel 1967/1984: 173, italics added).

Möllering (2006), in a similar vein, draws insights from the cognitive-cultural framework of sociological neoinstitutionalism. Decision-making and perceptions are held to be guided and constrained by “taken-for-granted scripts, rules and classifications” (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 15); actors play out social roles for which there are templates and scripts (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Scott 2001). Trust is again a presumption of taken-for-granted reliability, founded upon three bases. First, institutional rules, such as the law or technical standards, create a shared ‘meaning system’ which supports trust (Möllering 2006: 67). Second, actors hold expectations about the specified and scripted roles which others will perform: trust is thus a tacit expectation of the behaviours associated with a role, rather than an active assessment of individuals. Third, trust can become taken-for-granted within routine or habitual performance. Möllering (2006: 70) gives the theoretical example of parents sending their children to school – they will not (apparently) “fret”, because the act of entrusting the child to others has become “part of a daily routine”. From this perspective, central to trust in preschool provision is the set of institutional expectations which parents hold. The institutional setting of preschool provision is considered further in section 2.4.1.

### *Trust and affect*

Rational actor accounts have been further challenged for their failure to recognise affective dimensions of trust<sup>25</sup>. For Jones (1996: 5), indeed, the psychological state of trust arises from neither calculation nor belief, but is an “affective attitude of optimism” about the goodwill of the other. More commonly, and particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships, a dichotomy is identified between trust based upon cognition or rationality and trust based upon affect: McAllister (1995: 25-26), for

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<sup>25</sup> Affect, like trust, is a complex and contested concept. It is used here as a generic term to describe mental states such as moods, emotions and feelings. The term tends to imply “evaluative feeling” towards an object or person – the object / person is in some sense judged to be pleasant or unpleasant (Frijda and Scherer 2009: 10).

instance, identifies two principal forms of trust as “affect-based” and “cognition-based”. Lewis and Weigert (1985) interpret trust to be inherently a mix of the rational and the emotional; different types of trust are identified according to the qualitative mix of these ingredients. Although the relative presence of these ingredients varies, they suggest that trust is always a mix of the emotional and the rational: the exclusion of either misleadingly conflates trust with rational prediction or faith.

There are various propositions of how trust and affect are linked. It is suggested that trust arises out of the emotional bonds between participants in a relationship (Lewis and Weigert 1985; McAllister 1995); Brown (2008) describes trust emerging from the affective relationship between a doctor and patient. Trust may also evolve from a strong positive affect (in other words, liking) for the other (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Jones and George 1998), or from some sense that the other likes or cares for the person who trusts (McAllister 1995). Affect-based trust is proposed to assume more importance over time as relationships develop and as empathy with the other grows (McAllister 1995; Lewicki and Bunker 1996). It is sometimes described as a deep or resilient trust (Jones and George 1998), to the extent that contrary evidence about the untrustworthiness of the other may be discounted (McAllister 1995).

There are thus contrasting understandings of trust as calculative prediction of constraints and incentives, as normative belief, as taken-for-granted assumption or as affective response. For some commentators such understandings are not mutually exclusive. The balance of rationality and affect within a decision to trust may, for instance, be contingent on the specific situation and relationship (Lewis and Weigert 1985). The importance of context is also identified by Misztal (1996): in situations characterised by instrumental rational action, rational choice approaches to trust are likely to have considerable explanatory power; in settings characterised by passion, emotion or routine, other analytical frameworks may be more useful. Nonetheless there remain substantive theoretical disagreements about the nature of trust, its relationship to rationality, and the process by which actors come to trust in an empirical setting.

### 2.3.2 *Trust, knowledge and experience*

A second theme concerns the extent to which trust can be considered a matter of knowledge. There is, first, a straightforward contrast. Where an actor has “instrumental mastery” over a situation (Luhmann 1979: 15), or where another’s thought processes or the workings of a system are fully comprehended (Giddens 1990), then there is no uncertainty: in such circumstances trust is functionally redundant. It is, on the other hand, the very inadequacy of knowledge for which trust is a remedy (Simmel 1900/1978; Möllering 2006). Trust is thus conceived to be something more than simply inductive knowledge (Simmel 1900/1978): inherent in trust is a “leap to commitment, a quality of faith” (Simmel 1900/1978; Giddens 1991: 19). The essential characteristic of trust is that it is a leap of faith or suspension of doubt which “goes beyond available good reasons” (Möllering 2006: 49).

Nonetheless knowledge is not precluded as *part* of the process. For Giddens (1991) confidence derived from inductive knowledge may be a dimension of trust; for Luhmann (1979: 26), “trust always extrapolates from the available evidence”. Indeed, while knowledge may not resolve the problem of trust, there are common propositions that some evidential underpinning provides a foundation from which a leap to trust is more comfortably undertaken. Thus Baier (1986: 235) describes the desirability of ‘good grounds’ in order to achieve a trust which is ‘reasonable’. ‘Good grounds’ – and indeed knowledge – might be derived from rational deliberation, from social frameworks or from affective response. Some accounts nonetheless privilege trust which is supported by ‘objective facts and logical reason’; such trust is held to have a ‘strong’ and reliable basis (Nooteboom 1996: 991). Evidence, finally, may fulfil a social or psychological need: ‘reasons’ for trust may be required as a presentational tool, enabling actors to justify their behaviour to themselves and others (Luhmann 1979).

There are, of course, situations when evidence is scarce. This may be the case at the inception of a relationship, particularly when contexts are unfamiliar (Hardin 2006). Taking the initial step to trust can be problematic (Nooteboom 1996). ‘Blind trust’ – trust without evidence - may be functional as a means of initiating a trust-building process (Möllering 2006); alternatively, actors may creatively identify “good enough reasons” which justify their trusting behaviour (Tillmar and Lindkvist 2007: 359). But to trust blindly or on the basis of contrived evidence may be risky. Actors are advised

to engage ‘with small steps’ (Möllering 2005: 17); little should be placed at risk at first, and initial interactions should be monitored before further commitments are made (Kramer 2009). Tillmar and Lindkvist (2007: 361) report empirical evidence of such “small ‘steps of faith’”. Such proposals evoke Luhmann’s “principle of gradualness” (1979: 41), a suggestion that trust relationships are always built on a step-by-step basis. But an incremental approach is not necessarily straightforward when using welfare services: a surgical procedure, for instance, does not obviously offer scope for experimentation or limited commitment. The absence of knowledge in such contexts may be especially challenging.

As relationships develop, knowledge of the other party may increasingly inform trust. Repeated interactions provide information about the trustworthiness of the other (Nooteboom 1996; Williams 2001; Hardin 2006); such information may be especially valuable since it is detailed and first-hand (Granovetter (1985). Lewicki and Bunker (1996: 121) identify the development of “knowledge-based trust” within ongoing relationships: the experienced reliability of the other enables confident anticipation of reliability in the future. Trust thus becomes a dynamic process: Mayer et al. (1995: 728) describe a “feedback loop” by which the experienced behaviours of the other contribute to future beliefs around trust. Incremental accumulation of knowledge may, further, extend beyond the gathering of information about the other. Growing familiarity may introduce into trust relationships mutual understanding and an affective dimension. There may also be a process of routinisation, so that an unfamiliar situation becomes taken-for-granted and habitual (Möllering 2006).

Trust, then, lies somewhere between knowledge and ignorance (Simmel 1908/1950). It is a response to situations of uncertainty when much may be unknown or unknowable. Yet the knowledge which is available to an actor – such as past experience of interactions with the other - may contribute to a decision to engage (or not) in trusting behaviour.

### ***2.3.3 The production of trust in contemporary society: two themes***

Having considered propositions and disputes about the nature of trust, this overview of theoretical and conceptual debates moves on to explore two themes relating specifically to its production: first, the contrast between interpersonal trust and trust in abstract

systems, and, second, that between *a priori* trust – trust which is automatically conferred – and trust which must be actively earned. In both cases there are propositions that the conditions of modern society have brought shifts in the bases of trust which actors use to resolve trust problems.

### *Interpersonal trust and trust in systems*

A contrast between interpersonal trust and impersonal trust in abstract systems is commonly drawn in sociological literature. Interpersonal trust is particularly associated with traditional societies: trust is embedded in community, kinship and friendship; it is enabled by familiarity (Giddens 1990; 1994b). The modern market society, characterised by impersonality and abstraction (Weber 1922/1968; Tönnies 1887/2001), is seen to reduce the possibility of such personal trust. Actors, particularly in urban settings, have limited access to the stable social relationships which support trust (Hardin 2006). Familiarity becomes rarer: it is frequently necessary to participate in exchange with strangers (Lewis and Weigert 1985). As communities become dispersed, the possibility of community enforcement of social sanctions for untrustworthy behaviour also recedes (Hardin 2006). In such conditions trust becomes depersonalised; the trusting actor becomes more reliant upon impersonal or abstract systems (Luhmann 1979; Zucker 1986; Giddens 1990).

Different systems are identified. Zucker (1986: 63-64, 90) describes a number of “institutional” bases of trust, including professional certification, regulation and organisational form; Giddens (1990) focuses upon expert systems of technical accomplishment and knowledge. Such knowledge can be personified in the form of a specific expert, so that trust is invested in people as systems (Luhmann 1979): thus trust in an individual because he/she is a doctor is conceptually distinct from trusting a doctor on account of friendship or interactions which develop over time. Common characteristics of these abstract systems can be drawn out. First, trust is invested in the “correctness of abstract principles” rather than the moral probity of a person (Giddens 1990: 34). Second, expectations become generalisable beyond a given transaction (Zucker 1986; Giddens 1990). Third, some degree of formality is implied: professional ethics may be codified, regulation is legislated. Finally, trust in systems is often represented as habitual or latent (Luhmann 1979; Giddens 1990).

The emergence of trust in systems does not preclude some role for personal trust. Market exchange can be rooted in social relations (Granovetter 1985), enabling the development of personal trust over time; interpersonal trust remains significant within organisations and in business transactions (Child 2001; Lewicki et al. 2006). There may also be a need for personal trust when actors come into contact with those individuals who ‘represent’ the principles of abstract systems. At these moments trust in people and trust in systems come together – or, as Giddens (1990: 83) characterises it, ‘facework’ and ‘faceless’ commitments coincide. The facework commitments of professionals or other representatives of abstract systems are not the same as intimate personal trust, although they can become this; rather, they involve a “demeanour”, a display of integrity or competent professionalism (Giddens 1990: 85). Such facework may nonetheless provide a sense of mutuality or intimacy which abstract systems themselves cannot provide (Giddens 1990). Furthermore, emerging scepticism about expert knowledge may undermine taken-for-granted trust in systems (Giddens 1991), so that there may be a renewed role for personal trust. There is evidence, for instance, that users distinguish between trust in welfare service systems and trust in individual professionals working within those systems - and trust in individuals is higher (Audit Commission/Mori 2003).

As Chapter 1 noted (p.22), the growing importance of trust in impersonal systems is considered unfortunate in some accounts of welfare services reform. There are fears of a substitution effect, so that confidence in systems pushes out more valuable forms of trust. The personal trust which is apparently replaced or obstructed is seen to be essentially moral, based upon values and personal commitment (p.22-23 above); such trust is considered fundamental to the interaction of user and professional in welfare services (Harrison and Smith 2004). Commentaries on trust within and between organisations also warn that formal procedures or systems create distance between parties, thus obstructing the development of interpersonal trust (Shapiro 1987; Sitkin and Roth 1993): trust becomes founded not upon others’ goodwill, but upon their procedural or legal compliance.

Such analyses must be treated cautiously. Luhmann (1988), far from envisaging a zero-sum relationship between confidence in systems and personal trust, describes a process of complementary reinforcement. Confidence in systems is regarded as a prerequisite

for participation in a contingent world; interpersonal trust enables the best use of the opportunities which such participation offers. Systems trust can also be regarded as a macro-level institutional phenomenon and interpersonal trust as a micro-level interactional phenomenon – as such, the two sets of relations need not conflict (Luhmann 1988). Impersonal systems thus become an essential underpinning for interactions; where appropriate systems are absent, such as an enforceable law of contract, transactions may be prohibitively risky (Tillmar and Lindkvist 2007).

#### *A priori trust and earned trust*

A second useful lens through which to consider the production of trust is the degree to which trust flows from an “*a priori*” belief, or, conversely, the degree to which it must be earned. “*A priori* trust” is used here to describe situations where an actor is automatically considered trustworthy. Such situations might occur when actors are perceived to hold shared values on account of tradition, kinship or community; or trust may be awarded deferentially on account of social, professional or expert status. Such beliefs may be taken-for-granted or actively considered; the significant point is that trust is awarded on the basis of some pre-existing characteristic or signal, rather than after consideration of reported or observed behaviours. There is again a sense that pre-awarded trust is ebbing: shared values of tradition and religion have declined (Giddens 1994b); there is decreased deference and an increased scepticism towards professionals and expert knowledge (Taylor-Gooby 2006). In sum, “nothing ‘goes without saying’ any longer” (Beck 1994: 21). Such scepticism may especially affect actors’ interactions with welfare services and government (Taylor-Gooby 2000).

As an alternative to *a priori* trust, trust can be won or earned. On one level earned trust is not a new phenomenon. Zucker (1986: 60-62) describes “process-based trust”: gift exchanges are made in the knowledge of the other’s past exchange history; in situations where the other is not known, reputation acts as a “symbolic representation” of an actor’s previous behaviour. In this way past behaviour earns for an actor the trust of another within a current transaction. In the context of growing scepticism and awareness of risk, however, Giddens (1994a: 186) proposes the stronger notion of “active trust” - trust, no longer taken for granted, must be “energetically treated and sustained”. Giddens (1994a: 187; 1990: 121) focuses especially on personal relations: there must be an “opening out”, an exhibition of “demonstrable warmth and openness”.

But there is also a role for active trust in support of institutions and expert systems: “Wherever there is scepticism... mechanisms of active trust proliferate” (Giddens 1994a: 187). Indeed, trust may co-exist with a sceptical attitude, a phenomenon which has been termed ‘critical trust’ (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 971; Taylor-Gooby 2008).

The idea of ‘earned trust’ emphasises the active agency of both those who are trusted and those who place trust. The former must earn and nurture trust through actions or demeanours. The latter can no longer rely upon a trust which is automatically conferred, but must make decisions which are justified by proactive enquiry (Taylor-Gooby 2006). The proposed emergence of such considered trust, actively placed by critical citizens, has gained normative support as a foundation for a functioning democracy and effective welfare services (O’Neill 2002; Seldon 2009). This emphasis on individualised decision-making also has a resonance with consumerist models of choice in welfare services. Critics of such models, however, warn that the welfare market may disadvantage those who do not possess the relevant skills and capacities (Barnes and Prior 1996); in the preschool context it is suggested that middle class parents are more able than their working class peers to fulfil the role of proactive and informed consumer (Vincent et al. 2010). There is a similar proposal that actors’ ability to engage in active decisions around trust may be contingent upon personal capacities and circumstances (Taylor-Gooby 2006; see also section 2.3.5 below). Further, within a social context of scepticism in which *a priori* sources of trust have been devalued, decisions about trust may become stressful and difficult, especially when much is at stake.

#### ***2.3.4 Achieving a state of trust: the extent of activity***

Within the debates presented thus far, there are varied predictions about the extent of activity which an actor undertakes. On the one hand, trust may be taken-for-granted; on the other, it may be a purposive decision, whether based upon a calculation of the constraints and incentives to which the other is subject, a belief about the other’s values, or an assessment of the other’s behaviour. There is indeed conceptual disagreement about whether trust is necessarily characterised by purposive decision-making. For Luhmann (1988), purposive decisions are fundamental to the idea of trust. An actor who trusts acknowledges risk and the possibility of being disappointed; he/she considers alternatives and makes a choice (Luhmann 1988; Siegrist et al. 2005). Luhmann (1988)

contrasts trust with ‘confidence’, a state in which the possibility of disappointment is ignored and alternative courses of action not considered. Confidence is thus considered to be passive - a form of ‘hope’ (Luhmann 1979: 24). Luhmann (1988) attributes confidence to familiarity and habit, giving as an example an actor’s assumption that a car will not mount the pavement and hit him/her on a Sunday walk: in this sense ‘confidence’ is akin to the taken-for-granted state of trust described by Garfinkel and Giddens (p.57-58 above). But it is suggested that passivity may also arise from an actor’s powerlessness to affect a relationship through actions or decisions (Gambetta 1988).

Other commentators, however, extend the concept of trust to include both active decisions and taken-for-granted beliefs. Thus for Möllering (2006) the leap of faith which he holds to be central to trust may be enabled by an unquestioning attitude or by the deliberate suspension of doubts; McKneally et al. (2004) offer empirical examples of both approaches among patients undergoing elective surgery. Giddens (1990, 1994a), as observed above, acknowledges that active deliberation around trust has become more likely in contemporary society. But he contends that trust must not be associated only with situations in which actors consciously consider alternatives: trust is “usually much more of a continuous state” (Giddens 1990: 32). Nor is such trust necessarily passive: trust, like other aspects of social life, is continuously re-interpreted according to experience and new information (Giddens 1991). The lack of an identifiable moment of decision-making does not mean that trust is unconsidered.

Where actors engage in purposive decisions about trust, there is a further conundrum: how much activity should support such a decision? Collecting information is costly, in terms of time as well as money (Arrow 1963). Coleman (1990), from a rational actor perspective, describes the search for information upon which to base a probability estimate about trust as itself a calculation of the cost and benefit of each additional item of information; rational decision-making demands that an actor should “invest an optimal amount of time, energy, and money in gathering... information” (Elster 1999: 144). But such approaches contain a contradiction: the value, or even the existence, of information which might be accrued through further searches is itself essentially unknowable, so that there can be no objective determination of the merits of continued information collection (Arrow 1963; Möllering 2006). Elster (1999) acknowledges that

the assessed value of acquiring information must depend upon actors' subjective beliefs and preferences, not upon an objective evaluation of optimal activity.

Notwithstanding conceptual disagreements, it is at least apparent that responses to trust problems involve varied levels of activity. There are general propositions that trust is more actively considered when a situation is non-routine or unfamiliar (Möllering 2005; Siegrist et al. 2005). When engaging with welfare services actors may especially encounter contexts which are both unfamiliar and disturbing. Such situations may force attention to the issue of trust, since there may be little that is taken-for-granted. Entrusting a child to the care of others at a preschool setting may indeed be not only unfamiliar, but also unsettling or worrying.

### ***2.3.5 Individuals' agency and propensity to trust***

Accounts of trust, finally, allocate a role to the interpretative agency of the actor who trusts. Möllering (2006), for instance, although situating trust firmly within a framework of social institutions (p.58 above), warns against an over-socialised approach: in common with neoinstitutionalist theorists (for instance, Scott 2001), he acknowledges the role of individuals in interpreting social contexts. Giddens' (1994a: 187) proposal of 'active trust' – and his related suggestion of a decline in trust which is pre-awarded through deference or tradition - further indicates a central role for individual agency and interpretation.

There have been attempts to identify individual traits which affect actors' responses. Analytic focus has been upon individuals' "propensity to trust" (Hardin 1992: 163; Mayer et al. 1995: 715): the extent of vulnerability or risk which an actor accepts may be contingent not only upon the perceived characteristics of the other party, but also upon the actor's "predilections to trust, on the *trustfulness* of the truster" (Sztompka 1998: 20; emphasis in original). Hardin (1992) suggests that a strong propensity to trust is advantageous, for it enables actors to accept risk in order to embrace opportunities which may be beneficial – although a trusting attitude, if taken too far, is akin to naivety and exposes an actor to exploitation (Hardin 1992; Sztompka 1998).

Various proposals have been made regarding the origins of such a propensity. A trusting disposition has been associated with actors' "psychological security" (Giddens

1991: 19), positive childhood experiences (Hardin 1992; Sztompka 1999), life satisfaction (Brehm and Rahn 1997) and optimism (Uslaner 1998). Life experiences are also predicted to be instructive, so that the propensity to trust is strengthened or weakened when trust is fulfilled or breached (Hardin 1992)<sup>26</sup>. Numerous studies have explored associations between demographic characteristics and a trusting attitude, using survey analysis of individuals' general trust in others or gaming experiments which explore trusting behaviour. Three broad themes can be identified. First, survey data in the UK and US suggest that women are generally less trusting than men (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002; Li et al. 2005); gaming experiments in economic decision-making have similarly implied that women are generally less trusting and more risk averse (Garbarino and Slonim 2009; Croson and Gneezy 2009). Second, US studies find associations between membership of an ethnic minority group and reduced trust in others (Alesina and La Ferrara 2002); there are specific proposals that perceived or experienced racial discrimination may reduce the propensity of black and minority ethnic (BME) actors to trust medical professionals and institutions in the US, although empirical findings are inconsistent (Stepanikova et al. 2006). Finally, socio-economic disadvantage has been associated with reduced trust in others in the US and UK (Uslaner 1998; Hall 1999; Li et al. 2005); Vincent et al. (2010), indeed, attribute working class parents' fears around childminding to a lack of generalised trust in others which is not shared by middle class peers.

Such focus upon propensity to trust offers useful insights into individuals' willingness (or not) to trust. Absent from such accounts is consideration of variation in *how* individuals trust. Emerging empirical accounts of trust in medicine, for instance, indicate the subjectivity and diversity of actors' approaches: patients' responses to the same behaviours by the same professional may be contrasting (Brown et al. 2011); trust is developed within communicative interactions which are interpreted subjectively (Brown 2009); patients' trust may, as previously described, be unquestioning or

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<sup>26</sup> A learned propensity to distrust is captured well by E.M. Forster (1910/1992: 50) in his portrayal of working class character Leonard Bast in *Howard's End*: "this young man had been 'had' in the past – badly, perhaps overwhelmingly – and now most of his energies went in defending himself against the unknown".

considered (McKneally et al. 2004). Such accounts support conceptions of trust which emphasise the interpretative quality of individuals' agency (Möllering 2006).

It is possible that demographic characteristics or other individual traits may be associated not only with actors' propensity to trust, but also with how trust is enacted and interpreted. Such a dynamic is visible in studies by Vincent (2001), on parents' interactions with schools, and Taylor-Gooby (2006), on public trust in government and new technologies. In both cases the authors identify socially differentiated approaches to trust: middle class actors manage trust dynamically through active participation and use of voice; working class and less well-educated actors are more passive and less able to articulate voice, so that their trust tends to be given blindly. Culture, too, may affect how trust is enacted: there may be cultural biases towards more or less trust in institutions such as the market, government or expert authority (Slovic 1993; Hofstede et al. 2010). Baier (1985, 1986), finally, raises the possibility of differences in how men and women approach trust. The centrality given to contract, obligation and "cool, distanced relations" within theories of morality and trust is, she suggests, a distinctly male perspective (Baier 1986: 248); morality and trust for women resides more in riches of caring or in an "ethics of love" (Baier 1985: 55).

There is, therefore, a subjective quality to trust; whether trust is possible or not, and how trust is approached and understood, is subject to the agency and interpretation of individuals. If, as Giddens (1994a) proposes, there is a growing shift towards active trust which requires actors to make deliberate judgements about the placement of their trust, then the mediating role of individuals becomes still more pertinent.

### **2.3.6 Summary**

The nature and production of trust is complex and contested. There are fundamental disputes about the relationship between trust and rationality; the relationship between trust and knowledge is also nuanced, trust being a response to insufficient knowledge and yet often informed by knowledge of some kind. The production of trust can also be described across different conceptual dimensions such as interpersonal trust and trust in systems, or *a priori* trust and earned trust; there are proposals and disputes about the interactions between these modes of trust production in contemporary society. There are debates too about the extent to which trust is characterised by active decision-

making rather than taken-for-granted assumption. Some role, finally, is acknowledged for subjective individual agency; there are particular propositions about associations between demographic and personal characteristics and individuals' approaches to trust.

Three issues can be inferred from these debates which can inform empirical research. First, there is an apparent repertoire of strategies and cognitions which actors might use (consciously or unconsciously) to achieve the resolution of trust-like problems – to achieve, in other words, some reduction of uncertainty which enables risk-taking action. In seeking to comprehend how actors approach trust problems in empirical settings, a precise conception of 'trust' is perhaps less important than awareness of the range of functional equivalents which actors may use and which are theoretically proposed. Second, time recurs as a significant variable. Experience of the other changes the 'frame' within which actors trust, so that trust is a dynamic process (Rousseau et al. 1998; Möllering 2006: 89); the nature of trust may alter with time, acquiring an affective dimension or becoming more routinised as transactions become familiar. As a corollary, trust at the inception of a relationship may be challenging. Third, accounts of trust make frequent reference to context. The balance of affect and rationality within trust, the extent of activity which underpins a decision to trust, and the norms which inform trust may be affected by the specific transaction, the institutional environment in which the transaction occurs and actors' familiarity with and interpretation of the transaction. Responses to such contexts may in turn be mediated by actors' own subjective understandings of trust.

#### **2.4 Bases of trust in the preschool field**

Whether the movement from uncertainty to trust is conceived as calculation, belief or leap of faith, there is a consistent implication that it is founded upon some kind of evidential or other basis<sup>27</sup>. The characteristics and meaning of these bases of trust remain, of course, subject to different understandings according to contrasting theoretical conceptions of trust. The final part of this chapter draws upon theoretical

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<sup>27</sup> There are, of course, exceptions. Wishful thinking (p.45) implies a state of trust despite contrary evidence; bases for trust in this case are self-deceptive. A pure state of 'blind trust' (p.60) would have no supporting basis.

proposals about trust production, empirical studies of preschool and the summary of the preschool policy framework in Chapter 1 in order to achieve a conceptual awareness of the bases of trust which may specifically underpin parents' trust in preschool provision.

As implied within the foregoing sections, the production of trust is a multi-level phenomenon. Typically a distinction is drawn between trust in overarching systems or institutions and interpersonal trust (Lewis and Weigert 1985; p.62-64 above); research into users' trust in welfare services indeed tends to be located at the systems and interpersonal levels. However, as observed earlier (p.13), there is in addition an intermediary organisational level where trust may be produced, but which empirical research into welfare services has not generally addressed. These three levels of trust production in the preschool context are considered in the following sections.

#### ***2.4.1 Trust and institutions***

Drawing on the policy framework described in Chapter 1, the institutions of preschool provision can be conceived at two levels: first, purposive systems which regulate provision, and, second, the broader institutional setting of the preschool market. In both cases, how such systems produce trust can be construed in contrasting ways according to different conceptions of trust. From a rational actor perspective, systems explicitly deter or encourage behaviours, acting as "third-party guarantor[s] and enforcers" (Möllering 2006: 61). Alternatively, institutions and systems can be understood as formal social structures which establish shared meanings and expectations (Zucker 1986; also p.57-58 above); often such institutions may be taken-for-granted, underpinning more active decisions around trust.

Chapter 1 described the introduction into the preschool field of mandatory curricula, inspection regimes, staffing ratios, minimum qualification levels and vetting mechanisms; such regulatory systems were intended not only to improve quality, but also explicitly to strengthen parental confidence. In common with government regulation in other fields, such systems may facilitate trusting action in conditions where evaluation of products is challenging (Hansmann 1996; Pearce 2008)<sup>28</sup>. Both

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<sup>28</sup> In addition to regulation specifically applying to preschool provision, providers are, of course, subject to general legal frameworks – such as contract and criminal law.

economic and sociological literatures have especially highlighted professional certification as a signal of trustworthiness (Arrow 1963; Zucker 1986): professional qualifications are a warranty that a certain level of skills has been achieved (Akerlof 1970); professional status may create a normative expectation that professionals will act ethically and benevolently in the interests of their clients (Arrow 1963; Misztal 2002). Notwithstanding the Government's emphasis on workforce qualifications, however, the meaningfulness of professional status in the preschool field is problematic. Preschool work is often of neither high social nor economic status (Cameron et al. 2002); explicit attempts by policymakers to raise workers' professional status themselves indicate a deficit<sup>29</sup>. Further, given the diverse composition of the preschool workforce (p.31 above), there may be multiple understandings of professional status, so that a qualified teacher in a school may be perceived differently from a day nursery worker.

Conceptualisation of systems trust should not be limited, however, to specialised regulatory mechanisms. Parents' interactions with providers are situated within the broader institutional settings of the preschool market and quasi-market. Market-based mechanisms are, from a rational actor viewpoint, an explicit example of trust as an alignment of the interests of providers and users. The central element of trust production is providers' desire to protect organisational reputation, a dynamic considered in the following section. By contrast, if trust is alternatively associated with normative or cognitive-cultural frameworks, then it is the social meanings and values that frame a transaction which are of central importance. Preschool provision appears to be situated at a fault-line where social institutions collide. In using formal settings parents participate in the structures and routines of the market; yet the content of the transaction - caring for a child - is arguably rooted in or refers back to the institution of the family. The market and family are contrasting institutions with different and potentially contradictory logics (Friedland and Alford 1991; DiMaggio 1997). Institutional tensions are visible in Ball and Vincent's description of an "impossible market" which demands the placement of "a price on things beyond price" (2005: 565). As the previous chapter noted, accounts of parents' preschool experiences imply a discomfort with apparently inappropriate market-based norms and routines, and

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<sup>29</sup> For instance, HMT (2004: 4): "Working with pre-school children should have as much status as a profession as teaching children in schools."

describe how parents privilege norms and moral obligations associated with the family and with parenting (Duncan et al. 2004; Vincent and Ball 2006). Nonetheless the market cannot itself be discounted as a powerful *social* framework of meaning. Consumerism is a “potent structure of feeling” which carries implications for actors’ roles and understandings (Clarke 1998: 50); policy-makers propose that it is precisely the rhythms and mechanisms of choice and consumerism which service users expect and with which they are comfortable (Vidler and Clark 2005)<sup>30</sup>. The production of trust in the preschool field may be contingent upon how parents negotiate these contrasting institutional frameworks.

For trust to be generated through systems or institutions, there is, finally, an essential precondition - actors must have trust in the systems themselves (Möllering 2006). If regulation, for instance, is to be a remedy for trust problems, parents must, first, be aware of the regulatory system (or at least assume that a system is in place), and, second, believe that such regulation is meaningful and effectively administered<sup>31</sup>. Comprehension of particular systems is, however, predicted to lie beyond the evaluative capacity of individual actors (Luhmann 1979; Möllering 2005). It may be, therefore, that some confidence in systems provides a basis for trust in preschool provision, but that such confidence in systems is itself a form of blind trust.

#### **2.4.2 Trust and organisations**

Empirical research into trust in welfare services has paid little attention to users’ trust at the organisational level. There are, however, proposals that organisational form is theoretically relevant to trust. In particular diverse propositions have been put forward about the trust-building properties of state, forprofit and third sector organisations. Two

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<sup>30</sup> Fulfilment of this consumerist expectation has been identified by the Coalition Government as fundamental to trust in welfare services: “In a world where people are making informed choices about almost every aspect of their life... public services have to be equally responsive to people’s demands if they are to retain people’s trust.” (HM Government 2011: 8).

<sup>31</sup> The effectiveness of preschool regulation has indeed been questioned: Penn (2002) doubts Ofsted’s capacity to make appropriate inspections; Mathers et al. (2012) question whether Ofsted grades accurately capture preschool quality; practitioners perceive that Ofsted inspections and national standards guarantee only minimum levels of quality (Lewis et al. 2003).

groups of propositions about the trust advantages of different organisational forms are identified below which, again, derive from contrasting understandings of trust.

*Organisations and trust: rational actor perspectives*

Rational actor accounts of trust in organisations focus on reputation, which is held to be especially central to users' decision-making when the characteristics of a good are hard to measure (Ortmann 1996). It is "reputational enforcement" within a market which underpins the perceived trustworthiness of forprofit firms (Ortmann 1996: 475). If a profit-making firm is discovered to be skimping on quality or otherwise profiteering, its reputation will be damaged: consumers will be less likely to enter into future transactions, and profits will be diminished. There is, then, an incentive for firms to protect their reputation by acting in a trustworthy manner; a good reputation therefore becomes, for the consumer, an indicator of likely trustworthiness. Protection of reputation may be especially urgent for profit-making chains, since damage to a chain's reputation or brand could be extremely costly (Hansmann 1996). Such accounts are consistent with Hardin's conception of trust as a perceived alignment of interest between actors (Hardin 2006; p.55 above); trust in this context is an estimate of the constraints and incentives which influence organisations' actions.

Empirical studies of preschool provision indeed suggest that providers' reputation is a central element within parents' choices (Sharp and Davis 1997; Smith et al. 2010); parents obtain invaluable information about providers through social networks (Sharp and Davis 1997; Foot et al. 2000), a process often described as "word of mouth" (for instance, Bryson et al. 2006: 157). It remains unclear, however, whether parents interpret reputation as a constraint on untrustworthiness – or whether reputation, as proposed by Granovetter (1985) and Sztomptka (1999), is better understood as a rich source of information about organisations' past behaviours which informs assessments of likely behaviours in the future. Such information, of course, may not be equally accessible to all. Vincent and Ball (2006: 44) describe how parents access "hot knowledge" about preschool provision through varied and complex social networks; working class parents, whose networks are often limited in scope (Holloway 1998; Braun et al. 2008), may be deprived of such rich information and recommendations.

In seeking to explain the provision of private goods by nonprofit organisations, rational actor theorists make a further proposition. In conditions where quality is hard to measure, and where regulation and forprofit reputation are underdeveloped, organisations which do not seek profit may seem more trustworthy: it is, after all, the goal of profit-maximisation which creates incentives to skimp on promised quality (Hansmann 1980). Thus nonprofit organisations, because of legal constraints on profit distribution, may seem to have less incentive to act opportunistically (Hansmann 1980, 1996). There are doubts, however, whether such legal constraints are either meaningful to users or perceived to be effectively enforced by the state (Anheier and Kendall 2002). Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1993) instead focus upon control of the nonprofit organisation by stakeholders who themselves use its services. Such user control becomes a signal of trustworthiness, since any reduction in quality harms the controlling stakeholders as well as other consumers; it is not simply a protection against exploitation, but also a strong incentive to supply high quality provision. In conditions of information asymmetry, finally, state providers should share the same advantages as nonprofit organisations, except where the latter boast meaningful user control (Rose-Ackerman 1996). Again, government providers have no profit-maximising incentive to exploit information asymmetries. On the other hand, users may perceive that, in the absence of competition, there is little incentive for state services to be effective.

#### *Organisations and trust: social and institutional perspectives*

A second group of approaches, deriving from a more socialised understanding of trust, explores how organisational form may signal trustworthiness or untrustworthiness through its resonance or dissonance with norms or taken-for-granted beliefs. The profit motive, for instance, may be considered normatively untrustworthy. Such a response, characterised by feelings of discomfort or suspicion, is conceptually distinct from a calculative assessment of the risk of exploitation. Thus Arrow (1963: 950) proposes that profit-making in medical services may cause patients to experience “suspicion and antagonism”. Nelson (1977: 95) identifies similar normative discomfort in the preschool context, describing “a widespread feeling that private enterprise is not to be trusted”; in a more recent study, middle-class mothers, despite accepting the necessity of private provision through the market, showed “dislike and distrust at too naked an emphasis upon the financial underpinnings of parent-child-carer relationships” (Vincent and Ball 2001: 643).

As a corollary, organisations which appear motivated by non-pecuniary values may seem *a priori* trustworthy. Third sector organisations may have particular advantages: for Jeavons (1994: 186) “trustworthiness goes to the core of the reason for the existence of these organizations”. Their independence from both state and market may generate trust among users and citizens (Alcock 2010a); value-based orientations may be conveyed through ethical or religious missions, rootedness in the community, voluntarism, or a generalised notion that third sector organisations exist to fulfil caring functions or as an institutional expression of altruism (James 1987; Jeavons 1994). The participatory and democratic character of some third sector organisations may also create trust: Pestoff (2009: 121-122), drawing upon studies of parent-led preschool cooperatives in Sweden, describes how parental participation in organisations’ governance and activities enabled a sense of mutuality and familiarity, not only between parents but also between parents and staff; a “spiral of trust” is created by involving parents as “co-producers”<sup>32</sup>. Policy documents have indeed argued that third sector providers are well-positioned to build trust, particularly with vulnerable users or those distrustful of state agencies (HM Treasury / Cabinet Office 2007; HM Treasury / DCSF 2007; see also House of Commons Select Committee on Public Accounts 2007). In Mauser’s (1998) US study of childcare only 14% of parents identified organisational form as an important determinant in choosing a provider – but of these parents almost all favoured nonprofit provision.

The state too may be perceived to embody values of altruism or benevolence. For Titmuss (1970/1997) the state enables altruistic behaviour by protecting actors from the demands of the market. The ‘public sector ethos’ can be understood as a normative framework which creates expectations of value-based behaviours; as noted in Chapter 1, Marquand (2004: 135) contends that it is the state’s ‘service ethic’ which guarantees quality. There are, however, contrasting warnings that some disadvantaged parents are especially distrustful of services provided by the state (Williams 2004; Field 2010).

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<sup>32</sup> There is, however, a common caveat about the diversity of third sector organisations: contrasts are drawn between the trust-producing characteristics of small-scale and participatory organisations, and the bureaucratised and impersonal structures of large professionalised entities (Tonkiss and Passey 1999; Rothschild and Milofsky 2006).

### 2.4.3 *Interpersonal trust*

Trust, finally, may be produced at the micro level of interpersonal interactions. Emerging investigations of health services suggest the centrality to trust of interpersonal relationships (Harrison and Smith 2004; Brown 2009). The relational character of preschool provision similarly implies a role for interpersonal trust: Vincent and Ball (2001: 643) describe how mothers seek “to personalise the transaction, to build relationships with the providers, to emphasise the affective”.

Bases of trust at an interpersonal level are again multiple. Trust in an individual may be, at least in the first instance, an example of *a priori* trust (p.64), whereby trustworthiness is assessed on account of some pre-existing signal. Zucker (1986: 60) describes ‘characteristic-based’ trust: social categories, such as age, gender, ethnicity or appearance, enable swift attributions of trustworthiness (or untrustworthiness) to be applied to people with whom an actor is otherwise unfamiliar. Characteristic-based trust is commonly interpreted as a means by which actors identify “shared background expectations” (Zucker 1986: 63) or shared morals (Seligman 1997) – some sense of similarity underpins trust. But a swift evaluation of characteristics may also indicate individuals’ trustworthiness specifically for the contingent role to be undertaken. Thus Gambetta and Hamill (2005) describe how taxi drivers judge the trustworthiness of passengers according to age, gender, ethnicity and wealth; the inference drawn from these characteristics is not of similarity to the driver, but of actors’ likely behaviours as passengers. A study of mothers’ choices in California offers some evidence that swift *a priori* categorisations may be used to evaluate the trustworthiness of provision. Providers were assessed on the grounds of ethnicity and class: Hispanic mothers held greater trust in Hispanic carers; a middle class parent described how “I wouldn’t feel comfortable if it [the provision]... were quote, unquote, lower class” (Uttal 1997: 261).

In addition to such *a priori* categorisations, through the experience of interpersonal interactions actors may obtain evidence about individuals’ performance and competence, thus enabling them to make predictions about future behaviour (p.61 above). Interpersonal contact also enables observation of phenomena which may offer clues to the motivation or likely behaviour of the other: thus, taxi passengers are considered more trustworthy if they appear ‘candid’ rather than ‘shifty’ or ‘calm’ rather

than ‘agitated’ (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 212); Brown et al. (2011) describe how a physician’s demeanour affects trust.

Further, it is at the level of interpersonal interaction that some affective dimension to trust may develop. The processes by which affective trust is produced remain generally unspecified, but two themes can be identified. First, affect-based trust has been associated with various behaviours of the trusted party, such as expressions of empathy or actions which extend beyond those prescribed for a role, thus indicating an altruistic motivation (McAllister 1995; Brown et al. 2011). Second, empirical studies in the medical field emphasise the significance of communication. Trust is achieved through mutual reciprocity and openness between physicians and patients (Dibben and Lean 2003); through communicative interactions professionals display their commitment and care to patients (Brown 2008).

The foregoing accounts frequently refer to the attitudes, actions and demeanour of the individual who is (or is not) trusted. There is a consequent possibility that individuals who are the object of trust may make deliberate efforts to appear trustworthy. Williams (2007), for instance, identifies a process of emotional management: the individual who is (or wishes to be) trusted considers the perspective of the trusting actor, and makes strategic attempts to minimise the sense of threat which the latter perceives. Several commentators, drawing upon the work of Goffman (1971), describe some kind of performance which creates an “impression of trustworthiness” (Beckert 2005: 19). There is particular reference to Goffman’s contrast between the ‘front region’, where individuals make a performative representation of their competence and integrity, and the complex reality which lies ‘backstage’ (Goffman 1971: 109-114; Giddens 1990; Beckert 2005; Brown 2008). Thus Giddens’ (1990: 86) concept of ‘facework’ (p.63 above) has a performative quality; similarly Brown et al. (2011: 284) invoke Goffman’s (1971: 203) concept of ‘impression management’ to describe clinicians’ presentation of their ‘character’ to patients.

Beckert (2005: 25) maintains that such performances are not a manipulation of the person who trusts, but a “necessary reassurance” which supports trusting behaviour. Even actors of high integrity and competence may need to make explicit displays of their trustworthiness in interactions with others (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001; Brown

et al. 2011). Nonetheless there is a hazard: those who are not trustworthy may mimic the behaviours and signals of those who are (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001). Therefore there is potentially a twofold challenge as actors consider placing trust. Not only must they assess the trustworthiness of the other according to certain signals or bases of trust, but they must also evaluate the reliability of the bases of trust themselves, especially if these originate from the actor who is to be trusted.

#### **2.4.4 Summary**

The preceding sections have described a multi-level framework of bases of trust which can be applied to the preschool context. Theoretical and empirical studies typically identify such bases at the institutional and interpersonal levels; there are compelling reasons to add to the framework an intermediary level of users' trust in organisations. A full exploration of the dynamics of trust should acknowledge multiple levels of trust production (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Rousseau et al. 1998). At each level it can be observed that predictions about how trust is produced are in turn infused by contrasting interpretations of the nature of trust.

The bases of trust which have been described do not stand in isolation: there are multiple possibilities of combination and interaction (Möllering 2006). One such interaction – the relationship between trust in systems and interpersonal trust - has already been considered (p.62ff). How trust is produced may also be contingent upon time, upon the dimension of trustworthiness under consideration (section 2.1.3), or upon the quality outcome desired from preschool (section 2.2.3). The relative weights apportioned to different bases of trust may, finally, be subject to the interpretative agency of individual parents and their understanding of what constitute 'good reasons' to trust.

### **2.5 Conclusion and research questions**

Trust can be conceived as a functional response to the problem of action in a condition of uncertainty, when engagement in a desired behaviour will cause an actor to become vulnerable to the autonomous agency of another. Trust, as a psychological state of expectation that the other will act reliably, permits the desired behaviour to be undertaken; such positive expectation is founded upon or enabled by certain bases of

trust. Given that the focus of such expectations – the trustworthiness desired from the other - may extend across multiple dimensions of competence, integrity and benevolence, the production of trust may similarly be multidimensional.

This basic overview throws analytic light upon the ‘trust problem’ faced by parents, and indicates why trust is so frequently invoked in accounts of preschool. Barriers to information and evaluation may obscure practice from parents, so that uncertainty is high. In addition, harm from poor provision may be significant and even calamitous, so that the vulnerability of parents and children is considerable. This coincidence of pronounced vulnerability and profound uncertainty implies a compelling need for trust (or some functional equivalent).

Yet what trust is, and the process by which it is attained so that a trust problem of this kind is resolved, remains contested and complex. This chapter has not sought to achieve a definitive account of the nature and production of trust. Instead, it has introduced central themes and debates which provide a foundation for empirical investigation and analysis. Section 2.3 discussed propositions about the nature of trust, its production and the role of individual agency; it identified fundamental disputes about the relationship between trust and rationality, describing contrasting understandings of trust as calculation, as normative or taken-for-granted belief or as affective attitude. Section 2.4 focused specifically on bases of trust in the preschool context; it proposed a multilevel framework of trust production across institutions, organisations and interpersonal relations.

Within conceptual accounts of trust, finally, there is frequent acknowledgement that the nature and production of trust is contingent upon the specific transaction and its context. The content of a transaction, for instance, may affect the balance of rationality and affect within a state of trust (p.59) or the weight given to different dimensions of trustworthiness (p.46); the institutional meanings which frame a transaction may influence how trust is constructed (p.57-58); the dynamics of trust may be shaped by the extent of information asymmetry between parties, or by the sense of vulnerability which the trusting actor experiences (p.50). This essential relevance of context indicates the value of empirical research which explores trust within specific situations; it emphasises

the gap in knowledge caused by the lack of empirical research into the specific dynamics of parents' trust in preschool provision.

Given this knowledge gap, and drawing upon conceptual insights into trust set out in the present chapter, four research questions were identified and are reiterated here:

*1. On what basis do parents trust preschool provision?*

The primary research question considers the production of trust in the preschool field. It explores the bases of trust which support parents' positive expectations of providers' reliability, taking into account theoretical insights that trust is a dynamic process which may change with time.

*2. What is the nature of parents' trust in preschool provision?*

In addition to consideration of the bases of trust which parents use, and given conceptual debates about the nature of trust, the study will explore more broadly the process and meaning of trust as it is enacted in preschool provision.

*3. Is sector or organisational form perceived to be a significant a priori signal of trustworthiness? Are there other behaviours or characteristics of organisations which support trust?*

Empirical research into welfare services has not adequately addressed the organisational level of trust production. The study, while investigating trust at multiple levels, will make a specific exploration of parents' trust in organisations.

*4. Do parents trust preschool provision?*

Given suggestions that trust in welfare services is increasingly problematic, the study considers whether parents achieve a state of trust - or whether they use functional equivalents to enable engagement with preschool provision.

### **3 Research methods**

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This chapter describes the methods which were used in order to carry out the empirical investigation of the research questions. Qualitative research was undertaken through in-depth interviews with parents and preschool managers across multiple organisations in a single geographical location. The first section of this chapter (section 3.1) explains the decision to use a qualitative approach. Section 3.2 describes the process of selecting not only the geographical area and parent participants but also, given the focus on organisational form and behaviour in this study, five diverse organisations which offered preschool provision; it describes the selection strategy, the characteristics of the achieved selection, and its limitations. The process of data collection through in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents and preschool managers is outlined in section 3.3. Section 3.4, finally, describes the analysis of data, exploring in particular issues of reliability, validity and generalisability.

#### **3.1 A qualitative study**

Trust, as the overview in the preceding chapter has indicated, is a complex, multidimensional and multilevel phenomenon. In attempting to capture the nature and production of trust in an empirical setting such as preschool provision, several characteristics of the phenomenon argue strongly for in-depth qualitative approaches (Möllering 2006). First, investigation of how trust is attained demands close attention to individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations (Möllering 2006; p.68-69 above): it must consider the perceptions which they hold and the meanings which they confer upon situations; it must explore the possibility of implicit or taken-for-granted assumptions which support their positive (or negative) expectations of others (p.57-58 above). Qualitative approaches are well-suited to investigate individuals' experiences and the meanings, understandings and perceptions which they apply to their world and which support their behaviours (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Bryman 2004). It is qualitative methods too which offer the possibility of identifying those dimensions of a phenomenon which may be "latent, underlying, or nonobvious" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10).

Second, individuals' interpretations around trust are embedded in specific empirical contexts (Kramer 1996; Möllering 2006; p.80 above). Trust relations are at once bounded by the setting in which they occur, and also likely to be infused by the setting's empirical complexity. Of importance, for instance, may be the nature of the institutional setting where events take place, the relationships within which interactions occur, and contingent events which may inform individuals' approaches. Context may be especially complex and influential in a field such as preschool provision, the choice and use of which is itself an involved process laden with meanings, values and emotions which infuse parents' beliefs and behaviours (Holloway 1998; Duncan et al. 2004). Qualitative approaches are well-suited to explore context and to make an attempt at a "holistic overview" of a specific setting (Miles and Huberman 1994: 5).

Third, Möllering (2006: 152) describes how empirical investigation of trust requires a 'process perspective' in order to capture its dynamic nature. Trust can be envisaged as a process in two ways: there is the process by which individuals' come to attain a psychological state of trust; and there is the possibility of such trust shifting or developing as interactions proceed (p.61). Again, qualitative methods are suitable for enquiring into processes and chronologies (Bryman 2004; Möllering 2006). In sum, qualitative approaches can provide the 'thick description' (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10; Snape and Spencer 2003: 21) and rich detailed accounts which can support an exploration of parents' dynamic experiences and interpretations around trust in the specific empirical context of preschool provision.

The extent to which empirical investigation should be informed by existing theory is often debated in the context of qualitative approaches (for instance, Morse 2002; Bryman 2004). There are concerns, especially expressed by grounded theory practitioners, that engagement with prior theory can compromise inductive investigation by prejudicing the researcher's response to the empirical setting (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Morse 2002). Nonetheless, it is desirable that empirical study should be informed by, and build upon, the existing stock of theoretical insights (Bryman 2004); Möllering (2006: 145), while emphasising the importance of 'open-ended fieldwork', urges that empirical investigation of trust should both be informed by and inform existing theory. This study takes a pragmatic approach which broadly accepts these latter proposals. First, existing theoretical insights into trust and preschool provision are used to identify

key conceptual areas for empirical investigation and to provide a ‘frame of reference’ for empirical research (Möllering 2006: 145). Second, the procedures of data collection and analysis retained, as Morse (2002: 296) encourages, “the freedom to explore inductively” through open-ended questioning and reflexive interrogation of data. Third, in the final chapter of the thesis (section 8.1) the study’s findings are related back to theoretical perspectives and debates about trust and about preschool provision, in order both to develop and propose theory specifically around trust and preschool, and also to contribute to the general body of theory around trust.

## **3.2 Selection**

The central focus of analysis in this study was parents who use preschool provision. A secondary focus was organisations which offer such provision, in order to investigate whether organisational form or behaviour affected parents’ trust (research question 3). A process of purposive selection was utilised with two aims: first, drawing on insights from the conceptual overview of trust in Chapter 2, the selection process sought to include participants (whether organisations or parents) whose characteristics or dimensions might be relevant to the research enquiry (Bryman 2004); second, the study sought to achieve as far as practical a diverse group of participants in order to uncover the full range of views or different representations of the topic (Gaskell 2000; Lewis and Ritchie 2003).

The purposive selection process had three stages: first, a local authority was selected as the research area; second, five diverse organisations offering preschool provision were selected from which to access participants; third, parents were recruited from each organisation. Sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.3 describe the selection strategy and achieved selection for each of these stages. Section 3.2.4 considers limitations of the achieved selection.

### ***3.2.1 Selecting the research area***

Research was undertaken in a single local authority area. Such a focused approach enabled an in-depth study of parents’ approaches to trust and preschool provision; it also maintained a degree of stability over certain variables, such as the local political context and preschool market conditions. It was decided at an early stage to undertake

the research in an urban location. The likely concentration of preschool providers in an urban area might imply, in principle at least, choice for parents. Such choice might offer parents a wider repertoire of solutions for trust problems - although full access to such a repertoire might depend on economic and other resources. In addition an urban area was considered more likely to exhibit diversity across demographic characteristics which might support the selection of a heterogeneous parent group. London was selected as a general area suitable for the study. It fulfilled the desired criteria of an urban setting and was also a practical location for the researcher.

Given the study's focus upon organisational form as potentially relevant to parents' trust, attention was focused especially on the presence of diverse organisational forms within the local preschool market as a criterion for selecting the specific London location. DfES (2006d) offered basic insights into the prevalence of places for three and four year olds at, separately, maintained settings, private / voluntary providers (elided together) and independent schools. By exploring the lists of preschool providers on Ofsted's website, and by cross-referencing with local authority information and the websites of providers themselves, a picture of organisational diversity in London localities was constructed.

A local authority in inner London was selected on account of the presence of distinctive organisational forms which were of interest from both a theoretical and policy perspective. First, an established social enterprise owned multiple day nurseries within the area. A third sector preschool organisation of this type and on this scale is unusual. Its particular theoretical relevance is discussed further in section 3.2.2. Second, a number of children's centres were in operation in the area. There was thus an opportunity to include within the study an initiative which was central to government early years policy (p.33-34 above).

#### *Description of the local authority area*

Short descriptions of the area and the local preschool market are provided here as a context for parents' experiences. Contextual information was collected from central government statistics and local authority and primary care trust (PCT) publications; the latter publications are not referenced in order to preserve the anonymity of the area and participants. Interviews were also undertaken with a local authority childcare outreach

worker and with a senior manager at the social enterprise provider in order to obtain a contextual feel for the local area and local preschool provision.

The research area exhibited significant levels of deprivation, including high levels of income deprivation affecting children (ODPM 2004); in common with other inner London boroughs, there were extremes of disadvantage and of prosperity. The borough was ethnically diverse: among children who attended preschool provision the largest ethnic group was white, but there were substantial numbers of children of black, Asian, mixed or other heritages. Local authority and PCT publications described a transient population, so that, for instance, student turnover was high in some schools. Parents using preschool provision were a mix of local residents and those who lived elsewhere but used provision close to their workplace.

Within the area there was a diverse range of preschool providers, including third sector preschools, private nursery schools, forprofit daycare chains, nonprofit day nurseries, childminders, maintained infant, nursery and primary schools and independent schools. The balance between maintained and private provision for three year olds resembled general trends in inner London (DfES 2006d). In accordance with central government policy, the local authority was developing children's centres, a number of which were operational by 2008. The lead settings for these children's centres were varied, ranging from nursery schools to primary schools and third sector day nurseries.

Affordability and availability of places can be significant barriers to choice, most obviously for parents who have low incomes, who live in disadvantaged areas or who are not in employment (Penn 2000; National Audit Office 2004; West 2006; Bryson et al. 2006). Affordability is a particular problem in inner London, where provision is significantly more expensive (Bryson et al. 2006; Daycare Trust 2007). Daycare fees in the research area were indeed higher than regional and national averages; given that there was considerable socio-economic disadvantage, this implied an affordability barrier for sections of the local population. Further, the local authority's preschool audit identified areas of the borough which had insufficient places to meet demand. There was also apparent lack of availability across types of provider: in particular there was no full daycare provision in some areas.

The local authority, as required by the Childcare Act 2006, offered information about preschool provision to parents. Its children's information service provided a directory of preschool settings in the borough, as well as a series of leaflets (for instance, about nurseries, childminders, Ofsted and help with childcare costs). The children's information service also advertised on its website two childcare outreach workers who supported parents struggling to make preschool choices. In an interview with the researcher one of the workers described how she held one-to-one meetings with parents, during which she explained the differences between types of provision, showed parents how to access Ofsted reports, or suggested questions which parents might ask on visits to settings.

### ***3.2.2 Selecting organisations***

The study sought to explore the dynamics of trust as parents used group preschool provision. Those forms of provision which lie within the familial or domestic sphere, such as care by relatives or by nannies, were excluded from the selection. Provision by childminders was also excluded, being located on domestic premises and being provided by an individual and not an organisation. Such an approach to selection usefully held stable the nature of the service offered (group preschool provision), thus enabling comparability across providers and between parents' accounts. It is also consistent with other investigations of preschool provision which focus exclusively on group provision (for instance, Sylva et al. 2004).

Five organisational types were identified for empirical research. The selection of organisations was informed by theoretical propositions about trust and organisations, as described in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2) and summarised in table 3.1.

*State nursery class.* State nursery classes are part of state infant or primary schools. Potential bases of trust associated with this organisational form are perspectives of state provision as trustworthy (p.75-76), the absence of profit-making (p.75-76), and normative privileging of concepts such as 'public sector ethos' (p.76).

**Table 3.1: Organisational types as basis of selection**

<b>Organisational type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Theoretical trust dimensions</b>
<b>State nursery class</b>	A nursery provided by local government at a state-owned school.	State provision Absence of profit-making Normative beliefs about ‘public sector ethos’
<b>Forprofit daycare chain</b>	A private daycare chain which distributes profits to the owners of capital.	Maintenance of market reputation constrains cheating Normative beliefs about profit-making
<b>Parent-run preschool</b>	A sessional nonprofit nursery governed by parents.	Constraints on profit-making User/stakeholder control Third sector values
<b>Social enterprise daycare</b>	A local daycare chain which reinvests profits back into the service. The organisation is not governed by parents.	Constraint on profit-making Third sector values Formalised / professionalised, not parent-led
<b>State nursery school / integrated centre</b>	A centre provided by local government which offers a range of services to children and families. Preschool provision is offered by a state-owned nursery school provided by local government.	As nursery class (above)

*Forprofit daycare chain.* This category refers to nurseries which are part of a wider profit-making chain, characterised by multiple settings and the investment of private capital. The necessity of preserving reputation across the chain may be perceived as an incentive for trustworthy behaviour (p.74). There may, however, be normative suspicions of profit-making in a welfare service (p.75).

*Parent-led preschool.* Many sessional nonprofit preschools have their origins in the community-based playgroup movement, and are administered through parent management committees. A parent-run preschool may appear trustworthy on a range of bases including constraints on profit-making (p.75), consumer or stakeholder control (p.75) and third sector ethos (p.76).

*Social enterprise.* The third sector encompasses a diverse range of organisations (p.76, footnote 32). The large social enterprise in the selected research area was conceptually distinct from the more prevalent third sector preschools. It was not parent-controlled and was comparatively formalised and professionalised. It thus enabled propositions about the perceived trustworthiness of professionalised nonprofit preschool providers to be investigated. Bases of trust may again be third sector ethos (p.76) and the constraint on profit-making (p.75).

*State nursery school / integrated centre.* Within the research area there were a number of state integrated centres which offered a range of services to parents and children, and in which preschool provision was offered by a nursery school. The trust advantages of a state integrated centre are theoretically similar to those of maintained nursery classes. The centre was included in the study because, as the next paragraph describes, it was the lead setting of a children's centre and therefore of specific relevance to policy.

As well as such theoretical propositions around organisational form and trust, attention was also given to organisations' policy relevance. Day nurseries (of which both the forprofit chain and social enterprise were examples), preschools, nursery classes and nursery schools lie at the heart of the preschool mixed economy: excluding state reception classes, these are the forms of group preschool provision most commonly used by parents (Bryson et al. 2006; Smith et al. 2010). In addition, the state integrated centre was the lead setting of a children's centre, which enabled the study to consider this policy initiative; state integrated centres have also been identified as offering the highest quality provision by the influential EPPE study (Sylva et al. 2004).

#### *Selection of organisations in practice*

Organisations which fulfilled the characteristics set out in the organisational typology were located through Ofsted's listing of preschool providers (Ofsted 2006), through the local authority's directory of preschool providers, and through consultation with the local authority childcare outreach worker. Specific approaches to organisations are described below.

*State nursery class.* Schools in special measures were considered unlikely to be receptive to approaches. Ethnic and socio-economic diversity of intake was identified

as a benefit in order to maximise the range of parental perspectives. On these bases an infant school was selected and successfully approached by letter and telephone call.

*Private chain nursery.* Approaches were made by letter and telephone call. After refusals by two forprofit chain nurseries, a third agreed to participate.

*Parent-run preschool.* Since preschools are parent-run, it was considered less threatening if an approach was made through the local preschool umbrella group. The umbrella group proposed a preschool which could support a research project, and facilitated a successful approach by the researcher.

*Social enterprise.* A senior manager was approached who approved the organisation's participation and proposed a specific nursery. Letters were distributed to parents, but there was no take-up. A second proposed nursery felt unable to participate, a refusal attributable to manager turnover. A third nursery was approached independently by the researcher, and agreed to participate: three parents were recruited from this setting. Following further staff turnover at this nursery, a fourth nursery was approached, from which a further three parents were recruited.

*State integrated centre.* A centre was identified which was a state nursery school and the lead setting of a children's centre. It also had a large nursery, which was considered helpful for the recruitment of parents for the study. The centre was successfully approached by letter, telephone call and a meeting with the headteacher and the head of the nursery.

#### *Organisations: the achieved selection*

Characteristics of the participant organisations are shown in table 3.2. Given the diverse types of organisations selected, it is unsurprising that there was a mix of sessional and daycare provision, a range of ages for which provision was offered, and contrasting fee structures. There was also variation in size: the forprofit chain nursery in particular had a significantly higher maximum occupancy than the other providers. A description of each organisation follows.

**Table 3.2: Characteristics of organisations in the study**

	<b>Opening hours</b>	<b>Age range</b>	<b>Fees (3-5 year-olds)</b>	<b>Maximum occupancy</b>	<b>Qualifications of staff<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>Ofsted rating</b>
<b>State nursery class</b>	Sessional: school day, term-time only.	3-5	Free	40 children	Qualified teacher status & NVQ level 3	School: good Foundation Stage: outstanding
<b>Forprofit chain nursery</b>	07.30 – 18.15	0-5	Per week (50 hours): £238	74 children	Qualified teacher status through to NVQ level 2	Good
<b>Parent-run preschool</b>	09.30 – 15.30 (2 sessions)	2-5	Per week (25 hours): £76	16 children	NVQ level 4 to NVQ level 2	Good
<b>Social enterprise</b>	08.15 – 17.45 (nursery 1) 08.00 – 18.00 (nursery 2)	0-5	Per week (48 hours): £150-£215	39 children (nursery 1) 35 children (nursery 2)	Degree in ‘childcare education’ through to trainee (both nurseries)	Nursery 1: outstanding Nursery 2: good
<b>State integrated centre</b>	Nursery school: sessional school day, term-time only.  Daycare for children-in-need: all year	1½ – 5 years	Free	Nursery school: 40 children Daycare: 16 children	Qualified teacher status through to NVQ level 2	Good (both daycare and education)

Notes:

- i. For an explanation of NVQ levels, see page 31, footnote 14.

*State nursery class.* The nursery class was part of a maintained infant school located in a quiet residential area. There was a substantial outside play area, including a large dedicated space for the nursery class. A double nursery class was provided in a large nursery room, staffed by two teachers and two nursery assistants who had NVQ Level 3 qualifications. The reception classes of the school were oversubscribed, but there had recently been vacancies in the nursery class.

*Forprofit chain nursery.* The forprofit nursery was part of a national chain owned by private capital investors. The nursery had been established for less than three years, and was located in a busy commercial and business area: parents using the nursery were more likely to work nearby than to live nearby. It was situated on the first floor of an office building, and had a small outside play area. There were five nursery rooms, each providing care to a different age group. Unusually for a daycare nursery, both the manager and deputy manager were qualified teachers. Fees were significantly higher than the average for inner London, and the nursery operated a *de facto* top-up system with regard to free early education for three and four year-olds: parents were expected to take up significant extra hours of provision, and the nursery education grant, which the setting received from the local authority to fund the free early education entitlement, was discounted from fees. Despite the fee levels, the nursery was experiencing steady growth in occupancy levels.

*Parent-run preschool.* The preschool was around 30 years old. It was overseen by a parent management committee, and there was an expectation of parental involvement: its prospectus referred to a principle of ‘mutuality’, emphasising that parents were ‘members who have full participatory rights’. Fees were low, largely on account of a local authority subsidy negotiated by the local preschool umbrella group. Free early education places were offered for three and four year-olds. The setting was small, offering provision to 16 children per session. There were three members of staff, all with NVQ preschool qualifications but none with degrees. It was located within a housing estate in an affluent area, and had a small outside play space.

*Social enterprise.* The organisation was a long-established charity, but preferred the label ‘social enterprise’. It offered full daycare at multiple settings. Parent involvement in governance was limited: in contrast to the preschool, there were no parent management committees at individual settings. The organisation received funding from fees, philanthropy and local government, including a contract with social services to provide places for children in need. The organisation operated a tiered fee structure, access to lower fees being based on a means test. Stand-alone free early education places were rarely offered – parents were expected to take up extra hours of provision, and the nursery education grant, as in the case of the forprofit nursery, was discounted from fees. Parents were recruited for the study from two settings, as described above.

Both had rooms for different ages of children and small outside areas; at both settings staff had a range of preschool qualifications from early years degree to trainee. One nursery, used by social enterprise parents 1, 2 and 3, was located in a disadvantaged area; the second, used by social enterprise parents 4, 5 and 6, was located in a mixed residential and business area. While there had been some turnover of staff and management at the first nursery, the second had longstanding managers and strong staff retention.

*State integrated centre.* The integrated centre was located in an area of high disadvantage. The centre had been a key setting within a Sure Start Local Programme and was currently the lead setting of a children's centre. The centre offered integrated provision on site: services include a drop-in, a toy library and a crèche for parents attending adult education. Outreach was provided both by the integrated centre and by the Sure Start children's centre outreach team. The centre offered both nursery school provision for three and four year-olds and daycare for children designated as 'in need' by social services. There were a number of qualified teachers; the minimum staff qualification was NVQ Level 2.

### **3.2.3 *Selecting parents***

The aim of the purposive selection of parents was to achieve a heterogeneous group which might enable the exploration of a range of views and experiences around trust and preschool provision. Where possible a heterogeneous selection was sought not only across the study, but also from each organisation. Diversity was thus sought across dimensions such as ethnic group, educational qualifications and household composition. Socio-economic status in particular was considered a significant variable: social class has been identified as an important determinant of parents' experiences of the preschool market (p.36 above; Vincent et al. 2008); Chapter 2 in addition described how socio-economic status has been associated with levels of social trust (p.68). Occupational status was used as a proxy for socio-economic status.

The study sought to select parents whose children had entered the preschool setting at a similar age. The targeted age group was three and four year-olds: this is the age group for which the use of preschool provision is most prevalent (Bryson et al. 2006), and which has been the object of especial policy focus (p.24-26). Other age ranges would

not permit full comparison across diverse organisational types, since the nursery class and parent-run preschool did not offer provision for children younger than three and two years respectively.

Consideration was given to selecting on the basis of the gender of participants. Chapter 2 noted that gender may be associated with different approaches towards risk and trust (p.68-69): some diversity in participants' gender was thus sought in order to explore this dimension. On the other hand research indicates that it is women who take the lead role in making arrangements for education and preschool provision (Brannen and Moss 1988; David 1993; David 1997; Holloway 1998; Vincent et al. 2010). It was therefore expected that more mothers than fathers would participate in the study, and that such a selection profile would adequately represent choice-making in the preschool context.

#### *Selection of parents in practice*

Approaches to parents were made through managers of the preschool organisations. Such approaches were based upon variables specified by the researcher - namely socio-economic status, ethnic group and, in the context of daycare provision, parents whose children had entered the provision at three or four years. A preference was also stated for parents who had used the setting for at least some months, in order to enable investigation of the dynamics of trust over time. Managers, finally, were asked about the possibility of including a father in the selection. A selection of five parents from each organisation was intended, this being sufficient to achieve a range of views and also a manageable number for analysis. Variables were monitored as the selection and data collection processes progressed in order to ascertain whether a diverse range was being achieved. Thus, for instance, an extra participant was successfully approached at the forprofit chain both to achieve some diversity in household type and also to raise the number of parents whose children had entered the provision at three or four years. Two factors informed the decision to bring the selection process to a close: first, an appropriate diversity of parental characteristics and contexts had been achieved both across the selection and also, taking into account managers' descriptions of organisations' user profiles, as far as possible within the specific selections from organisations; second, the data collected at that point was of rich detail and high quality (Morse 2000), offering 'thick' and insightful descriptions of parents' experiences and beliefs.

*Parents: achieved selection*

27 parents took part in the study: a full list of participants is displayed in table 3.3. The achieved selection showed a good diversity across the dimensions of household composition and occupational status. Over half of the households had a degree-level qualification, but there was an adequate representation of those with other qualification levels. Given the transience of the local population, there was also a satisfactory selection of parents who had used the current provider for a significant period of time. However, while the selection was ethnically diverse, there was limited participation by Asian or Asian British families relative to their presence in the local authority. A selection restricted to parents of children who entered the provision at age three to four years also proved challenging. Both the forprofit chain and social enterprise typically took children at a younger age, a characteristic which is reflected in the respective selections: at the social enterprise, for instance, only one child had entered the setting at age three or four.

As anticipated, participants were predominantly mothers: 22 mothers and five fathers were interviewed. Exploration of the choice process confirmed that, as previous research has identified (p.94), responsibility for preschool choices tended to lie with mothers. In the selection of 27 parents, 11 mothers took sole responsibility and a further seven researched provision and made visits to providers before reporting findings to their partner. In eight cases research and decision-making was reported to be genuinely shared. In a sole case the choice of provision was primarily the father's (nursery class parent 2). In all cases the study interviewed only one parent from a household. The interviewed parents had generally played either a dominant or at least an equal role in the choice process. There were, however, two cases where the 'key chooser' was not interviewed - nursery class parent 2 (the father was key chooser, but the mother was interviewed) and forprofit chain parent 4 (the mother was key chooser, but her partner was interviewed). In these cases accounts of the relationship with the provider, and in particular of visits during the choice process, were not always first-hand and were approached with caution.

**Table 3.3: Characteristics of participant parents**

	<b>Gender of participant</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Highest qualification in household<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>Highest occupational status in household<sup>ii</sup></b>	<b>Ethnicity of child<sup>iii</sup></b>	<b>Key chooser<sup>iv</sup> interviewed</b>	<b>Children at the setting</b>	<b>Prior experience of preschool provision</b>	<b>Age of child at entry (years unless stated)<sup>v</sup></b>	<b>Time<sup>vi</sup> at setting</b>	<b>Full or part time</b>
<b>Nursery class parent 1</b>	Female	Lone parent	A level	Working (student)	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> children have attended. 2 <sup>nd</sup> child currently attends.	Voluntary sector preschool	3	2½ years	PT
<b>Nursery class parent 2</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Managerial	Mixed (Chinese / Iranian)	No	1 <sup>st</sup> child.	Voluntary sector preschool	3	8 months	PT
<b>Nursery class parent 3</b>	Female	Lone parent	Degree	Professional (unemployed)	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> children have attended. 2 <sup>nd</sup> child currently attends.	Forprofit chain	3	2½ years	PT
<b>Nursery class parent 4</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Managerial	White US / Czech	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	3	5 months	PT
<b>Nursery class parent 5</b>	Female	Lone parent	GCSE	Working	Mixed (White British / Asian)	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	3	5 months	PT
<b>Private chain parent 1</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Managerial	Mixed (Black African and white / Nigerian)	Yes	4 <sup>th</sup> child only.	Nursery school in France and daycare in London	3	8 months	FT
<b>Private chain parent 2</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Professional	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	6 months	1¾ years	PT
<b>Private chain parent 3</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Intermediate	White South African	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	6 months	15 months	FT

<b>Private chain parent 4</b>	Male	Couple	Degree	Working	White British	No	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Childminder	3	2 months	FT
<b>Private chain parent 5</b>	Male	Couple	Degree	Professional	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Childminder	1	1½ years	PT
<b>Private chain parent 6</b>	Female	Lone parent	Degree	Managerial	White French	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Childminder	3	6 months	FT
<b>Preschool parent 1</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Intermediate	White French	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup> child.	Childminder	2	9 months	PT
<b>Preschool parent 2</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Professional	White French	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> children have attended. 2 <sup>nd</sup> child currently attends.	No	2	2½ years	PT
<b>Preschool parent 3</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Professional	White Australian	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Forprofit daycare.	2	8 months	PT
<b>Preschool parent 4</b>	Male	Couple	Degree	Professional	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Social enterprise daycare	3	3 months	PT
<b>Preschool parent 5</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Professional	White Iranian	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Nursery in Spain; childminder.	3	3 months	PT
<b>Social enterprise parent 1<sup>vii</sup></b>	Female	Lone parent	A level; BTEC / NVQ 2	Working (unemployed)	Black African British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> children placed at nursery at same time	No	2 & 3	2 weeks	PT
<b>Social enterprise parent 2<sup>vii</sup></b>	Female	Lone parent	GCSE	Working (unemployed)	North African British	Yes	3rd child only	Nursery class	2	5 months	PT
<b>Social enterprise parent 3</b>	Female	Couple	A level	Working	Sri Lankan	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Forprofit daycare	2	1 year	PT
<b>Social enterprise parent 4</b>	Male	Couple	Degree	Professional	Black African	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	Under 1 year	8 months	FT

<b>Social enterprise parent 5</b>	Female	Couple	Degree	Managerial	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	1 yr	6 months	PT
<b>Social enterprise parent 6</b>	Male	Couple	Degree	Managerial	White Irish / Indian	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	2	2 years	FT
<b>Integrated centre parent 1<sup>vii</sup></b>	Female	Lone parent	GCSE	Working (unemployed)	Black African	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> children both attend nursery.	Nursery classes and childminder	2	1½ years	FT and PT
<b>Integrated centre parent 2</b>	Female	Couple	GCSE	Working	Black African	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	Social enterprise daycare	3	4 months	PT
<b>Integrated centre parent 3</b>	Female	Couple	None	Working	Black African	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> child	No	3	1¼ years	FT
<b>Integrated centre parent 4</b>	Female	Couple	GCE	Working	White British	Yes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> children have attended. 2 <sup>nd</sup> child currently attends.	No	3	3 years	FT
<b>Integrated centre parent 5</b>	Female	Lone parent	GCSE	Working (unemployed)	Black African	Yes	2 <sup>nd</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> children have attended. 4 <sup>th</sup> child currently attends.	No	3	5 years	PT

Notes:

- i. Where qualifications were gained overseas, an equivalent UK qualification was estimated in negotiation with the participant.
- ii. Job categorisation is based upon the NS-SEC classification of occupations. The NS-SEC has been collapsed into three categories as described by Croxford (2002) – managerial and professional, intermediate and working.
- iii. Ethnic group categories derived from 2001 census classification (Office for National Statistics 2005). Children’s ethnic category was identified by participants.
- iv. Key chooser: person who is reported to have at least equal share of responsibility for choosing provision.
- v. Age at entry of the first child to attend the provision.
- vi. Time at setting: the cumulative time for which a parent’s children have attended the preschool setting. This may not be a single continuous period. It refers only to preschool use, and not use of other facilities.
- vii. Social services placement.

There were obvious differences in the characteristics of the parent selections across organisations. There was a particular contrast between the selection at the integrated centre and those at the parent-run preschool and forprofit chain: participants from the integrated centre were from lower occupational groups and had lower educational qualifications; participants from the preschool and forprofit chain were degree-educated and generally of professional / managerial status. These contrasts were not unexpected, given evidence of socio-economic segregation across different organisational forms of preschool provision in England (p.36). Preschool managers were asked in interviews to describe the user profile of their settings. With the exception of the parent-run preschool, the participants were broadly typical of the users at each organisation, as described below.

*State nursery class:* the parent selection showed a mix of household types, qualification levels and occupational status. This was representative of the reported user group – while a quarter of children received free school meals (available only to low-income households in receipt of specific state benefits), the school was also popular among professional families.

*Forprofit chain:* the participants from the forprofit chain had a high socio-economic profile and little ethnic diversity: with one exception, all the participants were white. Such a selection was consistent with the profile of parents who typically use private day nurseries (Melhuish et al. 1999; Bryson et al. 2006), and was also consistent with the nursery's reported users. Nonetheless the parent selection achieved some diversity: it included one of only two users in receipt of tax credits for childcare (forprofit chain parent 4; for tax credits policy, see p.26) and one of the few lone parent users (forprofit chain parent 6).

*Parent-run preschool:* the selection of parents showed a high socio-economic profile and a lack of diversity in household composition. Participants were exclusively white, although there was a mix of nationalities. Such a selection was partly attributable to the preschool's location in an affluent area. Nonetheless the diversity of users was not fully captured. There was difficulty in reaching more disadvantaged parents: as an example, one father who faced challenging circumstances did not attend an arranged interview.

*Social enterprise:* the selection from the two social enterprise nurseries was diverse. Parents from the first nursery were from lower socio-economic groups, and two were in receipt of children-in-need places from social services; parents from the second were degree-educated and of professional/managerial status. There was a mix of ethnicities across the settings. The contrast between the selections reflected the nurseries' different locations (p.93). While neither selection captured precisely the reported user profile of the individual setting, which in both cases was more socio-economically diverse, taken together the selection broadly represented the user profile at the two nurseries.

*State nursery school / integrated centre:* In all cases occupational status and educational qualifications were at lower levels. Four out of five parents were of African origin. While the selection was homogeneous, it was nonetheless broadly in keeping with the centre's reported user group. The centre's users and its local population were characterised by high levels of disadvantage; the centre supported significant numbers of refugees.

An unpredicted dimension, finally, was the presence in the selection of three parents (social enterprise parents 1 and 2 and integrated centre parent 1) whose children had been allocated children-in-need places on the recommendation of social services. In such cases parents received state-funded daycare places for children under the age of three (in other words, extra provision beyond the early education entitlement) on account of the particular challenges which they or their children faced; their ability to choose provision was, however, heavily circumscribed or absent.

### ***3.2.4 Selection process: limitations and caveats***

There are a number of necessary caveats about the selection process. In particular there were several apparent selection biases towards parents who were more likely to report a robust trust in preschool provision. First, the study excluded parents who used provision in the private and domestic realm, such as familial care, nannies, childminders or care by parents themselves. Within this group there may be parents who do not trust group preschool provision in the public sphere: this mistrust may underpin their retreat to the private. Second, participating organisations to some extent self-selected. Some organisations refused to participate; it is possible that only organisations which were confident of the quality of their provision and of their relationships with parents took

part. All the settings had indeed achieved good or outstanding Ofsted grades. Although the accuracy of Ofsted grading is questioned (p.73, footnote 31), these grades at least implied good quality provision: in such settings there was, perhaps, a lower likelihood that there might be problems of quality which might undermine trust. Third, the use of organisations as intermediaries in the selection of research participants carries a danger of bias (Ritchie et al. 2003). Managers might select parents who were likely to give favourable accounts of the organisation. Alternatively they might especially approach those parents with whom they enjoyed effective communicative relationships. Since trust, as Chapter 2 suggests (p.78), may in part be derived from such relationships, the parents thus selected might be more likely to report strong trust.

Taken together, these characteristics of the selection process suggest a bias towards parents who are likely to show trust in provision. Such biases were not, however, obvious as the empirical phase of the study proceeded. Parents' accounts were not always favourable: in several cases there were explicit criticisms of providers and narratives of trust problems and failures. In addition parents' accounts extended beyond current providers to discussion of prior preschool experiences. In several such cases there were rich descriptions of problems encountered and even of exits from provision which was perceived to be unreliable, thus enabling consideration of the dynamics of trust in more challenging circumstances.

Finally, there is the possibility that parents themselves self-selected, so that assured or eloquent parents were more likely to accept an invitation to participate in research. Such parental self-selection has a particular relevance to an empirical study of trust. Actors who have a low propensity to trust (section 2.3.5) may be especially unwilling to come forward for a research study precisely because they are generally distrustful. Where possible this risk was obviated by monitoring of parental variables as selection took place. The achieved selection was by no means exclusively eloquent: in a number of cases parents did not appear self-assured, and in other cases unfamiliarity with English created difficulties of communication. Nonetheless there remains a conundrum of how research into trust can reach out to those who find trust challenging.

### **3.3 Data collection**

Data about parents' experiences and understandings around trust were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with preschool managers at each organisation. The rationale and practical application of these data collection methods are described in the following sections.

#### ***3.3.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews***

At the start of this chapter several characteristics of trust and its production were identified which argued for in-depth qualitative approaches: the likely significance of individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations; the relevance and influence of context; and the utility of a process perspective. In-depth qualitative interviews were an appropriate tool through which to gather data across such dimensions. Such interviews can enable rich insights into individuals' experiences, opinions and feelings (Jones 1985; May 2001; Bryman 2004). They offer the opportunity to explore individuals' "personal worldview" (Gaskell 2000: 46), and to consider how they frame and understand particular phenomena (Bryman 2004). In-depth interviews offer the specific possibility of identifying chronology and process (Gaskell 2000; May 2001), and also of exploring the contexts for behaviours and beliefs. In sum, in-depth interviews facilitate "the fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts" (Gaskell 2000: 39).

A further benefit of in-depth interviews was the opportunity to explore the relationship between individuals' stated opinions and their behaviours. This relationship has been identified as a methodological challenge when undertaking research into both trust and preschool provision. Rowe and Calnan (2006: 390) describe how individuals "espoused levels of trust" may differ from their "enacted levels": they propose that research which explores "enacted trust behaviour" may be more useful. In a similar vein Malani and David (2008), commenting upon users' trust in organisations, emphasise that research must not only record users' opinions, but also reveal whether such opinions influence behaviour. Leach et al. (2006: 499), finally, describe how parents' reasons for choosing preschool provision 'in principle' were often not enacted in practice: they warn that survey data may not capture the reality of parents' choices. Teasing out the

relationships between stated opinions and trusting behaviours was an important focus of the study, and was facilitated by the interview process.

The study specifically used semi-structured interviews. Insights from existing theory and from the overview of the policy context, as described in Chapters 1 and 2, were used to inform the progression of the interview, the topics raised and the specific questions asked. Such a semi-structured approach focused the interview upon dimensions of parents' experiences which were likely to be relevant to the specific topic of trust: such a focus helped to avoid indiscriminate data collection and "data overload" (Miles and Huberman 1994: 17). It also enabled the interview to investigate issues of particular theoretical and policy interest (Bryman 2004). The semi-structured approach, by which the same topics and questions were raised with all participants, had the additional benefit of consistency, thus enabling comparisons between parents' accounts and across organisational forms.

The imposition of a structure upon an interview carries dangers. It risks the imposition of the researcher's frame of reference upon participants (Jones 1985); it may prevent the emergence of unforeseen themes or the revelation of those aspects of experience which are important to the participant. Möllering (2006) stresses that interviews must be sufficiently open-ended so that respondents are able to describe fully their subjective interpretations around trust and their perspectives of trust problems. In designing and undertaking interviews it was thus necessary to be mindful of the need to give participants the space to talk about the issues which were of importance to them (May 2001), and to present their own perspectives, meanings and practice around trust.

The objective of the semi-structured interviews, therefore, was to achieve a balance of freedom and structure, openness and focus. Two particular strategies were helpful. First, as the next section describes, the design of the interview schedule provided both the space for open-ended accounts, and also the opportunity to focus on specific issues as necessary. Second, a reflexive and flexible approach to the conduct of interviews enabled the pursuit of emerging themes and the exploration of participants' own stories and perspectives (Robson 2002; Bryman 2004). Interviews rarely followed precisely the structure of the interview schedule, a flexibility which allowed rich, detailed and sometimes unexpected narratives to develop. A flexible and reflexive approach to the

interview process also enabled thorough and involved probing by the researcher into emerging issues of interest around parents' interactions with providers.

As far as possible the researcher, finally, sought to achieve 'rapport' with participants (Fontana and Frey 2000: 655). Rapport, conceived as an empathy with the concerns and situation of the other, can enable the researcher to be open to and achieve understanding of the participants' viewpoint (Fontana and Frey 2000; Möllering 2001). A rapport between researcher and participant also supported a conversational tone which enabled participants to speak freely about their perspectives and experiences. There is a necessary caveat that the researcher was male and childless, and the participants were mostly mothers. The lack of central characteristics-in-common might constrain the possibility of rapport; there can be limits too upon the personal information which women divulge to male interviewers (Padfield and Procter 1996). Upon reflection the degree of rapport achieved in most cases seemed reasonable. The narratives which parents offered appeared open and generous. Interviews were generally involved and detailed; parents tolerated detailed probing of their experiences, beliefs and feelings.

### ***3.3.2 Interview schedule***

The interview schedule had two parts: the first sought to explore parents' trust when choosing provision, the second to investigate their trust as provision was used over time. Integral to the structure of the interview, therefore, was a process perspective which sought to explore how trust developed over time. Each part of the interview broadly progressed from initial open-ended and general questions to more specific and focused enquiries. This movement from unstructured to structured questioning sought to prevent the imposition of meanings or frames of understanding upon participants at an early stage (Merton and Kendall 1946; Flick 2002). Open questions about preschool choices and usage invited parents to provide a narrative of their experiences and to identify those events or issues which they considered important. More focused questions drew upon dimensions of trust and trust problems identified in the conceptual framework – for instance, the extent of information asymmetry and uncertainty perceived by parents (section 2.2.1), their preferences around quality (section 2.2.3), and their relationships with staff (section 2.4.3). Towards the end of the interview more

specific questions of policy and theoretical relevance were introduced, such as organisational form, qualifications and regulatory mechanisms.

Direct questions about trust were delayed until the latter stages of the interview for multiple reasons. First, the level of abstraction of the term ‘trust’ can create barriers. Weber and Carter (2002: 17), who approached trust directly in their research interviews, found that participants sought to define the concept rather than simply describe their experiences and opinions; they felt themselves to be “intellectually quizzed”. Participants therefore, instead of describing their own experience, may strive to find the answer which they perceive the researcher wishes to hear (Weber and Carter 2002). Some parents participating in preliminary interviews (section 3.3.3 below) indeed found questions about trust at an early stage of the interview difficult to answer: at the least this presented an awkward beginning to an interview. Second, the delayed reference to trust offered space for the participants to introduce the topic themselves within descriptions of their preschool experiences. This created an opportunity to understand the relative importance which parents attributed to trust and trust problems: it was indeed instructive that trust was sometimes introduced spontaneously by parents (see p.113 below). Finally, there was an ethical as well as analytical motive for not approaching the issue of trust more immediately. It was suspected that a direct and abrupt set of interrogations at the start of an interview about why parents trust preschool providers might be unsettling for participants. Such questions might be less destabilising if embedded towards the end of an interview, when parents were perhaps more comfortable in speaking about their preschool experiences.

Sensitive descriptive information about participants’ employment status, ethnicity, level of educational achievement and household composition was sought at the end of the interview, when it was hoped such requests might be less intrusive. These enquiries were facilitated by the use of visual prompts (displaying, for instance, educational qualifications or ethnic group).

Refinements were made to the interview schedule following preliminary interviews, as detailed in the next section. The interview schedule otherwise remained consistent over the duration of the study, and is included as Appendix 1.

### ***3.3.3 Preliminary interviews***

Six preliminary interviews were undertaken with acquaintances who were using or had used preschool provision. Such interviews were an opportunity to review the strengths and weaknesses of the interview schedule, and also to practise and reflect upon interview technique. Interviews were conducted formally; participants were invited to offer feedback on the conduct and content of the interviews.

In general the preliminary interviews confirmed that the schedule enabled relevant themes to emerge and be discussed in depth. The interview structure – beginning with open and general questions and concluding with specific enquiry into areas of interest – was effective. Parents offered involved descriptions of their preschool experiences; they talked at length about the bases of trust which they used and other significant themes. Several issues emerged which led to minor amendment of the schedule. First, participants' account of their prior use of provision – their preschool 'histories' – was not only a significant contextual factor, but also sometimes provided rich data about trust. This topic was made more prominent in the schedule. Second, specific questions were added about social relations with other parents who used the provision (which were reported to be an occasional source of reassurance), and about staff turnover. Finally, in this first draft of the schedule direct questioning about trust was introduced at an early stage. Such questions, as described in the previous section, proved useful but also difficult for some participants at this stage of the interview: they were thus moved to the end of the schedule.

The preliminary interviews enabled the conversational tone of the interviews to be reviewed and improved. They offered an opportunity to strengthen the researcher's ability to probe appropriately and to respond reflexively to parents' accounts of their experiences. In this context the length and specificity of the interview schedule proved unwieldy: it was occasionally difficult to track those themes which might have been missed. To ease this difficulty the schedule was shortened and made less detailed.

### ***3.3.4 Interviews with managers***

Interviews were also conducted with preschool managers. In common with the approach favoured by Möllering (2006), it was considered beneficial to explore both

sides of the trust dyad, in order to obtain a range of perspectives upon the trust relationship. While the focus of the study remained parents' understandings around and attainment of trust in preschool provision, useful insights into providers' behaviours around trust, and particularly the emphasis placed upon exhibited empathy, were obtained and are considered in later chapters (p.163; p.279). Such interviews also provided contextual information about the local preschool market, the organisation, its user group and about the interactions between the organisation and parents. These interviews offered a particular triangulating function: the intention was not to confirm parents' accounts, but to provide more information and a fuller picture of the empirical situation and the relationships within it (Fielding and Fielding 1986; Ritchie 2003).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with the head of the foundation stage at the nursery class, and with the managers in charge of the forprofit nursery and the parent-run preschool settings. At the integrated centre interviews were held with both the head of nursery and the head of the centre (who was also the headteacher of the nursery school). A full interview was undertaken with the manager of the first social enterprise nursery, and an abbreviated interview with the manager of the second social enterprise setting.

Interviews followed a similar pattern of questions to that within the parents' schedule. There was particular focus upon how providers perceived that they supported parents' trust. Descriptive characteristics of the preschool organisation – such as its ownership structure, the number of children on roll, the qualifications of staff and the fees charged - were gathered through structured questions at the end of the interview. The schedule for interviews with managers is included as Appendix 2.

### ***3.3.5 Interviews in practice***

Contextual interviews were undertaken with a local authority childcare outreach worker and with a senior manager at the social enterprise organisation in order to support understanding of the local area and local preschool provision. 32 in-depth interviews with parents and preschool managers subsequently took place between May 2007 and April 2010. All interviews were face-to-face, taking place in various quiet rooms at the preschool settings, with exception of the interview with the head of the foundation stage at the nursery class, which took place at her home. The length of interviews varied

between 40 minutes and over two hours. The typical duration was one and a quarter hours. In two cases interviews with parents took place over two separate sessions.

Full attention was paid to the ethical conduct of the study. Information was provided to parents both through an introductory letter and through an explanatory sheet which was presented at the time of an interview. Before the interview began the researcher carefully explained the nature of the project, the process by which participants' and organisations' identities would be anonymised, and the potential production of academic articles on the basis of the obtained data. It was made clear to participants that they were free to withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. At this time informed consent was obtained from the participants.

### **3.4 Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants. In one case (preschool parent 1) the recording process failed, and data was restricted to interview notes. In all other cases interviews were transcribed by an external contractor. Transcripts were checked carefully against the recordings and edited as necessary. After each interview a 'memo' was written by the researcher which set down emerging themes, impressions of the participant, contextual information and reflections on the tone of the interview which might not be captured within a transcript.

From the interviews with parents and preschool managers there emerged a significant volume of detailed and rich text. Familiarity with this data was achieved through multiple close readings of each transcript. Once a level of familiarity had been achieved, a process of coding was undertaken: transcripts were again reviewed closely, and emerging concepts and phenomena of interest within the text were labelled. Such coding was facilitated by CAQDAS software (Atlas-ti), which was used primarily as a data management tool to enable straightforward creation, editing and retrieval of codes and coded text.

Codes arose from two sources. First, they were derived from the insights and theories around trust and preschool provision identified in the conceptual framework (Chapter 2). Second, codes were derived directly from parents' accounts to capture emerging

themes and issues of importance. Where appropriate, such codes were given *in vivo* labels (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which used the participants' language to capture a phenomenon or issue: 'gut instinct', for instance, was a repeated phrase and emerging theme in parents' accounts (see section 7.2.2 below). As codes were applied – and indeed throughout the analytic process – there were repeated moments of reflection to ensure that awareness of prior theoretical concepts and their application to the data was not prejudicing the researcher's ability to notice the particular experiences presented by participants or preventing the recognition of unexpected themes. Over time, and with reflection, codes were consolidated, refined and reviewed. In particular the depth of data obtained through the qualitative interviews enabled understanding of those issues or dimensions which were of core importance to individual participants, and those which were more peripheral (Merton and Kendall 1946).

Following detailed consideration and coding of individual transcripts, there was a concentrated and iterative process of comparison between participants' accounts in order to explore similarities, contrasts and emerging analytic themes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Bryman 2004). Where contrasts were found, variations in participants' situations (such as socio-economic status or the setting which a child was attending) were explored for their potential relevance as an explanation of such difference. During this process codes, as appropriate, were collected into higher level conceptual themes. As a simple example of this progression towards thematic generalisation, some parents described how their children told stories which provided information and reassurance about provision (p.149). Such stories were part of a wider pattern of messages from children (p.148ff), which in turn was categorised as belonging to a general explanatory finding that trust was actively constructed by parents (section 8.1.2). On the basis of such interrogation of the data within and between parents' accounts, generalised explanations were ultimately formulated which provided responses to the study's research questions. Such explanations of the processes and nature of parents' trust were in turn related back to existing literature in order to develop and refine theory.

The idea of any sort of quality assessment in qualitative studies through terms such as validity or reliability can be controversial (see for instance Bryman 2004). Nonetheless these terms have some utility as a means of considering the robustness of a study (Miles

and Huberman 1994; Lewis and Ritchie 2003). As a conclusion to this description of the analytical process used in this study, there therefore follows a brief consideration of the reliability, validity and generalisability of the study's findings. The *reliability* of the study is here conceived as the appropriateness of the research tools and their consistent and stable implementation (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the current study consistent data collection was supported by the semi-structured character of the schedule, which ensured that similar questions and topics were raised with all participants. Analysis, as described above, was rigorous, systematic and detailed. All data collection and analysis was undertaken by a single researcher (the author), a characteristic which provided consistency across interviewing and coding processes.

The *validity* of the study's findings can be construed as the extent to which there is correspondence between the study's analytic assertions and the phenomena which it is attempting to capture (Hammersley 1991) – or, as Lewis and Ritchie (2003: 270) suggest simply, whether the findings and analysis are “well-grounded”. Validity is derived from all aspects of the research process, such as the nature of the selection and the quality of the data collection process (Lewis and Ritchie 2003). Nonetheless much focus is upon the quality of analytic interpretation. Two layers of interpretation – interpretations by the participant and by the researcher - can both potentially create bias. Participants may offer a distorted account which presents a favourable image of themselves or their behaviour (Miles and Huberman 1994; Bourdieu 1999). As Chapter 2 noted (p.60), there may be a particular tendency to such self-presentation in the context of trust, where ‘reasons’ may be contrived or over-rationalised to justify trusting behaviours (Luhmann 1979; Möllering 2001). The passage of time may also distort interpretations (Becker and Greer 1957) so that parents, when asked about the process of choosing provision, might reinterpret their behaviours and feelings at that time in the light of their current perspectives about the preschool and the wider social context - and thus not accurately capture the ‘true’ process which they had experienced. The researcher's own interpretations of data may also be subject to bias (Miles and Huberman 1994), including, as already alluded to, over-emphasis on pre-existing theoretical conceptions, cultural assumptions or the temptation to include only data which favourably supports an emerging theory.

There is no simple solution to the challenges of achieving a ‘valid’ interpretation of qualitative data. A number of approaches were utilised with the intention of ensuring a level of robustness. First, probing within interviews was used to explore and check initial understandings. Second, the researcher attempted to achieve a reflexive and self-critical attitude to the interpretation of text and to the attribution of meaning to parents’ accounts (Seale 1999) – an attitude which was enacted through repeated checking and reflection upon the construal of data and the empirical groundedness of findings (Flick 2002). Third, as part of this reflective process, the researcher’s interpretations were scrutinised and informed within discussions with his doctoral supervisor. Fourth, discrepant accounts or findings were explored and their implications for theory construction considered (Miles and Huberman 1994). The presentation of findings in the following chapters is, finally, illustrated by frequent direct reference to parents’ own words and statements. The intention of such references is to present to the reader the rich descriptions within parents’ accounts, and also to display how analytic constructions emerged from the empirical data. In this sense the analytic process and empirical data is offered to scrutiny, so that the reader may assess the validity of the interpretative process (Lewis and Ritchie 2003; Snape and Spencer 2003).

Finally, there is the issue of the *generalisability* of findings. It is, of course, not possible to make statistical generalisations to a population from a qualitative study of this kind in which a small selection of participants has been purposively selected (Bryman 2004). Instead, such a study can support the development of theoretical or analytical generalisations about social processes which may inform understanding of other situations and settings (Firestone 1993; Miles and Huberman 1994; Bryman 2004). In the first instance the development and refinement of theory in the present study, which is explored in the final chapter, has obvious relevance in extending analytic understanding of parents’ trust in preschool provision. There is a further possibility that theoretical generalisations may extend beyond the preschool context to other fields of welfare service provision. As the final section of the thesis concludes (p.285-286), inasmuch as preschool provision shares characteristics in common with other welfare services, there may be transferable analytic insights. Inasmuch as each welfare field is idiosyncratic, there will, however, be limits to the extent of such generalisation.

## **4 Empirical report: trust and choice**

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The current chapter is the first of four which report empirical findings concerning the bases and nature of trust as parents chose and used preschool provision. The chapter considers, first, the extent to which parents thought trust to be a central issue. It then explores how they attained beliefs about the trustworthiness of nurseries during the process of choosing provision. The study finds that parents made use of multiple and diverse bases of trust. Three distinct categories of information are identified which supported parents' expectations of settings. First, many parents (but not all) made use of recommendations and the reputation of nurseries. Second, the chapter considers the contribution of regulation to trust, and in particular the role of Ofsted inspections, CRB checks and qualifications. Third, parents often used self-generated information (for instance, parental observation and assessment) as a central basis for trust.

The final section of the chapter considers patterns and contrasts within the overarching processes through which parents collected information about trustworthiness; it identifies a typology of four distinct models of information collection. These varied approaches had significant implications for the production of trust and the bases of trust which were used and prioritised.

### **4.1 Trust: a central issue and a significant challenge**

Before exploring the basis on which parents trusted preschool provision (and indeed whether they did), it is useful to explore how far they considered trust to be a central issue and significant challenge. When parents were asked directly whether trust was important, the response was universally affirmative. Such responses are of limited analytical value since, as parents indicated, it would seem extraordinary to disagree:

I don't know what parent would say no to that because... everybody who's a mum... wants the best. (nursery class parent 5)

... it's common sense. You wouldn't really want to leave your child with someone you didn't trust [laughter]... (integrated centre parent 4)

Nonetheless the necessity of trust evoked a certain strength of feeling:

if you don't trust... the nursery, you don't feel comfortable [when] you leave your children... You have to trust, yes, you have to trust... (integrated centre parent 1)

Moreover, parents sometimes spontaneously identified trust as a significant issue prior to specific questioning. Integrated centre parent 3 was content to leave her children at the nursery "cause I trust them"; forprofit chain parent 6 described her "sense of trust" in the nursery manager. For social enterprise parent 1, there was no option except to trust:

I can't control what goes on when I'm turning my back from my kids. I just have to trust other people to do it.

The significance of trust can alternatively be explored through the conceptual framework set out in Chapter 2. The need for trust is predicted to be pressing where the extent of vulnerability to harm is high and uncertainty is pronounced (section 2.1.2). Both these conditions were identifiable within parents' accounts. Parents' vulnerability was acute because the well-being of their child was at stake:

This is the precious thing you have... You have to trust someone... to look after the same you do at home. (integrated centre parent 2)

Numerous potential risks were described. There was fear of a "nasty experience", a need for reassurance that a child "...wasn't going to be scarred for life" (forprofit chain parent 2). For some parents child abuse was a deep concern, a fear driven by some idea of a generalised risky environment:

... children are never safe, no one's safe in this world, do you know what I mean?  
(social enterprise parent 1)

As well as fears of acute damage, there was shared concern about children's happiness:

my experience of school was fairly awful... we very much wanted [our son's] first experiences to be positive. (preschool parent 4)

it's very important that my daughter feels happy... she [is] spending more time here than with me at home during the day. (forprofit chain parent 1)

The latter comment indicates another dimension of parents' and children's vulnerability. The extensive time which children spent at preschool settings increased the potential for harm or unhappiness:

Because your children in the nursery, how many hours... something happen you know? (nursery class parent 2)

... he's spending half of his life in this place... it's very important how he spends that time (preschool parent 5)

The possibility of harm or of a child's unhappiness might cause anxiety:

... every day I worry, but that's because I'm a parent. (social enterprise parent 5)

... you feel something inside... when you give your children to someone...  
(integrated centre parent 5)

Thus a belief in the trustworthiness of a setting was not only a reassurance that a child would be safe or happy, but also a protection from feelings of anxiety and fear:

[we wanted] ... an environment where we know we can leave [her]... and we don't even have to think about how she's going to be... not saying, "ah, I hope they look after her..." (forprofit chain parent 4)

The second condition which implies a functional need for trust is a situation of uncertainty. For some parents the difficulty of knowing the nature of a nursery, especially before use, was acute:

... we don't know anything at all, of course, no. (nursery class parent 2)

I was a bit nervous of taking him to a place that I didn't know, to a nursery that I didn't know. (integrated centre parent 4)

Such uncertainty might persist on an ongoing basis, since poor quality might be hidden behind the "closed doors" of the nursery:

all the mums and dads... at work, they don't know what's happening. (forprofit chain parent 3)

after closed doors, you don't... know, people [can] change. (social enterprise parent 1)

Parents identified two difficulties which heightened such unknowingness. First, staff might contrive some kind of performance when parents visited, so that the observed scene did not represent the nursery's reality:

... you will never really know what goes on... you will stay there with your children and... the staff would act different because you're there. But once you're not there, you don't know what goes on. (social enterprise parent 1)

... if the place is doing an open day... obviously they're going to make an effort, anywhere would, any person would. (nursery class parent 1)

Second, a visit to the nursery could only be a snapshot of a moment in time:

...if I'd have walked in on a bad day, maybe my children wouldn't have come here... If I'd have walked in and a child was having an awful tantrum and was maybe being ticked off a bit, you might think, "Oh dear". So I don't think you can ever be sure. (nursery class parent 1)

The dimensions of vulnerability and uncertainty were combined, for some parents, in the spectre of the stranger who would look after their child. The character of the stranger could not be certainly known, and yet the capacity for harm was boundless:

I can't guarantee that this person doesn't get upset, doesn't get angry... cause I do... I control myself but that person might not be able to ... cause... that's not his child or her child. So that... really scares me. (preschool parent 5)

You can't really tell a paedophile can you, unless it's written on their forehead. (nursery class parent 5)

It has been noted that the functional necessity of trust results from "people's uncontrollable power to act" (Luhmann 1979: 41). For these parents such uncontrollable and unpredictable power was very real. Not only was trust therefore a central issue, but it was also a challenging state of mind to attain:

I just don't trust, I'm very un-trusting of people I don't know looking after my kids. (preschool parent 3)

... you literally are leaving your child most of the day in the hands of somebody else and I personally do not trust anyone except my mother. (preschool parent 5)

Parents' perceptions of both vulnerability and uncertainty were, however, varied and sometimes contrasting. Some parents were considerably more conscious of risk than others (see section 7.3.2). Others believed that the information asymmetry between themselves and the provider was not impenetrable – that it was possible, in a meaningful way, to confront such asymmetry through their own observation and assessment. Such a belief did not obviate the need for trust, but instead affected how trust was achieved. Parents' active construction of trust, through their own observation and experience, is a recurring theme in this and following chapters.

The necessity of trust, finally, was eloquently exhibited by occasions when it was undermined. Parents described moments when belief in the trustworthiness of a setting

was lost. In these cases parents became distressed or suspicious; they engaged in costly monitoring or even exited the provision (section 5.2.3). It was in its absence that the significance of trust was most clearly recognisable.

Positive expectations of the reliability of a setting were therefore central. This chapter considers how such expectations were attained when parents chose provision.

## **4.2 Recommendation**

For over half the parents, recommendation by other actors supported positive expectations of the provider at the moment of choice. Recommendation was a means of acquiring, at second hand, knowledge about a provider. It brought reassurance that other parents had been satisfied with the provision in the recent past:

it was... safe in that respect, that I knew a lot of people whose children had gone there and they'd been happy with it. (nursery class parent 1 – referring to prior choice of preschool)

Recommendation might be a central reason for trusting a nursery at this initial stage:

there was two or three people who had children in... exactly the same places... they were thoroughly happy ... [and] recommended them heartily. So it was entirely word of mouth. (preschool parent 4)

she say that it's a good nursery, nothing to worry [about]... just from what she said ... I put my child in there. (forprofit chain parent 1, referring to a prior choice)

Recommendation was privileged over certain other information sources, such as prospectuses, local authority guides or Ofsted reports. The value of recommendation lay both in the richness of reported personal experience and in its perceived impartiality:

I would rather speak to someone who's had experience like... my friend who had a child in here... I would obviously take her word more than a book [reference to a local authority preschool guide]. (social enterprise parent 1)

I can't imagine that there's somewhere you can go to get an honest rounded opinion ... word of mouth is probably as close as you're going to get. (preschool parent 4)

The specific content of recommendations was diverse. Typically recommendations focused upon individual staff members or the ethos of the setting. In the case of the nursery class, recommendations tended to apply to the whole infant school as much as (or more than) to the nursery itself. Parents also used recommendations to resolve dilemmas over *type* of provision – for instance, whether to use a school-based or other nursery, or whether to use a nursery or childminder. For one parent, recommendation was not of the specific setting, but of the local association of third sector preschools. Parents' favourable reports of other settings in the association were considered relevant to the nursery he intended to use:

it was recommended by...a friend of ours... There's another [name of association] preschool ... their little girl was there and they said, "Well, it's fantastic"... And they said, "You know that there's one near you?" (preschool parent 4)

This father utilised his social network to uncover further 'hearty recommendations' of the association and, via third parties, of the specific nursery:

we have three friends who are spread over... the same organisation... they'd heard that this one was a good school... that was good enough. (preschool parent 4)

Recommendation was commonly communicated through 'word of mouth'. But the observed behaviour of other parents might also be interpreted as an implicit recommendation. Parents' repeat use of a nursery for a subsequent child was a strong recommendation – a signal that the nursery "must be doing something right" (integrated centre parent 4). Use of a setting by a staff member was interpreted as an implicit recommendation from an insider:

the deputy manager ... had a child here... which seemed to be quite a good endorsement..... it made me feel that she obviously had faith in what's happening... (forprofit chain parent 5)

... it wasn't just people that were using [the nursery], it was the staff as well. (integrated centre parent 4)

The process of recommendation requires access to an individual or group who can provide such information. Parents often received recommendations through social networks around parenting and children, such as playgroups, drop-ins or post-natal groups; there were also flows of information amongst expatriate communities. Recommendation might also be transmitted through familial ties. Nursery class parent 5 had access to rich information through her older sister's parent network:

I see [my sister's friends] all the time ... [we] get together and have coffee ... a lot of the mums recommended me to come here...

A very specific network was identifiable at the state integrated centre. Parents typically used other services at the centre prior to use of the nursery (see section 6.4.3 for further discussion). A community of parents developed around the drop-in, a play session at which parents stay with their children; from this community opinions about the centre's nursery might be obtained:

... parents who had maybe [a] second or third child... were in the drop-in... they had their first child downstairs [in the nursery] and they would be, "Oh my son's downstairs"... it was a lot of word of mouth. (integrated centre parent 4)

Finally, nursery class parent 3 responded inventively to her isolation from such networks by visiting local cafes to access "the gossip" about schools:

It's hearing what the local parents say... and what they hear... I went to sit in for a chicken noodle soup and then you hear everything... you sort of ask, "[name of school], what do you think?"

The extent of involvement in social networks affected the richness and detail of recommendations. Thus nursery class parent 3, having accessed information in cafes, described the consequent recommendation as "a murmuring on the streets". Nursery class parent 1 received recommendations only through third parties; the recommendations lacked substance:

... their grandmother on their father's side knew women who had sent their children there and she had said to me... "so-and-so says it's a good place and so-and-so said it was a good place."

For three parents, indeed, it was as much the absence of negative comments as the presence of positive recommendation which supported trust. All used the same formulation – "I hadn't heard anything bad about it". This formulation seems weak; it contrasts with the multiple 'hearty recommendations' described by preschool parent 4.

Within the process of recommendation, there is an underlying tension. Why should a recommendation itself be reliable? Preschool parent 4, for whom 'word of mouth' was a central factor in his initial trust in the nursery, emphasised that recommenders must themselves be trustworthy –

it was word of mouth ... I firmly think that that's... the best way to approach it - I mean if... people you trust [make the recommendation]...

Several parents used triangulating strategies to confirm the recommendation's reliability. Assessments might be made of the recommender's own characteristics. Trusted qualities were the regard in which the parent held the recommender, the extent of a recommender's experience of preschool, or a recommender's dual role as staff member and user. The recommender's knowledge of the particular character and needs of the parent's child also implied that a recommendation would be well-founded.

Alternatively parents observed the characteristics of the recommender's own children:

... if their children are going through the same thing, you look at their children and their children seem very well balanced and happy... (preschool parent 4)

As a corollary, parents were prepared to reject recommendations. Integrated centre parent 4 had received negative feedback from parents who were disappointed about the lack of formal tuition in reading and writing at the nursery. The parent, however, supported the nursery's philosophy of 'learning through play', and therefore discounted the opinions of the other parents.

Parents, finally, occasionally received recommendations from professionals.

'Recommendation' might simply be signposting to services at the integrated centre: nonetheless such signposting, by a familiar health visitor, midwife or outreach worker, was a significant first step in a process of engaging with services which culminated in use of nursery provision. The impact of professional 'recommendation' was more direct for parents in receipt of preschool places from social services, although the effects upon trust were contrasting. For integrated centre parent 1, the involvement of social services was a primary foundation of trust:

I trust them because this is come through the social service. [Otherwise] I would have to be worried... maybe the staff are no good... But from the social service, I feel a little bit certain.

Social enterprise parent 2 also found reassurance from social services' assertions that the proposed nursery was good. By contrast, the involvement of social services undermined the trust of social enterprise parent 1. This involvement caused her, wrongly, to believe that the provision was run by the state: she held a belief that state

provision was inherently inferior (section 6.3.1 below). She also perceived that there was no incentive for the nursery to offer high quality care to clients of social services:

Social services referred me, so to them [nursery staff], it's like... why should they [bother]? ... It's not like I'm going to a private school where ... wow, I'm going to bring in millions and thousands of pounds...

In this case the involvement of social services became a negative recommendation, a prediction of low quality.

In sum, recommendations, when used, were typically considered central to the production of trust. There was, however, some diversity in the origins and substance of recommendations: the identity of the recommender, the richness of the recommendation and the manner in which a recommendation was transmitted were all variable.

### **4.3 Regulatory systems**

Views on state regulation were in some cases polarised. Preschool parent 2 held that it was the duty of the state to ensure that settings were safe and staff were qualified; for forprofit chain parent 3, by contrast, “government should stay out of it”. Generally regulation was not volunteered as a central basis of trust. However, when parents were directly asked about dimensions of regulation – qualifications, Ofsted inspection and CRB checks – it became apparent that regulation had some relevance to parents’ experiences. In many cases regulatory functions were taken-for-granted, but nonetheless constituted some kind of foundation for trust in preschool provision. Such an overall summary disguises diversity and nuance in both the relative importance attributed to regulation and the extent of investigation undertaken by parents into regulatory issues.

#### **4.3.1 Qualifications**

Staff qualifications were not volunteered by any parents as a reason for choosing or trusting a setting. However, when the topic was directly introduced in interviews it became clear that qualifications were of some significance: there were only two parents for whom they did not matter. Parents offered different opinions on the extent of this significance. Some were ambivalent - while acknowledging some role for qualifications, they did not presume against unqualified staff:

you would expect them... to be looking at taking on people with... qualifications... but I wouldn't say I would be against someone if they didn't have it. (forprofit chain parent 4)

... formal training's probably a good thing maybe, but I think a great deal of it is instinctive... (preschool parent 4)

Thus qualifications might be a helpful, but not essential, reassurance:

I obviously find it reassuring that they're a qualified nursery nurse or whatever, but... it wasn't fundamental for me. (forprofit chain parent 5)

For other parents qualifications were essential. Preschool parent 2 was explicit:

you don't want to give your children to people who don't have qualifications.... at the beginning the most important thing is that they have all the qualifications.

Qualifications signalled that staff were prepared for the challenge of looking after young children: they would have the skills to care for a feverish child (forprofit chain parent 1) or to support children's cognitive development (social enterprise parent 1).

Qualifications therefore offered some reassurance of quality in a condition of information asymmetry:

... it means they are professional, they know what they do is not just like baby-sitting... (forprofit chain parent 6)

... it's important [for] the staff to have... [qualifications]... Otherwise, if you're going to leave your children with someone, you don't know... his behaviour or how he is. (integrated centre parent 1)

... it's important... they've gone through a system and it's a reassuring thing... (social enterprise parent 6)

Notwithstanding the significance attributed to qualifications, in many cases parents did not actively seek out information. Instead qualifications were assumed:

I... made an assumption that they would have to be qualified to work in a chain nursery like this. I never checked it. (forprofit chain parent 2)

I just assumed they would have [qualifications]. I assumed that the school checked these people out thoroughly before they give them the job. (nursery class parent 1)

Even preschool parent 2, for whom qualifications were essential, did not check. Her assumption that staff would be appropriately qualified was informed by knowledge of the French system:

I assumed that they had the qualifications - in France you can't open a school if teachers are not qualified...

A minority of parents, however, did actively seek information about qualifications.

Forprofit chain parent 1 approached staff directly:

I asked... "Why are you here? Did you do something to work with children or study for NVQ?"... Then I find... on the walls, pictures of people, with what they've done before joining the nursery... who's got what... So that's good.

Such active investigation was undertaken by those parents who attributed greatest significance to qualifications – although not all parents who attributed such importance made active enquiries. Active investigation was sometimes associated with a particular awareness of the qualifications framework – for instance, on account of an intention to pursue a career in child psychology (forprofit chain parent 3) or being an educational professional (the husband of forprofit chain parent 2).

The level or type of qualification was in most cases unimportant. There was no general association between higher qualifications and higher trust. Most parents had little awareness of the precise qualifications which staff held. Among parents who did hold a view about levels, there were differing opinions. Commonly parents were satisfied with a basic qualification:

You don't need... the highest standard but there's a minimum... for taking care of children. They need to know the basics... (forprofit chain parent 1)

Such opinions were linked to a conception of the preschool as a non-academic setting, in which there was no call for advanced qualifications:

I've known people who are fantastic with children who've had no formal training whatsoever... you hope they're not teaching them absolute rubbish. I don't think you could do that at this stage. (preschool parent 4)

... you don't need to be that highly qualified... to teach a three year old the basics... They're not exactly going to be learning ... Shakespeare... [qualifications are] important but not like proper degrees.... obviously GCSEs or O-levels [are necessary]. (nursery class parent 5)

A small number of parents were reassured by higher level qualifications. Nursery class parent 4 preferred staff to have degrees; nursery class parent 3 and integrated centre parent 4 attributed importance to the knowledge and training of qualified teachers. The

latter parent did not initially realise that qualified teachers worked at the nursery. Their presence was “a pleasant surprise” – this discovery was the central reason for her growth of trust in the nursery over time. Teachers brought a depth of expert knowledge:

teachers might have child psychology under their belt... a little bit more...

understanding of how a child at that age works. (integrated centre parent 4)

The parent, in contrast to others, perceived child development in the early years to be a complex phenomenon, professional understanding of which required an academic underpinning.

For one parent, finally, the level of qualifications was a source of concern. Forprofit chain parent 3, because she was intending a career in child psychology, had undertaken research into preschool qualifications. She perceived that, by international standards, qualifications in England were weak. Qualifications, rather than a reassurance, became a source of suspicion:

Get out of school at 16, if you're lucky 18, and then you pick up all these small qualifications and you... walk into a job... But actually that means nothing.

For most parents, then, the existence of qualifications was significant, but not their precise nature. Qualifications were generally assumed and not investigated. But there was considerable diversity in parents' approaches and beliefs, so that, for instance, qualifications were essential for some and simply helpful to others. Across all parents, however, qualifications were considered simply as a basic foundation. Thus, for preschool parent 2, for whom qualifications were vital, they were nonetheless only a starting-point. Primary focus lay instead on the exhibited competence and character of staff, a theme explored in section 4.4 below:

it's not because you read your book that makes you a better person... you have to have it in here, in your heart. (nursery class parent 2)

#### **4.3.2 *Ofsted inspection***

Ofsted reports for all providers were accessible online, and all providers made their report available to parents. There was some confusion about the forprofit chain's report, which was based upon an initial inspection seven months after the nursery opened. The manager did not regard this as a full report, a view shared by forprofit

chain parent 2. However, three other parents made use of this report during the choice process. Providers were inspected within different Ofsted regimes: the nursery class was inspected against the more detailed section 5 schools framework; the parent-run preschool, social enterprise and forprofit chain were inspected as daycare settings; the integrated centre was inspected under both regimes.

Parents exhibited diverse approaches to Ofsted inspections when they were choosing preschool, as shown in table 4.1. There was difference both in the significance attributed to Ofsted and in the extent of research into the Ofsted inspection which parents undertook. Such diversity was in turn driven by varied levels of knowledge of Ofsted, and by different views of Ofsted’s relevance and competence. Two contrasting groups of parents can be described – those for whom Ofsted was in some way a reassurance of quality (the upper half of table 4.1), and those for whom it was irrelevant (the lower half of table 4.1).

**Table 4.1: Parents’ approaches to Ofsted reports**

		<b>Report not read</b>	<b>Report read</b>
<b>Ofsted: some significance</b>	<b>Mild reassurance</b>	Nursery class parent 5 Integrated centre parent 2	Nursery class parent 1 Social enterprise parent 5 Forprofit chain parent 2 <sup>i</sup>
	<b>Significant</b>	Preschool parents 1 & 3	Nursery class parent 4 Forprofit chain parents 1, 4 & 6
<b>Ofsted: no significance</b>	<b>Not considered</b>	Nursery class parent 2  Integrated centre parents 1, 3, 4 and 5  Social enterprise parent 1, 2, 3 & 4	N/A
	<b>Deliberately discounted</b>	Preschool parents 2, 4 & 5 Forprofit chain parents 3 & 5	Nursery class parent 3

Notes

- i. Forprofit chain parent 2 did not consider Ofsted’s initial inspection of the nursery to be a full report; she therefore accorded it little value.
- ii. No data was obtained from social enterprise parent 6.

Within the first group, the reassurance created by Ofsted might be weak or strong. For integrated centre parent 2, nursery class parent 5 and social enterprise parent 5, Ofsted oversight was a mild reassurance which supplemented their own observations. Nursery class parent 1 had been given the Ofsted report in a welcome pack subsequent to her choice of the provider; the report was ‘important’ to the parent, but played no obvious role in her choice process. For a number of parents Ofsted was more significant. There were two dimensions to such significance. First, the simple fact of Ofsted oversight was sufficient to signal minimum levels of quality and safety. Preschool parent 3 actively checked that such oversight was in place, but did not read the inspection report:

I just saw it was Ofsted-approved, I thought, “Well, that’s fine”... if it’s Ofsted-approved, they would have had to have police checks and all that sort of stuff.

Second, other parents found significance in the report’s substance. Preschool parent 1 did not read the report, but found reassurance in the allocated grading; other parents studied the report itself:

I just read the beginning... it’s been checked not too long... before I put my daughter here and it was satisfactory. They were happy with it... So I said, “Okay, that’s okay with me”. (forprofit chain parent 1)

The partner of forprofit chain parent 4 studied the report in detail. It was perceived to be an “accurate document”, the content of which was “quite key to what we want”. For forprofit chain parent 6, who also read the report thoroughly, Ofsted was “very important” – “it’s good to have something you can rely on”. There was amongst these parents a certain trust in Ofsted itself.

A second group of parents did not attribute any significance to Ofsted. There were contrasting explanations. Some parents simply did not consider Ofsted at the moment of choice. Five parents had no knowledge of Ofsted; social enterprise parent 4 knew of Ofsted, but did not realise that it inspected nurseries; other parents had some awareness, but offered no specific reason for their lack of engagement. A number of parents deliberately discounted the Ofsted framework. Two distinctive reasons were proffered, both of which emphasised parents’ own agency and critical judgement. First, parents preferred to trust their own judgements *specifically* in the early years context. In the selection of a preschool provider, parents’ skills were perceived to be at least as robust as those of Ofsted inspectors:

I don't think it [the Ofsted report] was relevant... because I like to judge by myself.  
(preschool parent 2)

I'm sure [reading reports is] a good way of doing it... But I think as a mother ...  
you go around and you see things... I'm a housewife myself, I know if a place is  
safe, if a place is dirty or not immediately. (preschool parent 5)

In these cases parents perceived the quality of preschool provision to be not only  
observable, but also amenable to evaluation through domestic and parental insight.  
These parents accepted the value of Ofsted reports when their children moved to  
primary school: schooling was both a longer term commitment and a more technical  
field in which parents might not have sufficient expertise to evaluate quality.

Second, some parents had more substantive concerns about the conduct of Ofsted  
inspections – they believed, in effect, that Ofsted itself was not to be trusted. These  
parents were also unlikely to refer to Ofsted when choosing primary schools. For  
preschool parent 4, whose wife had experienced Ofsted inspections as a primary school  
teacher, Ofsted's expansion into the early years was a “crazy idea”. Inspirational  
teaching could not be measured in this way:

It's a bit like a performance... if you let it go, you lose your audience and I think  
it's that intangible... It's not something you can measure as an Ofsted report...

Conversely, it was precisely the lack of a simple measure which disturbed nursery class  
parent 3:

I don't really understand [Ofsted reports]... I like ... clear diagrams to say... good,  
medium, awful. I don't need all this waffle.<sup>33</sup>

Parents were also concerned by frailties in Ofsted's procedures – concerns which in  
some cases were shared by parents who nonetheless used Ofsted reports as a resource.  
There was a particular belief that an inspection could only describe the setting at one  
point in time. Such a snapshot might hold little meaning:

Ofsted can come in today and the nursery can run absolutely smoothly and  
tomorrow it's not the same place... so no, I can't say that I really put any trust in  
Ofsted. (forprofit chain parent 3)

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<sup>33</sup> The inspection report available to the parent had been published in 2004 under the section 10 regime.  
Section 5 reports, from September 2005, have included simple grades for the whole school and for  
aspects of the school's performance.

In addition it was perceived that a nursery might ‘perform’ for the inspection. Forprofit chain parent 2 had heard anecdotally of a childminder who “could turn it on” when Ofsted visited, but who otherwise provided mediocre care. Nursery class parent 1 was concerned that, because settings were given notice of inspection, they might prepare such a performance:

if you know someone’s coming, ... if you’ve got visitors to your home, you  
hoover more or you polish...

Parents questioned not only the competence but also the integrity of the Ofsted process. Nursery class parent 3 held that, as a government body, Ofsted would not give a “true representation” and would gloss over bad provision. This was not a generally held view: forprofit chain parent 5 was explicit that reports are “certainly not whitewashing”. Integrated centre parent 4 described a more complex interaction, by which Ofsted inspection and other regulatory systems undermined her belief in the integrity and motivations of staff at a nursery class. The school, having been criticised by Ofsted for standards in the Foundation Stage, had implemented a more rigorous academic focus – a focus with which the parent disagreed. The school was perceived to be pursuing a “hidden agenda” which privileged its interests over the needs of children:

what I don’t like is... my child will be forced at such a young age to do something  
so that [the school] can go further up the league tables.

This perception informed her decision not to use the nursery class for her daughter.

There appeared to be organisational and demographic distinctions in approaches to Ofsted. Parents who were unaware of Ofsted, or who offered no specific reason for their lack of engagement with the Ofsted process, were concentrated at the integrated centre and social enterprise. By contrast, all parents at both the forprofit chain and the preschool made an active decision to reject or to embrace as significant the Ofsted framework. Further, such active decisions were limited to households with degree-level education.

The significance of Ofsted reports, finally, should not be overstated. As table 4.1 illustrates, only a small number of parents had read reports when choosing a nursery. No parent offered Ofsted as a primary source of trust; in most cases Ofsted oversight or

reports were a foundational reassurance on which more active decisions to trust were constructed.

### **4.3.3 CRB checks**

Most parents were aware of the system of CRB checks. There was a consensus that such checks were important. Even parents who were otherwise suspicious of government intervention supported such oversight. CRB checks were considered a necessary safeguard when a child was left with a stranger, especially given concerns about the wider social environment and the risk of abuse.

I think about it especially with what's happening in our society. ... It is good to have... When you put your child somewhere... you don't know the person... I don't know what kind of person he is or she is... [Checking] whether he is or isn't a criminal... that's a very good idea... you should know who you're working with.  
(forprofit chain parent 1)

The significance of CRB checks was clear in parents' accounts:

... if I went to a nursery and... found that they weren't doing those, then I definitely would consider... [taking] my child out... (forprofit chain parent 4)

I would obviously be horrified if I felt that there was any member of the team that hadn't been [checked]. (social enterprise parent 5)

Despite this significance, no parent investigated whether checks had been undertaken.

Instead they were taken-for-granted:

it was something I assumed would have happened... so I didn't ask about it.  
(social enterprise parent 4)

you don't come in one day and go, "Oh, is everyone here checked?" (forprofit chain parent 4)

Preschool managers confirmed that they were rarely asked about CRB checks.

In general, then, there was a taken-for-granted confidence in the CRB system. Two parents, however, voiced doubts about its efficacy. Nursery class parent 5 noted that, notwithstanding CRB checks, "you still hear of these awful things happening".

Preschool parent 5 cited media stories as evidence that the CRB system was fallible and

that people with prior misdemeanours were not appropriately excluded. She therefore attributed less significance to CRB checks than other parents.

There were, finally, three parents who did not have knowledge of the CRB system, two of whom used the integrated centre and one the social enterprise. All three had also been unaware of the Ofsted framework. This lack of awareness of regulatory systems seemed associated with challenging circumstances and lower socio-economic status. Of the five parents who were unaware of Ofsted or CRB checks (or both), none had degrees, three were lone parents and four were immigrants to the UK.

#### **4.4 Self-generated bases of trust**

In addition to information obtained from external sources (such as recommendation or regulation), parents' accounts gave striking prominence to their own critical assessments of the expected quality of provision. A decision to trust preschool provision was thus not a passive, taken-for-granted process, but rather an active construction which drew upon parents' observations, experiences and judgements.

The context for such observations during the choice process was most obviously parents' visits to preschool settings. With one exception, all parents visited nurseries prior to choice<sup>34</sup>. There was variation in the number of settings visited – some parents visited multiple settings, which enabled comparisons to be made across preschools; others visited solely the setting which was chosen. Some parents made a single visit to a setting; others made two or more visits before deciding to use a nursery.

The fact of such parental visits is not surprising. The importance of the visit in supporting the construction of trust is, however, perhaps unexpected. The visit was, for a significant number of parents, central to an assessment of trustworthiness. As an example, social enterprise parent 3 described the reassurance which she gained:

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<sup>34</sup> The exception, social enterprise parent 1, received her child's place through social services. She was shown around the nursery on the first day her child attended.

they answered all my questions... they were so polite and they showed me all around... all of a sudden all the fears had gone... I just decided oh I'm going to bring him...

In consequence the parent cut short her search for nurseries:

... when I see the environment ... and I talked to the staff ... I felt ... this is the place for him. I don't have to worry about anything, I don't have to go and look for another place...

Similar effects were described by other parents. Following a visit, forprofit chain parent 5 “had no hesitation that this would be right”; nursery class parent 4 was “really really impressed”; nursery class parent 3 knew that “this is going to be fine”. The extent of positive expectation created by the visit is noteworthy.

Parents made active assessments of providers' trustworthiness across numerous dimensions. Five categories of observation are identified in the following sections: direct observation of providers' task performance; judgements of the motivations and character of staff; assessment of the overarching nursery environment; scrutiny of the responses of children; and evaluation of the characteristics of other families which used the nursery.

#### ***4.4.1 Exhibited professionalism***

Parents observed and assessed the behaviours of staff during the choice process. Trust was actively won (and sometimes lost) within these interactions. For trust to be earned, two conditions necessarily had to be met: first, that nursery staff behaved in a seemingly professional manner; second, that this behaviour was observable to parents. Such ‘exhibited professionalism’ might create strong expectations of competence: preschool parent 2, for instance, concluded on the basis of a visit that “you could tell that [the manager] knew exactly her job.”

Reliability might be exhibited even before a visit. Some nurseries did not react quickly, or at all, to the telephone enquiries of forprofit chain parent 6; the forprofit chain's prompt responses were a sign of comparative reliability. Forprofit chain parent 1 described how some nurseries might “want to get rid of you, don't want to stay on the phone.” This created a negative impression of impatience in interactions with parents.

For forprofit chain 3 it was precisely patience, and also the warmth of the conversation, which enabled her to draw strong positive expectations from an initial telephone call.

It was during the visit that judgements of professionalism were primarily made. The manner in which the visit was conducted by staff was a first indicator. A thorough introductory tour, in which staff attempted to answer parents' questions fully, created a positive impression. Providers' perceived honesty and openness was valued:

[the manager's] communication impressed me... she was very open... and told me what's what which I liked. (preschool parent 3)

Parents across all providers focused upon the friendliness and warmth of staff during this initial interaction. Such friendliness created a sense of a "welcoming and very kind environment" (forprofit chain parent 2). Social enterprise parent 3 inferred from such a welcome that her son would be happy:

... it's going to feel like he's at home, because I felt like that, talking to them, just feel at home, just friends...

The substance of these initial communications was also significant. There was an opportunity to receive a sense of the nursery's ethos and pedagogical approach. Several parents were impressed by the structure created for children's learning, which was perceived to enable child development and stimulating play; preschool parent 4 was reassured that the "happiness of the child" was at the core of provision. Staff, moreover, exhibited professional expertise through their responses to questions:

...they were very professional. No matter what question you asked, they would be able to give an answer. (forprofit chain parent 3)

Forprofit chain parent 1 asked questions specifically relevant to the care of her daughter – the manager's comprehensive replies indicated not only professional competence, but an expertise which would be responsive to the particular child. For social enterprise parent 4, the conduct of these communications was the basis of his positive expectations of the nursery:

... the way they received me when I came in and the way they answered the questions and from our conversations... they just seemed better [than other nurseries].

As a corollary, if interactions during a visit were perceived to be poor, parents might be distrustful of future quality. Parents chose not to use nurseries where there was

apparent emphasis on money-making or ‘pushy’ salesmanship (see section 6.4.1); such behaviours undermined belief in a nursery’s ethos. Social enterprise parent 1 was disturbed by the cursory manner in which she was shown around the nursery on her daughter’s first day: it was not a ‘good invitation’. This lack of thoroughness contributed to emerging negative expectations. It confirmed the parent’s belief that, because she was in receipt of a social services placement, there was little incentive for the nursery to be responsive; further, she attributed the tour’s brevity to staffing shortages which would compromise future quality.

Beyond such initial interactions, parents – even on the basis of a single visit – reported that they were able to observe and assess the actual conduct of the nursery. Some parents adopted purposive strategies to ensure that they would observe meaningful interactions. One parent visited nurseries without an appointment; another scheduled her visits for particular moments in the nursery day:

I want to see how the staff are, how they treat children, when they’re busy with children... not when they’re ready for you... (preschool parent 5)

I didn’t go... early in the morning or late at night ... when they’re just coming or everybody’s going. It was... in the morning when there were already activities and I could see what was going on. (forprofit chain parent 6)

Sometimes the evaluated procedures were easy-to-observe ancillary functions. Several parents, for instance, were impressed or put off by a nursery’s meals. For forprofit chain parent 5, a favourable assessment of nursery food was a signal of quality across harder-to-see aspects:

I remember... being very impressed by... the chef... Just how good the food was... really nice and healthy... interestingly produced. I just thought that’s likely to signify... how they might do other things which are less visible to me.

Importantly, parents also observed the actual production of care or caring behaviours. In particular they noted exhibited professionalism within the interactions between staff and children. Occasionally during the visit such professionalism would be directed towards the parent’s own child:

they talked to [child's name] straightaway rather than actually ignored her and talked with me... the interaction with [child's name] straightaway impressed me.  
(preschool parent 3)

More often parents observed the relationship between staff and children who already used the nursery. A range of behaviours was assessed – for instance, affection between staff and children, an appropriate balance between discipline and kindness, the extent of staff interaction with each child, or the manner in which children were encouraged to socialise with each other. As an example, nursery class parent 4 was struck by the manager's patience:

... she just treated every child as her own children. The attention she gives to every child, that child comes and interrupts her and she's, she seems like a mum ... it was very impressive... her patience and composure.

Exhibited staff behaviours had especial impact if they corresponded to a parent's particular preferences. Social enterprise parent 2, who placed importance on her son's language development, noted that the staff "speak properly with the kids". Forprofit chain parent 3 wanted her "baby to be picked up if he's crying"; thus the manager's observed caring behaviour during her husband's visit to the nursery was meaningful:

... there were two babies... the carer was looking after one and the other one started to cry and [the manager] picks him up. And then the baby went with them through the visit... she kept him and took him with her.

The behaviour of all staff might be relevant: parents at the forprofit chain, for instance, were impressed by the interaction between the nursery cook and children. But there was particular focus upon the exhibited professionalism of the manager. Such focus was attributable partly to the direct interaction between parents and managers during the visit, when, typically, managers led the nursery tour. In addition the manager, as the person in charge of the nursery, was perceived to be a key actor who oversaw standards of care. Thus a number of parents explained their initial trust in the nursery by referring to their assessment of the manager. For some, trust resided in the manager's competence as a leader; for others, in her exhibited care for children; for others again, in her ability to reassure them about leaving their child:

[trust is]... a lot to do with who's in charge... and how they run it... some people just won't stand for incompetent caring. (forprofit chain parent 3)

[the manager] is a Mother Goose, you could just tell... The way that she looks out for everyone and anyone going near the gate... she reminds me of my mum.  
(nursery class parent 3)

the manager... was absolutely excellent... full of ideas and enthusiasm... good at reassuring me cause I was a bit nervous about leaving [child's name]. (forprofit chain parent 2)

There were by contrast instances when parents observed poor practice during a visit. Social enterprise parent 5 was disappointed by what she saw at a forprofit chain:

... people chewing gum, people just sitting around, a lot of the kids had runny noses... the attention and the dedication to the children... wasn't there... Some children weren't being included and weren't doing activities.

Such exhibited lack of professionalism created negative expectations; it compared unfavourably to the behaviours which the parent had observed at the social enterprise nursery. Similarly nursery class parent 5 distrusted a forprofit chain nursery on account of what she saw:

I could smell... nappies... you could see the saggy nappies on the children... this man that was working there bent down, and his whole backside was out on view and I was just like no way... (nursery class parent 5)

Within these various examples there is a consistent theme. Parents actively constructed expectations of a provider's future reliability or unreliability through assessment of observed behaviours during a visit to the nursery or other initial interactions.

#### ***4.4.2 Attributed motivation and character traits***

Parents also developed expectations of the nursery through judgements of staff members' inner world of motivations and character dispositions. There is inevitably a blurred boundary between such judgements and the observation of behaviours described in the previous section: assessment of character and motivation was necessarily often made through observation of behaviour. Significance lies in the extent and type of inferences which parents drew. Parents did not simply develop expectations about specific staff competencies, but also extrapolated beliefs about the internal motivations and character dispositions which might be expected to infuse staff members' future actions.

Judgements of motivation and character traits were made in differing ways. Occasionally parents made *a priori* assessments derived from social categorisations of staff. Social enterprise parent 1 would not trust any nursery which employed a man:

I will not take my child to a nursery with a man - but there's no male staff here... you don't hear [that] paedophile women... molest a child... But men do.<sup>35</sup>

Preschool parent 5, although herself from overseas, associated foreignness with incompetence. Her initial distrust was overcome in subsequent interactions:

... first time I came here, the honest truth, I just thought maybe, because obviously [the manager has]... a foreign accent... she doesn't know what she's doing.

Several parents held reservations about workers who were young. Social enterprise parent 5 was impressed by the experience of staff at her chosen nursery; by contrast, the staff at another setting “were very young..., perhaps didn't have children of their own, didn't seem to have... life experience”. Such concerns were sometimes allayed through exhibited professionalism: “they're young, but they're really good” (forprofit chain parent 1). Forprofit chain parent 3 remained distrustful:

I... feel uncomfortable because... some of them are too young... you can't teach them about maturity and responsibility... [there are] children looking after children.

Assessments of motivations and character, however, were primarily constructed not through such *a priori* categories, but through parents' observations during a visit or other initial interactions. There were three particular foci of such observations which underpinned parents' expectations. First, parents assessed motivations. The extent to which staff enjoyed their job was, for forprofit chain parent 4, “the main thing.” He believed that intrinsic motivation was immediately observable:

... you can see when someone really enjoys their job and actually takes care in what they're doing... that came across straightaway, just on the visit...

Motivation was indicated by dedication and commitment displayed within initial communications or through behaviours:

... it was a... very good presentation... It looked... like the management and leadership of it was... very committed. (forprofit chain parent 5)

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<sup>35</sup> Subsequent to the interview, a case of abuse by a female nursery worker received widespread media coverage (for instance, Morris and Carter 2009).

She took us into other rooms... and she knew the names of the other children...  
And... that's not even her room. (forprofit chain parent 4)

Equally, it was apparent when staff were not intrinsically motivated. Settings were rejected because staff were 'gloomy', 'unhappy' or unsmiling.

Second, parents sought to identify personality traits, and in particular a loving and caring disposition:

I think main important [sic] is the nature of teacher have to be loving, caring...  
(nursery class parent 2)

Again, parents looked for indications of the intrinsic world of staff – in this case, benevolence towards both parents and children. Forprofit chain parent 3 identified such benevolence even before she visited the nursery:

I said, "I can't come in [to visit]... cause the little one's got chicken pox." And immediately... they started to give tips ... we didn't even know each other at that stage... they phoned... two weeks on, just you know, "is he okay?" And not being an "I'm selling my nursery" type of call, a genuine call.

Intrinsic benevolence was also indicated by the interactions of staff with children. There was, for instance, repeated reference to the character traits of the nursery class manager – that she exhibited patience, which was considered both a skill and an indicator of a certain disposition; and that she was 'like a mum' in her interactions with children. Nursery class parent 5, drawing on both her own assessment and information from her familial network, concluded:

... that's what I liked about this place, cause it's sort of like, "Do you think of the children a lot?" And that's what... my sister's friends are saying, that they care about the children's well-being... Whereas in other schools, not that they don't care but... they've got a different way of doing things here.

The idea of 'care' here has a specific meaning. It was desirable not just that children are competently looked after (or 'cared for'), but that there was a deep-rooted intrinsic concern for the children's well-being ('care about').

The disposition of staff was significant in a third and final way. It was important for a number of parents that they "got on with" or liked the staff. Preschool parent 5 partly attributed her trust to an immediate "human connection":

You just make that connection without wanting with some people and you don't do it with others. So I must have made that connection as soon as I came in.

Similarly, the husband of forprofit chain parent 3 “really got on with [the staff]... he felt comfortable, joking around.” Other parents reported “liking” or “warming to” staff during the visit. Such immediate affective connections brought, as described by forprofit chain parent 3, some kind of “peace of mind”.

#### **4.4.3 Overall aspect of nursery**

For many parents the nursery's overall aspect or presentation – whether its physical characteristics or more intangible ‘atmosphere’ - played some role in forming expectations of future quality and reliability. Physical characteristics, for instance, might be valued as quality outcomes *per se*. Cleanliness was a particular focus:

I always go check the toilets, see how clean they are. And the kitchen. These two places I have to see. (preschool parent 5)

Observed cleanliness was conceptually similar to the ‘exhibited professionalism’ discussed above: expectations were constructed from observed performance. A nursery would not be trusted if cleanliness was seen to be poor or, indeed, was unobservable:

... there was this [nursery]... everything was such a mess. It might have been clean, who knows? But I don't know how you clean things if it's in such a mess... (forprofit chain parent 3)

Physical characteristics might also be interpreted as signals that less easily observable quality might be achieved. Parents occasionally interpreted, from observation of a range of toys and equipment, that children would have access to varied and stimulating activities. A large physical space was both a good in itself and also a signal that children would be stimulated:

... one thing I really liked was that it was really big... the bigger it is, the more (*emphasised*) there is for them to do. (nursery class parent 1)

Poor upkeep, on the other hand, might be a problematic signal. Crumbling décor implied to preschool parent 2 a lack of care:

... when I came a few years ago, it was not very nice... that was a problem, I talked to my husband, it was not nice that space, it doesn't look well looked after.

Such easy-to-observe physical characteristics, however, were not necessarily essential to trust. Preschool parent 2 chose the nursery despite the crumbling décor. Preschool parent 3 took no account of the “sparkly” environment and “beautiful equipment and...computers” at a private nursery: the behaviour of staff and her child’s own response to settings were prioritised.

Parents also placed emphasis on more intangible impressions of overarching environment or ‘atmosphere’. Such impressions appeared difficult to verbalise, but were often accorded strong significance in accounts of trust:

... I guess just seeing the environment... I could imagine her coming here...  
(nursery class parent 4)

The notion of an overarching atmosphere was linked to the friendliness of staff, the happiness (or not) of children, or the sense of order in a setting. Nonetheless there appeared to be an impression or feeling which could not be easily reduced to such components:

...sometimes you can see the difference in a room, it is colour or warmth and affection. (forprofit chain parent 1)

There was also almost like a vibe... is it a happy place, I mean, you do pick up quite quickly. (social enterprise parent 6)

Feelings about a setting might also be derived from idiosyncratic sources, such as an off-putting sensory experience:

it smelt awful... like a... kindergarten workhouse. (nursery class parent 3)

Two parents presented particularly powerful narratives of ‘atmosphere’ when describing their visits. Nursery class parent 3 related how -

I just walked in and I saw some happy children and I saw some happy teachers... I walked into the nursery and it was an open-plan place. It had a... nice area to play outside. It had a garden. I saw love written on the wall. ...I thought, okay, this looks like a hippy, hippy sort of peace and love place. This is going to be fine.

The parent held strong views against large impersonal institutions; she had been disturbed by her child’s previous experience at a private daycare chain. The environment which she experienced in the nursery class was by contrast congruent with

her preferred conception of a preschool. This congruence permitted a strong positive expectation – “this is going to be fine”.

Impressions of atmosphere were also powerful for social enterprise parent 6. The nursery created an impact through its considered presentation of physical space:

... they could have left the stairs empty, but no, they populate [them] with pictures... they’ve just gone the extra mile in bothering, so as I’m walking up, I’m not even in the place yet, I’m feeling good about it...

The overarching environment was, for this parent, the “bedrock of my trust”:

that visit... I sensed it was a happy place and a socialised place and that’s really important, I was pre-sold, before I even spoke to anybody... it was all non-verbal and I was sold.

#### **4.4.4 Children’s responses**

The observed responses of children were perceived to be strong bases for judgements about trustworthiness. Parents observed the responses and behaviour of, first, their own children during a visit, and, second, children who were already attending the setting. These two dimensions are considered in turn.

Many parents took their child on visits to settings. Given that a child’s happiness was a central desired outcome for parents, the child’s response to the setting was significant: “he has to see if he likes it or not...” (nursery class parent 3). Children offered apparently straightforward signals of the likelihood of their happiness:

My daughter loved it... she was like opening her eyes and saying, “Oh, I like it, look, they do this, they do that”. She went straight to the room with the children. She started to play with them... (forprofit chain parent 6)

As soon as we came to this one... she just straight went with the children, sat down and started talking to the [manager] and the other people. (forprofit chain parent 4)

Children might clearly discriminate between settings:

it’s my son who really chose the place... when I took him to the other place... he didn’t want to stay... he started crying, he was pushing me out... he came here and he sat straight on the little chairs. ... the teacher was very, very nice so he wasn’t afraid... So he in fact made the decision. (preschool parent 4)

Other parents described similar contrasts where, at one nursery, a child might typically cling to a parent's leg, and, at another, participate in activities or otherwise show enthusiasm. In all such cases the child's response informed parents' beliefs about the nursery and subsequent choice.

Some parents linked a child's response to the exhibited professionalism of staff. A positive response implied that staff understood how to interact with children:

... one of [the teachers] was very nice, she was speaking ... in a slow voice, low voice, my child liked her straightaway. (preschool parent 2)

Similarly preschool parent 3 suggested that it was the staff's direct engagement with her daughter which facilitated the latter's positive response. By contrast her daughter had responded negatively at a nursery where she was ignored by staff, who were seeking instead to engage with or impress the parent. In these cases trust, again, appears to have been actively constructed – primarily through a child's positive response, which created an expectation of similar responses in the future, but also through recognition of staff professionalism which was held to have enabled the child's happy state.

For two parents their child's responses during the visit had deeper significance. A child might, through a certain 'animal instinct', sense dynamics unseen by the parent:

...all the perceptions that adults make for themselves, children don't have that so it's very raw feelings. It's almost like animal instinct and I actually trust that... (preschool parent 5)

[my daughter] walked straight in and was really happy and actually took to [the nursery assistant] really quickly ... I did look at one other [nursery] and [she] wouldn't leave my side... I think it's a bit like dogs. They get a sense of what's right and what's wrong. (preschool parent 3)

Such instinctive responses supported preschool parent 5's decisions about trust:

children, they get... emotions from people, from adults. So if he doesn't like a person, I wouldn't trust that person.

Parents also observed children who were already using the nursery, thus gaining insights into their happiness and feelings about staff:

I actually look at the children to see how happy they are, if they are under pressure, if they're stressed, if they're scared or if they're just really enjoying their time.  
(preschool parent 5)

If parents visited multiple settings, comparisons were possible. Sometimes children did not seem happy or stimulated:

I saw them playing and they looked happy..., you could see that they wanted to learn, the sparkle in their eyes. The one round the corner that I went to see, oh ... they were limp and lifeless. (nursery class parent 3)

The observation of children offered a special window into the dynamics of the nursery. Children would not hide their feelings:

you can't really get children... to actually act happy when they're not. (forprofit chain parent 5)

... kids are kids. If somebody is really not nice to them, they'll tell you or you will see that in their attitude. (forprofit chain parent 1)

Observation of children's behaviour was thus a means of circumventing the obstacles of contrived performance and information asymmetry.

#### ***4.4.5 Other families at the setting***

Judgements of trustworthiness were not limited to a nursery and its staff. Some parents also assessed the behaviours and character of other families who used a nursery. A child's preschool peer group was perceived to have a significant effect on - and be a significant predictor of - the quality of the preschool experience:

... sometimes in a child's life, you are what your friends are... if you go to certain schools, you pick up certain habits... (nursery class parent 5)

I'm trying to teach my daughter to speak properly, to behave properly... I don't want her to be with kids that... have bad word in their mouth and bad manners.  
(forprofit chain parent 6)

Expectations of the conduct of other users were constructed from varied observations and sources of information. A nursery might be ruled out because of its reputation as a "tough place" attended by a "certain style of people" (preschool parent 2); the professional profile of parents who used the forprofit chain nursery was a positive signal for forprofit chain parent 6. Other parents made more active observations of the local area and local parents:

I just didn't want her to go there... because of the surrounding estates.... I didn't really want to put [her] in that nursery across the road because I could see the parents. (nursery class parent 5)

Two parents, both of whom wished to use a school-based nursery, rejected settings because they saw pupils swearing and fighting in the street. Although the parents were seeking nursery provision, it was the behaviour of older children which was off-putting:

... a boy 10 or 11 years old, he was fighting in the street. So you won't feel... comfortable sending your son to that school. (nursery class parent 2)

While observations of other families were sometimes important in parents' accounts, they were rarely dominant. Preschool parent 5, however, undertook extensive investigation of the families using preschool settings. Like other parents she was concerned about peer group effects; the comprehensiveness of her investigation was attributed to a desire to avoid violent behaviours:

If I see violence, there's absolutely no way I'm going to take my child there... even if they teach children at school that you shouldn't be violent, aggression comes with a child from the family.

The parent initially explored the locality around a potential preschool. Negative signals about other families included a concentration of local authority housing, the appearance of young people and broken windows in a high street. The parent next undertook covert observations of the behaviours of parents and children outside the setting. She thus judged the "sort of child" who attended:

You either go in the morning when they're dropping children or [at] three when they're actually closing, so you can see a lot... people coming out, how they speak to their children, how the children are reacting...

The nature of other users was a primary condition for her trust. If she did not approve of the other families, then she would not "even bother to go visit" the nursery.

The characteristics of families who used the nursery were relevant in a final way. The extent to which an organisation was held to account was seen to depend on the characteristics of the parent users. Thus parents' sophistication as consumers became a signal of the quality which a provider might offer. Forprofit chain parent 5 described its

users as “a lot of... wealthy foreigners”. Problems at another nursery in the chain would therefore not transfer across:

... an organisation operating here ... couldn't tolerate those sorts of practices that were potentially going on there.

A number of families at the social enterprise were also from overseas, but tended to be disadvantaged. They were perceived by one parent to be passive consumers, unwilling to exercise voice and tolerating poor provision:

there's a lot of foreigners here... they're not really going to be fussy, are they?  
You're just given something and they accept it. (social enterprise parent 1)

Parents, then, made active assessments of providers' trustworthiness through varied observations. Such observations were reported by all parents. While there were differences in the extent of observation and in the richness and depth of critical assessment, the active construction of trust through observation was generally held by parents to be both possible and important.

#### **4.5 Trust and choice: models of information collection**

This chapter has thus far described the diverse bases of trust which parents used when choosing settings. There were in addition patterns and contrasts within the overarching processes through which parents collected information about trustworthiness; these distinct processes in turn had implications for the bases of trust which were used or prioritised. A typology of four models of information collection is presented in table 4.2: in each case there are implications for trust production; each model is in addition associated with particular parental and organisational characteristics.

##### *Market-based choice with recommendation*

Most parents made some kind of market-based choice between competing providers. Commonly parents used a combination of recommendation and self-generated assessments during a nursery visit to assess trustworthiness. Recommendations were received through social networks. This model of choice was common at the parent-run preschool, the nursery class and the social enterprise nurseries, all of which were long-established.

**Table 4.2: Models of information collection**

	<b>Organisation (number of parents)</b>	<b>Distinctive trust dimension</b>	<b>Parent characteristics</b>	<b>Organisation characteristics</b>
<b>Market-based choice with recommendation (11 parents)</b>	Nursery class: 4 Preschool: 4 Social enterprise: 2 Integrated centre: 1	Recommendation combined with parent assessment during visit(s).	Social networks	Established
<b>Market-based choice without recommendation (9 parents)</b>	Preschool: 1 Forprofit chain: 6 Social enterprise: 2	No recommendation. Parent assessment during visit(s).	Tend to be newcomers. Tend to have prior experience of preschool.	New
<b>Trust through familiarity (4 parents)</b>	Nursery class: 1 Integrated centre: 3	Experience of organisation over time. No other settings considered.	Newcomers or familial network. More disadvantaged.	Integrated centre: multiple services on single site.
<b>Trust without choice (3 parents)</b>	Integrated centre: 1 Social enterprise: 2	No choice of provision. Response to social services involvement.	Parents offered social services place. Disadvantage.	Contract with social services

Some parents restricted their choice to school-based nurseries. The information collected was related, at least in part, to the school and nursery as a single institution. Thus recommendations were made of the whole school; the behaviour of older children was used to assess the quality of provision; the ethos and appearance of the whole school was assessed during visits. The trustworthiness of the nursery was not considered discretely.

*Market-based choice without recommendation*

A number of parents made choices of nursery in the preschool market without using recommendations. A lack of recommendation would seem to create a challenge for assessing trustworthiness, since parents were deprived of potentially rich information derived from the experiences of others. Parents instead relied upon information

collected through their own observations during one or more visits to a nursery, in some cases supplemented by reference to Ofsted reports.

In particular, none of the parents at the forprofit chain had access to recommendations. From an organisational perspective, this phenomenon was attributable to the newness of the nursery, which had not yet developed a sufficiently large user or ex-user group to facilitate widespread recommendation. Parents' reasons were varied. Most commonly, isolation from social networks prevented access to recommendations: parents were 'newcomers' to the locality, either immigrating from overseas or simply moving from one area of London to another. For one parent a network, while transmitting rich recommendations about sessional (part-time) provision, could not supply the required information about full daycare. Finally preschool parent 5 ignored recommendations in favour of her own judgements. Most, but not all, of the parents had prior experience of some kind of preschool provision; all were degree-educated and middle class.

#### *Trust through familiarity*

Four parents collected information about a nursery through extended interaction with an organisation prior to preschool use. Parents observed and became familiar with a nursery and its staff over time; there was also an extended opportunity to access information and recommendation from parents who were already using the nursery. Decisions to choose and to trust a nursery were founded upon this familiarity. Parents did not explore or compare other provision – there was no process of market-based choice:

I didn't actually look for another school. (nursery class parent 5)

it was like a no-brainer... my mind was set on here... (integrated centre parent 4)

Such familiarity with an organisation was achieved in alternative ways. First, as discussed in section 6.4.3, it was facilitated by the multiple services offered by the integrated centre. Parents in this context tended to be newcomers to the area, from more disadvantaged backgrounds and isolated from social networks. There was also some evidence of prior anxiety about using preschool provision or state services. Second, nursery class parent 5 became familiar with the infant school through her familial network; knowledge and trust accrued through the family's embedded relationship with the institution.

### *Trust without choice*

The collection of information about trustworthiness was constrained for the parents who received places from social services. All were lone parents, working class and unemployed; all had experienced further challenges, such as domestic violence and health problems. There was no possibility of choice, except to accept or decline the place; there was, therefore, no opportunity to compare trustworthiness across settings. Parents' own observations and assessments of the nursery were also limited. Instead, parents' trust (or distrust) was particularly determined by their responses to the involvement of social services (p.119-120). Integrated centre parent 1 was in addition familiar with the centre through use of its drop-in, a familiarity which offered some reassurance when her child was allocated a nursery place.

Parents therefore collected information about trustworthiness in distinct ways. They might use different processes for different types of provision: thus forprofit chain parent 5 believed a recommendation was important when selecting a childminder, but not group provision; for two parents who received their place through social services, the choice of nursery class for older children was a market-based process supported by recommendation. The different models carry significant implications for how trust is produced. Trust, for instance, might be constructed swiftly (market choice) or gradually (trust through familiarity); a decision to trust might be informed by the experience of others (recommendation) or might rely upon a parent's self-generated assessments of a nursery.

### **4.6 Conclusion: trust and choice**

Trust, perhaps unsurprisingly, was reported by parents to be important when using preschool provision. In addition, parents' accounts described significant uncertainty and pronounced vulnerability to harm within the preschool transaction: such conditions indicate, as discussed in Chapter 2, some kind of "trust problem" and a consequent functional requirement for trust (or a functional equivalent). Parents' perceptions of vulnerability and risk were, however, diverse.

Uncertainty might be especially acute before provision was used. Parents utilised three distinct categories of information in order to achieve some expectation of a provider's

reliability. Around half made use of recommendations, which potentially provided rich information from third parties about settings. Recommendations were derived from various actors in a variety of ways; they might be strong or weak, depending on parents' access to information-rich social networks; they might be checked to assess their reliability. Regulatory systems, while rarely volunteered as a central basis of trust, nonetheless had some role in underpinning parents' expectations of trustworthiness. There were different responses to different systems. CRB checks, although taken-for-granted, were held to be valuable by most parents. Professional qualifications were also generally taken-for-granted: parents held varying beliefs about their meaningfulness. Responses to Ofsted inspections were diverse: for some parents these were a reassurance; for others they provided valuable information; for others again, they were inappropriate or irrelevant. Several parents were unaware of Ofsted and of regulation more generally, an unawareness which was associated with disadvantage.

Parents, finally, actively constructed trust through their observations and assessments of providers. Such observations stretched across multiple dimensions; they drew not only upon parents' evaluations, but also upon responses from children. Striking prominence was given to such self-generated information: this prominence implied a belief that, even during the choice process, parents might be able to observe and evaluate substantive quality (see section 7.2.1 for further discussion). As a corollary of parents' active observations, it was necessary for staff, and especially the manager, to display an 'exhibited professionalism' in order to earn an attribution of future reliability.

Within parents' accounts differences of emphasis emerged from particular concerns or preferences – some parents, for instance, were anxious about other families at the nursery; one parent was especially concerned about male staff. There were in addition overarching distinctions in the processes through which parents collected information about trustworthiness. A typology of four models of information collection was identified in the chapter's final section. Each model was characterised by distinct processes of trust production, and associated with particular parental and organisational characteristics. There was, therefore, significant variation among parents in how expectations of providers' trustworthiness were achieved at the moment of choice.

## **5 Empirical report: trust over time**

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The previous chapter considered the challenge of trust when parents were choosing provision. In this chapter the dynamics of trust during parents' ongoing relationships with providers are explored. A shift can be observed in the bases of trust: over time there was less reference to external sources, and more emphasis on parents' own observation, experiences and consequent assessments of trustworthiness – an emphasis which nonetheless showed continuity with similar approaches observed during the choice process. Parents' active assessments of providers' reliability can be disaggregated into three dimensions. First, there is a striking finding that parents' expectations of a provider were strongly informed by messages from their own children (section 5.1). Second, parents made direct observations of providers' behaviours and motivations in a number of contexts, through which they predicted future reliability or unreliability (section 5.2). Third, trust was supported by the communicative and personal relationships which developed between parents and nursery staff (section 5.3).

The chapter is illustrated not just by examples of parents' trust and its bases, but also by circumstances in which trust was disrupted. Such situations, in which parents had to respond to a situation in which trust was compromised, are of empirical interest in themselves. Parents' accounts of such situations also had an illuminative power: the dynamics of trust were sometimes uncovered with particular poignancy, since beliefs and assumptions about trust, when disrupted, tended to be thrown into sharp relief.

### **5.1 The observation of outcomes: messages from children**

Parents formed expectations about providers' reliability on the basis of information provided by their own children. Such a process was described by all parents; frequently it was offered as the primary explanation for trust in a nursery. Children provided parents with two types of message. First, through a variety of media, they provided their own feedback about the preschool. Second, parents observed the extent to which the preschool was perceived to contribute to the development of their child. Through such messages and observations parents made swift evaluations of the outcomes of provision; such evaluations in turn supported the construction of beliefs about the nursery's future trustworthiness.

### 5.1.1 *Child feedback*

Children's responses sometimes informed parents' assessments of trustworthiness during the choice process (section 4.4.4). Child feedback was still more important on an ongoing basis, being reported in some way by every parent. Such feedback was a primary basis upon which expectations were formed about nurseries' ongoing reliability.

#### *Mechanisms of child feedback*

'Child feedback' is used here to describe some kind of communication to parents from their own children about the quality of the preschool experience. Such communication was transmitted through diverse mechanisms. Children, for instance, might provide *daily accounts or stories*, in words or by acting out scenes:

... she's telling me about her nursery nurses, what they do, her friends, what she's been eating, what's happening, yeah, big smile on her face. She tells my parents on the webcam every night what she's done at school. (forprofit chain parent 6)

Such accounts might be spontaneous or prompted by parents:

... as soon as we sit in the pushchair to go home, I will ask him, "What did you do, who you played with, what did you learn...?" (preschool parent 5)

Children also offered unambiguous *verbal opinions*, whether expressing their eagerness to attend nursery, their affection for staff, or, rather cruelly, the superiority of the nursery to home:

She doesn't like weekends... She says, "I want to go to my school every day."  
(forprofit chain parent 1)

... she says, "I like all my teachers"... I say, "Which one do you like the most?"  
And she [says], "They're all really nice". (nursery class parent 4)

"I like the nursery better than at home." ... I say, "Why?" She say, "Because here, they cooking, they do cake, pizza - at home, you don't let me do anything."  
(integrated centre parent 1)

Meaningful feedback might also be transmitted through *behaviours*:

She started wearing her slippers during the day at nursery... So she's really settled in... (forprofit chain parent 4)

Behaviours at the beginning and end of the preschool session were rich sources of information:

... they all tear up the stairs and I mean [my son] does. He never says goodbye anymore. He's in there and sitting down and into an activity. (preschool parent 4)

... when I come to pick her, ... she's crying [because] she don't want to go [home].  
(integrated centre parent 1)

If a child's feedback was negative at such moments, trust in the nursery might be undermined:

Leaving someone that looked so lost... they used to stand him up on the window upstairs and I used to wave him goodbye and he used to just cry. (nursery class parent 3)

Parents used combinations of these types of feedback to create an overall picture of children's responses to the preschool:

... they always come out with like stories of what they've done.... They never come out sad or fed up... they've always looked forward to going... on that alone, my experience of sending my children here has been good. Yeah, cause they've been happy here. (nursery class parent 1)

### *Interpretation of feedback*

The feedback from children might be taken at face value; often, however, it was subject to nuanced interpretation. Forprofit chain parent 1, for instance, was cautious about complaints which her daughter made, and was reassured when the reliability of a particular complaint was confirmed by the nursery:

I just wanted to be sure that she wasn't lying to me, cause she was young, she was just three... She had it right... I feel like okay, so anything's going to happen in this nursery, she can tell me about it... if there's something wrong in the nursery, she can tell me.

There was a specific challenge in discriminating between episodic reluctances to attend, which were not considered an indicator of a nursery's quality, and more meaningful unhappiness. Preschool parent 4 did not consider significant his son's occasional reluctance to attend the present nursery –

... he has mornings where he's reluctant but that's not going to school, that's just leaving home.

But the unhappiness which the same child communicated about a previous nursery had been interpreted to be more fundamental, so that he was withdrawn from the provision:

he'd always seem very disappointed when he found out we were going to [the nursery] ... occasionally he was a little bit tearful... Or he would say, "oh no, I don't want to go there"... he was just telling us that he wasn't very happy there.

In this case the child's unhappiness was consistent with the parents' own negative assessments of the nursery.

Parents especially applied a nuanced interpretation to children's responses in the early stages of preschool use. Positive feedback about a child's lack of separation anxiety was welcomed:

... the teacher is new, the friends new, everything's new... "you can go now", he said, "I see you at mummy time." (nursery class parent 2)

On the other hand, parents tended to tolerate negative feedback. For preschool parent 3, her child's initial discomfort was clear: "she'd be howling..." This uncomfortable period was endured with the support of nursery staff. Indeed, changes in the child's feedback, from severe reluctance to enthusiasm to attend, supported a growth in trust in the nursery. Where negative responses were prolonged, however, trust might erode:

I was uneasy... about why she was like that... that's when I had my doubts about this nursery... Maybe this nursery is not for her. (integrated centre parent 4)

Parents' interpretations of feedback were, finally, influenced to some extent by the age of the child. There was some sense that communicative capacity grew stronger as children become older. Social enterprise parent 1 made a distinction between the abilities of her two-year-old and three-year-old sons, so that the older was in effect monitoring the younger:

I've got my older son anyway and he can speak. So if there was anything unusual or anything really bad, he will talk.

There was doubt about the ability of the youngest children to comprehend the nursery environment:

[my daughter] really didn't know what was going on, she was eight months old. I think she noticed that I'd gone but she was too little. (forprofit chain parent 2)

Preschool parent 3, whose daughter was two years old, suggested that "at this age they can't tell you what's going on. I think it's different for a six year old".

Despite these caveats, it is striking how far parents felt able to derive meaningful information from the responses of young children. In part there appeared to be some distinction between verbal reports and other means of expression. Thus, despite her belief that her daughter could not accurately report “what’s going on”, preschool parent 3 accorded central significance to her behaviours –

... she’s quite astute ... the way she’s happy to come here ... all day we’re hearing about... what [staff member] is doing ... and that she enjoys being here. So that gives me enough to trust.

Similarly for social enterprise parent 5, whose child, at 18 months old, was the youngest in the study, her child’s observed happiness and eagerness to attend were central to her assessment of the nursery’s trustworthiness.

#### *The significance of child feedback*

For many parents child feedback was of strong significance to the construction of trust. Forprofit chain parent 6 attributed her trust to the “good answers” she received when she asked her daughter about her daily experiences. Children’s communicated happiness was especially identified as the primary source of positive expectation about settings:

when you see your child confident and happy... I said, “okay, this I think, you know, good.” (integrated centre parent 2)

you never know exactly what goes on during the day while you’re away... if your child is relatively happy ... that’s the best indicator. (forprofit chain parent 2)

Such feedback might assuage a parent’s anxieties:

she runs in, she gets her toys out immediately, starts playing with them, she talks about her carers at home... She seems quite contented... So I don’t feel any guilt about leaving her here ever. (forprofit chain parent 2)

Child feedback might be explicitly linked to parents’ decision-making and behaviours. Thus children’s observed happiness was offered as a reason for not removing a child when parents were concerned about a nursery. The decision by preschool parent 4 to exit a nursery was also significantly informed by his son’s feedback:

... he was making his feelings quite plain... if he’d liked [the nursery], we probably would have kept him there... that was the clincher really... he didn’t like it and so we felt oh, we’ll have to move him.

Why was child feedback often so significant? Within parents' accounts three characteristics offer some explanation. First, child feedback enabled parents to overcome information asymmetries which favoured providers: reports from the ultimate user of provision - the child – created a window into nursery life. Thus, for forprofit chain parent 1, her daughter's demeanour and verbal responses after her first day at nursery confirmed that the provision was good:

... if I don't know what happen during the day cause I wasn't there... the look on her face and the way she talk to me was... enough for me to see that this is a good nursery, she's going to like it here.

Children's feedback might be the primary source of information for understanding how staff interacted with children:

... [he] imitates what he does at school... the plays they do, the dance, he wants me to be the teacher... in that way I get... how they treat children. (preschool parent 5)

... my son, he likes to come to the nursery. If they didn't treat him well, he wouldn't... he will be crying... (social enterprise parent 2)

Second, children's responses were held to be authentic – although, as has been noted, subject to parental interpretation. Children would not hide unhappiness:

... you can tell if he's unhappy. He will tell you if he doesn't like something. (preschool parent 4)

... if a child doesn't feel relaxed with a person, they're going to let you know, aren't they? (integrated centre parent 4)

In addition, there was again some notion of children's instinctive ability to assess the trustworthiness of staff:

... he picks up [if] he doesn't feel comfortable. They know who they can trust. A child needs somebody they can trust... They pick it up. (forprofit chain parent 3)

Finally, child feedback was intrinsically linked to key quality dimensions. Parents identified numerous desired characteristics of the preschool about which child feedback was informative – for instance, interactions between child and staff, the behaviour of other children, or the extent of stimulating activity to which the child was exposed. Social enterprise parent 6, as an example, was reassured from her child's reports that the nursery's ethos fitted with her own:

... feedback from my daughter, that's important, "this teacher's strict"... I'm happy, I don't want my daughter to be... indulged...

Most importantly child feedback directly informed parents about the happiness of their child. This specific outcome - child happiness at the nursery - was generally identified as highly significant or essential. Thus, as a tangible indicator of a key outcome, child feedback was central in constructing positive or negative expectations about a nursery:

... she's always been really straightforward to leave here and always seems very happy when I pick her up... those are the big measures for me. (social enterprise parent 5)

### **5.1.2 Observed child development**

A second set of messages about the nursery was provided by children through their exhibited development. A number of parents not only observed children developing across various dimensions, but also unequivocally attributed this development to the setting. Such observed development was interpreted as a sign that provision was high quality, and formed the basis for positive expectations of continued good provision. Occasionally, however, parents perceived and attributed to a nursery *poor* development, an attribution which created distrust about the future.

Parents observed their child's development across numerous dimensions. Cognitive development was identified through observation of a child's numerical skills, competency with the alphabet, literacy and other capacities; language skills were similarly monitored:

Now he know... to count one to 100. I never teach him at home so... he learn it from school... I notice he improve. (nursery class parent 2)

We worried... about his talking... [we are] amazed, you know, the things he's picking up and learning now since he's been here. (forprofit chain parent 5)

Social skills development was also observable. Parents noted a child's growing confidence, improvements in social behaviours or the ability to make friends:

her behaviour... it's completely changed. She's so soft and so different... she wouldn't share... not even with me or her dad, with her cousins... now everything is about sharing... it's great to see a child change (nursery class parent 5)

... now he have many friends, so he know how to bond with friends... he has best friend as well. (social enterprise parent 3)

Parents generally made their own observations of their child's development. Forprofit chain parent 3 also interpreted judgments of her child's development by third parties as an objective signal of the success of the nursery placement:

we've been out to birthday parties ... everybody says, "oh, you've got such a good boy"... that's a brilliant reflection to see what he learns here [at the nursery]... (forprofit chain parent 3)

For a child's development to create trust it must not only be observed, but also attributed to the nursery's work. There might, of course, be other explanations for a child's progress, such as parents' own interactions with children. Social enterprise parent 4 was cautious about linking his child's development with nursery attendance, suggesting that any progress might be a function of age. But generally parents confidently identified a causal relationship between nursery attendance and child development:

she's progressed so well... That's what I love about this school. And I know it's the school. (nursery class parent 5)

Numerous justifications were given for such a conviction – that development had coincided with nursery attendance, that the child spent more time at nursery than at home, or that the skills could not have been acquired elsewhere:

I can see my daughter... using... longer words, making more sentences... It's obvious she's picking it up here cause... she's spending more time here with the nursery staff than she is at home. (integrated centre parent 4)

The nursery's role in a child's development was held to be especially obvious when improvements flowed from explicit intervention:

... they make all the children tidy up, and now at home [she] will tidy up which is great because... she would never tidy up [before]. (nursery class parent 5)

Finally, on occasion the nursery's contribution to development was thrown into high relief by comparison to a previous ineffective placement:

[at the previous nursery] he literally didn't learn anything at all. But here, within a month and a half, he just made such huge progress. (preschool parent 5)

Often a child's observed development – in contrast to child feedback - was not a core focus of a parent's narrative about ongoing trust, being mentioned only in response to specific questioning during an interview. In some cases, however, a child's visible development was described as central to trust. Such different responses appeared to be related to conceptions of 'quality': where some kind of child development was prioritised as an outcome, observed child development was attributed significance as an indicator. The relationship between definitions of quality and bases of trust is considered further in Chapter 7.

There were, moreover, two contrasting situations in which observations of child development had a strong effect on trust. First, trust was supported when a nursery's explicit intervention resolved a behavioural difficulty – whether a child's reluctance to share, refusal to engage with books or, in one case, tendency to vomit deliberately when annoyed. A positive resolution indicated professional expertise and enabled a positive expectation of the nursery's future competence. Second, trust was explicitly undermined if a child was seen to be developing for the worse, not the better. Integrated centre parent 1 attributed her older son's increasingly aggressive behaviour to his attendance at a nursery class:

... when he's three years and a half he start pushing, playing rough, saying bad words. This ... he learn from the nursery...

Her concern was compounded by the nursery's failure to respond appropriately:

I tell them... this is my son, I know him. Look at him, he's playing rough, he's pushing, he's saying bad words, but they don't care.

Consequently the parent held no positive expectations about the nursery's future behaviours or impact upon her son; with trust thus broken, she removed him from the provision.

### ***5.1.3 Messages from children: conclusion***

The foregoing sections illustrate how strongly parents drew upon messages from their children in actively constructing expectations of the reliability (or not) of nurseries. Child feedback, whether through direct reports, stories, behaviour or demeanour, was in particular a key basis for assessments of nurseries' trustworthiness.

The importance of such messages is a significant and unexpected finding. In contrast to common predictions (see section 2.2.1), the informational difficulties created by third party purchasing of provision were apparently not insurmountable: children were perceived to be able in some sense to evaluate and communicate the quality and outcomes of provision (especially in terms of their own happiness); child development could also be observed. Nor, generally, did parents believe that there was significant time lag between service use and the transmission of such messages: child happiness, in particular, was observable concurrently with use. Messages from children were thus a central basis of trust (or distrust) for all parents.

## **5.2 Observation and assessment of the nursery over time**

When choosing a nursery, parents actively constructed trust through their own observations, judgements and experiences of the nursery and its staff (section 4.4). Such processes continued to be central to the construction of trust over time. Forprofit chain parent 5, for instance, explicitly attributed his trust in the nursery to:

... how I detect the place is run. My own assessment of the people who are looking after the children and... my sense of how they approach their task.

Trust for nursery class parent 4 was similarly founded upon her observations:

... what I have heard..., what I have seen and the extra knowledge that over time I have had and kind of the impressions I got... confirmed what I felt.

Iterative interactions provided multiple opportunities for parents to undertake such observations and assessments. All settings, for instance, offered 'settling-in' periods, during which a parent stayed at a nursery while the child became familiar with the environment. Intended to ease the child's passage into nursery life, settling-in periods also provided to parents a valued opportunity to observe the staff and nursery:

... the first week I was here every day for... the settling-in period. I saw how the staff was with the other children, so it ... give me a bit of confidence. (social enterprise parent 1)

Subsequently, parents typically observed the nursery when they dropped off or picked up their children. Such moments, although often brief, were seen to offer meaningful opportunities to assess reliability:

I bring my child and they're busy with the kids... I never saw any strange behaviour with the kids. They're always patient... I never seen anything like, "ah, what's this?" Never. (social enterprise parent 2)

I'll sometimes stay an hour when I pick him up... let him just play and enjoy himself. And then you talk to people and you see a lot... that's happening. (forprofit chain parent 3)

Parents from time to time might also sit in on activities –

I've been in the classrooms a few times ... So I know... they're very good. (preschool parent 5)

Several parents purposefully manufactured opportunities for observation. There was perceived value in unexpected visits for which staff would not have the opportunity to prepare:

I've come early, effectively early pick-ups... to see what's going on... how tea time is organised and how they discipline them when they're eating tea... what they're doing in their free play... that is quite helpful. (forprofit chain parent 2)

I've popped in here at almost all the times during the day... it doesn't matter what time I get here, whether it's nap time, eat time, play time, it's always organised. (forprofit chain parent 3)

Occasionally parents' assessments would be supplemented by insights from informal conversations with other parents using the nursery:

... talking to some of the other mothers... that I've had a coffee with... everyone seems to be quite happy. (preschool parent 3)

The following sections consider both the focus of observations, and also how such observations informed expectations of future trustworthiness. They describe how parents assessed and placed significance upon both staff members' exhibited professionalism and task performance (section 5.2.1) and on their motivations and character (section 5.2.2). The construction – and destruction – of trust through the observation of staff behaviours was particularly visible in parents' narratives of problems and crises which they had experienced (section 5.2.3).

### *5.2.1 Exhibited professionalism over time*

The previous chapter introduced the concept of ‘exhibited professionalism’ (p.130): during the choice process, providers actively earned trust through visible behaviours; parents might construct strong expectations about competence from observations of apparently professional conduct and task performance. This process of trust construction became still more significant during parents’ ongoing interactions with the nursery.

Parents made observations of varied activities and behaviours - from basic competencies, such as changing children’s clothes when they became wet or dirty, to more abstract professional skills, such as tailoring activities to the number of children attending on a given day. Most commonly parents identified as significant the interactions between staff and children:

... sitting there for three weeks [during an extended settling-in], I never saw - okay, on the odd occasion a tear... but never somebody really upset. Or the teachers losing their patience with the children. (nursery class parent 5)

when I just go in... he’s playing, he’s around with the staff and they teach him and they just cuddling them, so it’s so nice... (social enterprise parent 3)

The emphasis which parents allocated to specific behaviours might depend upon their particular concerns. One parent, worried about her son’s speech, was reassured because the staff were observed to “speak properly” with the children; another parent focused upon discipline:

I’ve seen them discipline children ... in a way I don’t mind, which is making it very clear that’s not acceptable but not so much that [it is] reducing a child to tears... (forprofit chain parent 2)

Alternatively a certain behaviour might be especially resonant because of a parent’s experience elsewhere. The integrated centre, for instance, benefited from comparison to a nursery class:

Here [the integrated centre]... the staff, they change the clothes for them... My son he went to other nursery, school nursery, nobody change, he come [home] dirty, smelling bad... (integrated centre parent 1)

Within the choice process it was the manager's exhibited professionalism which was prominent in parents' accounts (p.133-134). The observation of staff behaviours on an ongoing basis tended to be more diffuse, reflecting opportunities to interact with multiple staff members. Nonetheless particular significance was given to the manager's role. Both the manager's interaction with children and her oversight of the nursery were assessed:

As time passed, I realised actually she's very very observant. She's very good at what she does. (preschool parent 5)

She's very... aware of what's happening in the nursery. (forprofit chain parent 1)

The observation of professional behaviours does not necessarily imply an expectation that such behaviours will be replicated in the future – it does not, in other words, necessarily imply trust. It was, however, apparent that from such experiences parents constructed beliefs about the ongoing competence of staff and the future reliability of the nursery:

I just walked in there and [child's name] was hammering with a nail... but they're handing her the nail. They're putting it in the pegboard and then she just hammers. So small safety issues... are fine. (preschool parent 3)

... they are very on the ball when it comes to where the children are and what they're doing. (nursery class parent 5)

... [during settling-in] I'd built up a level of trust that one could hope for... by speaking to the members of staff, by them anticipating what the concerns were, the fact that they were very relaxed and very comfortable with a tried and tested... approach to settling kids in... (social enterprise parent 5)

Such expectations might be nuanced. From her experiences, for instance, forprofit chain parent 3 developed contrasting opinions about the trustworthiness of different nursery workers. Some staff ignored nappies which needed to be changed:

I don't want to point out "listen, I think that baby's got a poo"... if I can smell it, surely you can too... the competent ones, they're like this [*clicks fingers, indicating instant action*]... it's just that bit more trust in them.

This example of unchanged nappies indicates that the exhibited behaviours of staff were occasionally perceived to be *unprofessional*. In such cases parents might construct

negative expectations of reliability – in other words, distrust. The implications for trust of observed failures of professionalism are described further in section 5.2.3.

### ***5.2.2 Attributed motivation and character traits over time***

Even within the choice process, parents sometimes drew upon observations of staff behaviours to make wider inferences about motivations and character traits, assessments which in turn informed beliefs about future behaviours (section 4.4.2). Over time iterative interactions further enabled such judgements:

The more you see each other, the more you realise what sort of person you are.  
(preschool parent 5)

In common with the findings in relation to choice, assessments of two aspects of workers' inner world especially informed parents' expectations of reliability. First, the motivations of staff members were again assessed. Parents valued intrinsic motivations, such as enthusiasm for one's work or pride in achieved outcomes:

... she'd just come back from working in an orphanage... she was really enthusiastic and she just loved babies... (forprofit chain parent 2)

they all love what they do... you can see ... at the Christmas assembly... when the teachers have been working so hard getting them to sing... how proud they feel... You see it in their faces. (nursery class parent 3)

there's a real sense of vocation... they're all very committed. (social enterprise parent 6)

By contrast unhappy and unmotivated staff, according to a number of parents, would not perform adequately, and might indicate deeper problems at a nursery. Thus forprofit chain parent 3 monitored the mood of staff:

... they're looking after your children and if they're not happy, you can see it. So it's about... [asking], "How well you're doing, are you okay?"

Second, parents continued to assess the personality of staff. Nursery class parent 3, for instance, held a certain normative vision of a preschool professional. The staff at a private nursery breached this ideal by smoking outside the building:

...I never thought that people in the children profession would be nicotine junkies... you always think people who look after children should be whiter than white... or something purer than yourself.

Most commonly, parents again assessed and valued a caring disposition, described through terms such as ‘kind’, ‘patient’, ‘lovely’ or ‘loving’. There was special value in ‘genuine’ care which was intrinsically generated:

they seem to be genuinely caring about the children that they are looking after and have a genuine interest and have built relationships with those children which I really value. (forprofit chain parent 2)

I feel they’re doing it for me... I may be wrong but the way I feel [it] is really genuine. (forprofit chain parent 1)

One parent at the integrated centre explicitly linked her trust to the loving care exhibited to vulnerable children:

... seeing how they take care of... the children who’ve got physical disabilities or mental disabilities. They’ve got... the loving and the patience with these children. (integrated centre parent 4)

Alternatively, for social enterprise parent 3, it was the kindness which she interpreted from her own interactions with staff which supported growth in her trust over time.

In these examples inferences about the character of staff were drawn from the daily interactions between staff, parents and children. In addition certain specific behaviours were held to imply valued motivations or personality traits – for instance, concern for a distressed parent or dedication in resolving a child’s behavioural difficulty. Most notably, staff sometimes offered help which extended some distance beyond simply preschool provision. Such extra help was seen to indicate an intrinsic benevolence; parents at the integrated centre particularly referred to such acts as evidence of the kindness and helpfulness of staff. Examples included arranging a child’s speech therapy appointments, support in completing forms or encouragement of a mother to believe in herself:

if you have... difficulty with writing or forms... really they are good. Like family... they’re helping me. (integrated centre parent 5)

some of us mums... said, “okay, I had a child, there’s no way to go and study now”... they just give you advice... “okay, you can do it yourself. Even if you’re a mum, you can achieve those things”. (integrated centre parent 2)

The significance of support extrinsic to the preschool transaction was most evocatively expressed by nursery class parent 3. The parent had experienced domestic violence and, when her child joined the school, had been in a safe house. The school gave material support by providing towels, cutlery and children's clothes; the nursery was offered as a "safe space" where she could sit with her child. Such support was proffered tactfully and gently. From this experience the parent drew conclusions about the disposition of the staff:

All the teachers, everybody... that works here, has this deep underlying giving of love. The gift of loving kindness here is special.

Here acts of care external to the preschool transaction were considered powerful indicators of intrinsic benevolence. This attribution of benevolence in turn strongly influenced the parent's beliefs about the caring ethos which underpinned the provision offered to children. It is noteworthy that significant instances of care outside the preschool transaction were confined to state providers in this study.

The importance which parents placed upon a caring disposition creates a challenge for providers. How can such a disposition be represented? Both the forprofit chain and social enterprise managers emphasised the importance of showing empathy:

children are the most precious things they have... it's very important that you make them aware that you know that... (forprofit chain manager)

It takes empathy, I empathise. I can imagine what it's like leaving your child here and how you'd feel... I make that very clear... (social enterprise manager)

Empathy was thus perceived to be a means of offering to parents fellow feeling and reassurance. Such empathy, however, had to be plainly displayed. For the social enterprise manager, this was a "personal skill" which preschool professionals should possess.

### **5.2.3 Problems and crises**

A problem or crisis might be a powerful moment when, through the observation of staff behaviours and responses, trust was won or lost. A number of such instances are considered here, both because they were significant moments within parents' experience of trust, and also because such situations made especially explicit the connection

between parent observations and the construction of positive or negative expectations about the nursery.

A problem might sometimes offer to staff a context in which to show expertise and care. Integrated centre parent 1 directly attributed the growth in her trust to the impressive manner in which her child's behavioural difficulties were addressed. She had expressed concern one morning that her daughter was not eating well: when she returned, the centre's headteacher was sitting with the child, urging her to eat. Such behaviour expressed not only expertise and responsiveness, but also a motivation to help:

... if you have problem at home with kids and you tell them, they help you... They care to know how the kids [are] ...

For nursery class parent 3, the expert resolution of a conflict between her son and another child underpinned the growth of her trust. The incident had especial resonance because for her the absence of aggression was an important aspect of quality:

[trust has grown because of] ...how all the situations are dealt with... anything that is aggressive is really dealt with...

The links between a problem, its observed resolution and trust were most powerfully described by forprofit chain parent 4. His partner's daughter had responded badly to starting at the nursery. She emitted a "whining noise" which disturbed other children; soon she was producing the noise at home. The parents were at their "wits' end", believing that the child would have to be removed. Following one-to-one intervention by the nursery's assistant manager and other strategies, the behaviour calmed. The resolution of this entrenched behaviour highlighted both the staff's expertise and their dedication:

you don't realise how much they... help until something like that happens...

[staff member] was like saying... "I don't want to give up on it, I really want to get her settled".

The parents already trusted the nursery before these events. With the resolution of this problem their trust became even stronger.

Within these and other accounts there were common threads. First, the problem was of high significance to parents. Second, the expert intervention of staff was observed to

solve the difficulty directly. Third, the intervention might show something more than expertise – a motivation or dedication to support the child and parents. In such conditions trust was actively and strongly produced.

Such positive outcomes and the trust which they produced were dependent upon the successful resolution of problems. There were instances when observed staff behaviours, either in causing or responding to a problem, were interpreted to be inadequate. Thus parents observed that children were kept outside too long in the rain, that a screaming child was ignored, or that staff had made spelling mistakes. Parents constructed from the exhibited lack of professionalism specific negative expectations – whether, respectively, about the likelihood of a child catching cold, the reliability of a specific worker, or the development of a child’s language skills.

Within parents’ accounts, further, there were descriptions of problems which undermined trust so seriously that exit from the nursery was considered. Parents perceived a severe breach of trust: in some significant dimension the nursery had not behaved reliably or professionally when expected to do so. Again, such failures were perceived through observation or experience of staff behaviours and related outcomes. Integrated centre parent 4 described how her son suffered severe eye inflammation after being splashed with chlorinated water from the nursery pond. There were multiple failures of competence and communication: the water should not have been heavily chlorinated; staff did not bathe the child’s eyes; the accident was not recorded; the nursery failed to inform the parent. These failures had real consequences:

... the maddening thing is he told someone, she was agency staff and she didn’t wash his eyes... the hospital said that, if the girl had washed his eyes... he would never have needed to have his eyes flushed.

Through experience of such behaviours and observation of the impact on her child, the parent’s expectations of the nursery’s reliability were compromised:

... that was the one time where I actually took stock and I actually said, “Crikey, maybe I should remove him”.

After managers apologised and the agency worker departed, the parent retained her son at the nursery. There was, however, a meaningful change in her approach to trust. Her

positive expectations of the nursery had previously been based upon her familiarity with staff and her assessment of their character and competence; there had been a 'rapport'.

Following the incident, her expectations were derived from calculation:

it was... towards the end of his nursery time... he would have had two or three months to go... I thought if anything's going to happen now, they've got to have their eyes and wits about them.

The calculation had two aspects. First, her son's vulnerability to harm was limited because he would soon leave the nursery: there was little time in which another calamity might occur. Second, the parent estimated the constraints upon the nursery: at least for a temporary period, she expected the staff to be especially vigilant, because it would not be in the nursery's interests to face further damaging complaints of negligence.

Calculation of the constraints and incentives upon another appeared here to be a strategy which was invoked when there was pre-existing suspicion or distrust – in this case on account of multiple failures of care. It was, therefore, *subsequent* to an assessment of competence or character which had proved unsatisfactory.

Integrated centre parent 5 distrusted the nursery not because her child had come to harm, but because staff behaviours were perceived to create a risk of catastrophe. The parent had observed that, at drop off or pick up times, the nursery's external door was often open and apparently unsupervised. She feared that her child might wander outside. She had raised the issue with staff, whose response had not been satisfactory:

They said there is someone there but... I know there is no one.

The parent thus had no positive expectations that, in this dimension of child safety, the nursery would be reliable. As a result of this distrust, she directly monitored the door:

... sometimes there is no one on the door... I'm not leaving until that door close.

Sometimes I close the door and I leave. No one see me.

The parent's distrust was solely associated with the specific matter of the nursery door. Nonetheless the perceived vulnerability was so great that she considered removing her son from the nursery. She chose to continue to use it because, like integrated centre parent 4, she perceived that the extent of vulnerability was constrained by time: her son would be progressing to primary school within a few months.

Nursery class parent 2 had similarly witnessed unsafe practice<sup>36</sup> when using a previous preschool. This observation had created a dilemma around trust: should the parents continue to use a nursery where there were known elements of poor practice, or move to another setting about which nothing was known? The parents, having challenged staff about the unsafe procedures, chose not to exit. Knowledge of the provider was a valuable resource; poor practice, if known, could be monitored. It was preferable to remain at a known, if imperfect, provider, than to move to a new, unknown nursery. The parents' approach was a functional, informed distrust.

Finally, for preschool parent 4 the interactions which he had observed when he sat in on sessions at a previous nursery were inappropriate and undermined his expectations:

... the way they reacted with the children wasn't terribly good. They did tend to shout... they were ignoring children who were distressed and that's always worrying...

There was evidence of a lack of preparation:

The singing was pretty awful... carers or teachers would be forgetting the songs... half-way through.

The parent made a connection between the "lacklustre" performance of staff and the responses of children, who "weren't terribly focused". These were significant failures, since singing and creative activities were important aspects of quality for this parent. These observations of poor professionalism undermined trust and informed a decision to remove his son. The current nursery, by contrast, won trust through singing which was "very tight and very structured and everybody's shouting the roof down".

These examples of problems or crises which severely undermined parents' trust had differing foci – real harm to a child, a potential risk to safety, or poor staff interaction with children. But there were consistent threads: the problem was of high significance to a parent; there was observation or experience of poor behaviours by staff which contributed to the problem; and such exhibited unprofessionalism informed negative expectations of the future. The situation might be compounded by poor responses from the provider which offered no hope of improvement. In all cases distrust affected parent

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<sup>36</sup> The children wore aprons for certain activities. When they visited the toilet, these aprons had been reversed to hang behind them, creating a danger of strangulation.

behaviour - whether exit from the nursery, extensive monitoring, or a more suspicious approach to future relations.

#### ***5.2.4 Observation and assessment over time: conclusion***

Parents' observations and assessments of staff over time were thus a significant basis for positive (or negative) expectations of a nursery's reliability. In common with the choice process, parents made assessments of both providers' exhibited professionalism and of their intrinsic character and motivations. Iterative interactions enabled multiple opportunities for such evaluations. Problems or crises, if experienced, were also rich contexts within which beliefs about staff were generated; these might be key moments when positive expectations of the nursery were acutely confirmed or undermined through providers' exhibited behaviours and responses.

Within parents' accounts there were variations in approaches to and interpretations of such observations. Some parents were more active than others in making assessments – for instance, by purposefully manufacturing opportunities for observation. Parents' accounts might also exhibit varying levels of depth and nuance. Some descriptions and evaluations of providers were thin. Other accounts were rich and nuanced, so that, as noted above, a parent might discriminate between trustworthy and untrustworthy staff members. Variations in parents' accounts are explored further in Chapter 7.

### **5.3 Trust through ongoing relationships**

The development of trust or distrust has thus far been associated with parental observation of specific events or behaviours (whether relating to the child or to staff). But trust was also located within ongoing relationships, so that interactions between parents and staff were not only significant as arenas in which observations took place, but also contributed to trust through the information which was transmitted, the understandings which were constructed and the connections which were developed. Most obviously, trust was produced or maintained through ongoing communication. Sometimes communicative interactions developed into strong personal relationships, with some kind of affective dimension.

### ***5.3.1 Communicative relationships***

The relationship between communication and trust was multi-layered. Communication by nursery staff might simply be an example of exhibited professionalism which, like other behaviours, was observed by parents. Thus, as a tangible professional behaviour, communication might be construed as a signal of the nursery's overall reliability. For one parent good communication was a manifestation of the preschool's quality; for another desultory communication might indicate unseen problems. Communicative interactions between staff and parents, however, influenced perceptions of trustworthiness in more complex ways through both their substance and process. Five significant dimensions are identified.

#### *Communication as knowledge transmission*

Most commonly, regular communication by staff transmitted knowledge about what was taking place in the nursery. Such transmitted knowledge seemed to overcome the problem of parents' absence from the nursery when provision took place:

(interviewer): ... do you feel you know a lot about what's going on?

(preschool parent 5): I think so, yes. Because it's an everyday process... It's just communication constantly.

... even if I talk five, ten minutes, they tell me everything... (social enterprise parent 3)

A simple communicative interaction might provide reassurance and a reduction in unsettling uncertainty:

... I give them a call to see how she was getting on. They said she was getting on fine, she was participating with the other kids... I was happy with that. (forprofit chain parent 1)

While some parents welcomed a detailed description of their child's day at the nursery, for others communicated knowledge did not have to be in depth:

... all you want to hear is he was fine today, he did really well... maybe he's built a little model or... he's done a little bit of writing. (forprofit chain parent 4)

In several cases parents directly related their trust to knowledge transmitted through communication. For one parent, trust grew because "They let me know what they do"; another explicitly attributed growth in her trust to reports of her daughter's increasing happiness:

[the manager] said she's coming along... great... she was quite... frightened and stuff. Now... [the manager] says she's smiling a lot more. (nursery class parent 5)

Knowledge transmitted through communication was qualitatively distinct from that obtained through parental assessment of a child or of staff behaviours. Knowledge was not derived from direct observations, but was mediated by staff. Parents' belief in such mediated accounts raises a fundamental difficulty: why should a provider's report be trusted? There remained incentives for the provider, protected by information asymmetry, to give embellished accounts in order to impress or reassure parents. There appeared to be three protections against this hazard. First, the knowledge transmitted through communication was one item of information among several upon which attributions of trustworthiness were based, so that providers' reports were effectively checked against parents' observations or child feedback. Second, belief in providers' reports might flow from prior positive assessments of the character of staff. Third, the experience of frequent communication itself might support such belief, as described in the next section. It may be nonetheless that there was some kind of wishful thinking in parents' approaches (see section 7.4.3).

#### *Communication as openness*

The very process of frequent communication created a sense of openness and honesty. Parents' positive expectations – not only about the reliability of communication itself, but also about the character of staff - were supported by the experience of past communications, including occasions when they had been informed of an uncomfortable truth:

... if there is a problem, [the manager] will address us straightaway ... I don't think she would keep it from us... if there's a problem or if there's something good happening, she always tells you... (nursery class parent 5)

If she's unwell, they will let me know, she's been a little bit sad, they will let me know. If she's happy, they let me know. (forprofit chain parent 6)

Nursery class parent 1's trust had specifically grown because –

... the teachers... do talk to you a lot... if something's not quite right... anything really. So that's good. They're open about it.

The significance of open and full communication was powerfully illustrated when it was perceived to be absent: in such conditions trust was severely compromised. When integrated centre parent 4's son was injured by the chlorinated water (p.165-166), the incident was escalated by failures of communication. Staff did not inform the parent of the incident, an omission which abruptly emphasised to her how little she knew about events in the nursery. Staff were also initially unavailable to discuss the matter and were then unhelpful:

... I had tried to speak to someone but I got the answer machine. So I came the very next day and I was very angry... There'd been no report written down... they were very dismissive.

Such failures contributed to the parent's negative expectations of the nursery and consideration of exit.

For forprofit chain parent 3, communication from managers had been neither full nor honest. An interim management team had failed to provide information about managerial instability:

... I had to say, "Look, I'm not happy with this... You have to keep us in the loop, our children are here, it's important to us."

Further, the parent believed that she had been deliberately misled about a manager's departure:

The interim manager got fired... although they don't admit to that... I knew that they were lying to me and you do not lie to me.

This perceived obfuscation and deceit created a confrontational relationship and significant distrust in the management's integrity and benevolence.

#### *Communication as a tool*

An effective communicative relationship thus reassured parents that nursery staff would not hide problems. Equally, it encouraged a belief that providers would listen to concerns which parents themselves raised:

It's easy enough to talk to them if you've got a problem... (nursery class parent 1)

An open and respectful communicative relationship was thus more than simply a medium for the transfer of information; it was also a tool through which problems might be understood and resolved. Parents drew confidence from past interactions:

I ... have almost a day to day catch-up... if they've got a concern, or if I've got a concern, it... gets dealt with immediately. (forprofit chain parent 3)

I'm very happy cause everything I not understand, I'm not happy, I tell the teacher. ...then I notice the teacher is very helpful (nursery class parent 2)

Therefore, through the existence of an effective communicative relationship as a problem-solving resource, there was an expectation that the nursery would reliably intervene when problems arose.

Sometimes there was no such belief. The failure of staff to respond to concerns contributed to the distrust experienced by integrated centre parent 1, when she complained about her son's aggressive behaviour (p.156), and by integrated centre parent 3, when she raised the problem of the door (p.166).

#### *Communication as parental understanding of the nursery*

Nursery managers suggested that it was important for parents to understand the processes of the nursery, so that misunderstandings which might undermine trust could be prevented. Such understanding might be developed through communication:

[we try] to make things transparent to the parents... for them to see that... work is planned, it's not just a free for all. (nursery class manager)

The early stages of use were a particular moment when parents were helped to understand the dynamics of preschool provision:

... a parent coming into nursery school who's managed their own baby... may... see that there are two babies crying and one's being held and will maybe look a little bit disconcerted... you would reassure them that it's quite a normal thing. (forprofit chain manager)

This function tended to be emphasised more by providers than by parents. Forprofit chain parent 2, however, was uncomfortable at the nursery's failure to articulate an overall strategy, which created uncertainty around ethos and objectives. By contrast, the nursery's careful explanation of process supported the trust of integrated centre parent 4. When her son was among a group of children who were interacting problematically, staff explained the dynamics of the difficulty and the rationale of their response. Not only the explanation but also its respectful tone were significant:

It was educating us as parents, knowing what is normal... and what is not normal for a child at this age. And being taken seriously... it was the fact they sat, they listened, they explained and they dealt with it...

### *Communication as representation*

Communication, finally, might be an act of representation – an opportunity for providers to display to parents some trust-enhancing characteristic. The importance of representing empathy or care has already been noted. In addition, providers might transmit some sense of commitment and skills:

I am available for the parents to talk to. I interact with the parents and I think they trust me... they know that I wouldn't tolerate sloppy standards in the nursery...  
(forprofit chain manager)

Staff might, through the information which they transmitted about the nursery day, make parents aware of their professional behaviours. Thus forprofit chain parent 1 was impressed at staff interaction with her child - an interaction about which she was aware only because nursery workers communicated to her the stories which the child had told them during the day. Staff at all organisations also displayed their expertise by advising parents about aspects of child-rearing, such as weaning, eating or toilet-training. Such advice supported both belief in the provider as an authority on the upbringing of children, and also a perception of helpfulness and care.

### **5.3.2 Personalised relationships**

Through communicative interactions, parents developed relationships with individual staff members. Sometimes the relationship extended beyond an evaluation of the other as a nursery worker to some connection to the other as a *person*. Conversations between parents and providers, for instance, might move beyond discussion of the preschool transaction to a general interest in the other's well-being:

... feeling confident to chat... like "Oh, your hair looks nice"... not really about the children, mainly about... personal stuff... (nursery class parent 5)

... we meet every day, she tells me about her children... I know her more as a person... (preschool parent 2)

Generally the relationship did not extend beyond the nursery. Forprofit chain parent 3 was exceptional in the development of a wider relationship:

you just get more and more involved in each other's lives... some of them took my mobile number... it's that type of... thing that you... build up over time.

The development of such personalised relationships had relevance to trust across three dimensions: first, parents' affinity with individual workers; second, parents' perception that staff had a special interest in their child; third, the occasional presence of a powerful emotional bond.

### *Affinity*

Within relationships there might develop some kind of feeling for or affinity with the other, so that numerous parents made statements such as:

I get on with them, very happy with them. (nursery class parent 2)

I really like [name of workers] who are... in her room. (forprofit chain parent 4)

During the choice process it was important for some parents that they 'got on' with staff (p.136). On an ongoing basis a number of parents again emphasised 'affinity':

It's about me feeling an affinity and a trust with the people... interacting with [my daughter]. (social enterprise parent 5)

This feeling of affinity contributed to trust in a number of ways. It might create a sense of reassurance about leaving a child in another's care:

... I'd made quite a connection with [the keyworker]... so I felt quite reassured leaving [my daughter] with her. (forprofit chain parent 2)

It might also facilitate the openness and informality which was vital for the flow of information which supported trust. Thus it was through "a bit of banter" that forprofit chain parent 5 received information about his son. For forprofit chain parent 3, the ease of interaction with staff was central:

You need to have that... comfortable, "I can tell you anything, you can tell me anything" type of relationship.

Most commonly, there was no longer a sense that the child was left with a stranger. Forprofit chain parent 1's personal relationship with staff was a stated basis of ongoing trust:

There's always the words for you, not like strangers bringing your child up... I feel like I'm coming in to see my friends... [it's] an extension of my family here, my child is happy at home and she is happy here too.

Parents at other settings similarly described nurseries and staff as ‘family’ or ‘community’. This perception implies a certain expectation of benevolence - a belief that nursery workers, as friends or like family, cared about children and parents.

### *Taking a personal interest*

Some parents were particularly reassured when staff appeared to take a personal interest in their child. Such interest implied that especial care might be targeted on the child:

... what I really liked about her actually was that ... she had taken photographs of [my daughter] during the day... she could tell you a story about what your child was doing and what she'd noticed that was different from the week before... she wasn't faking... she was really interested... (forprofit chain parent 2)

In such cases parents again evaluated workers' motivations; here motivation inhered in some special personalised connection, so that the worker seemed interested in and inspired to care for the individual child. This observation brought an expectation that the child would receive good care, even relative to peers at the same setting:

there have always been... members of staff here who I've always got a sense... that they know me quite well and they look out for [son's name] and they're interested in [him]. Well, they look like they're interested and find him amusing... [which is] very reassuring. (forprofit chain parent 5)

Staff's specific familiarity with an individual child was also interpreted to imply special competence. Their understanding of the child, developed over time, enabled swift and appropriate responses:

... here, if she's crying, they know what's going on. (integrated centre parent 1)

Such knowledge was highly valued. To use another nursery would be to lose accumulated knowledge and to “start from the beginning”.

### *An emotional bond*

For some parents the personal relationship with staff had strong affective content. Nursery class parent 5 was distressed at the manager's forthcoming retirement:

I'm so sad that [the manager is] going. Tried not to cry...

Particularly strong affective connections were reported by forprofit chain parents 2 and 3, whose children were babies when they entered the nursery. Forprofit chain parent 2

described how an emotional bond had been central to her trust. Such a bond had been forged with the manager when the parent first left her daughter at the nursery:

I warmed to the person... I made this bond with her... I'd built up this relationship... because she... was there when I left [my daughter], which was a very emotive time...

The significance of this bond as a basis of trust became explicit when it was compromised. The manager had since left the nursery: the personal bond between manager and parent, forged in the emotional cauldron of leaving a child at nursery for the first time, was lost and could not be replaced. Trust was thus undermined:

I'm very sad that [the manager] has gone... because she was there at the beginning... I probably trust them a bit less now... because of the change of staff... if you feel reassured by that person, you've made a connection with them and I just haven't made that with the current manager.

Such an account indicates an inherent risk when trusting a staff member through some kind of personal affinity or affect: trust may be compromised if the trusted person leaves. Staff turnover, therefore, carries implications for trust, an issue further considered in the next chapter.

For the managers of both the forprofit chain and the integrated centre nurseries, strong interpersonal relationships or 'bonding' between child, parent and keyworker were key strategies. For the forprofit chain manager such relationships were central to reducing child and parental anxiety; the integrated centre manager explicitly associated such relationships with parents' and children's trust in the nursery.

### ***5.3.3 Ongoing relationships: summary***

Ongoing relationships between parents and providers thus contributed to positive expectations of a nursery in multiple ways. The extent to which parents sought to engage in such relationships was varied. Some parents were not proactive in approaching staff; others purposefully sought daily communication and detailed information. For a number of parents relationships were a central factor in trust - whether on account of the transmission of knowledge about the nursery, a perception of transparency and honesty, or the growth of affinity or powerful emotional bonds. More commonly the development of relationships over time supported an underlying sense of

familiarity and ease with a nursery and its staff so that, through communication and personal interaction, information asymmetry was perceived to be reduced and the 'other' was no longer a stranger.

#### **5.4 Conclusion: trust over time**

Over time, references to external bases of trust, such as inspection reports or the opinions of other parents, were absent or of secondary importance in parents' accounts. Instead, trust was actively constructed through parents' own experiences, observations and assessments. In common with the choice process, parents both observed the exhibited professionalism of staff and assessed their motivations and personalities. Such observations might be a strong basis of trust; but when behaviours were observed to be inadequate, expectations of the nursery might be severely compromised. In addition, parents without exception referred to the messages which they received from their own children. Such messages offered not only a window upon events in the nursery, but also immediate knowledge about outcomes such as, especially, a child's happiness. Thus beliefs about trust might be constructed from a swift evaluation of the achievement of desired outcomes. Occasionally swift evaluations led to swift exit.

Trust was also situated in relationships. Through communication parents might obtain knowledge about the nursery which apparently overcame informational problems. Perceptions of full and open communicative relationships enabled beliefs that nothing was hidden and that problems would be discussed and resolved. Within ongoing relationships, moreover, staff members evolved from strangers to familiar individuals. Sometimes such personal relationships were characterised by affective bonds and affinities which supported powerful positive expectations of the other.

Within this general pattern of parents' active construction of trust, there were variations and nuances. The relative importance of different bases of trust or the foci of parent observations were contingent on parents' definitions of quality – a relationship considered further in Chapter 7. Parents' contingent experiences might also be influential, so that approaches to trust could shift if, for instance, significant problems were encountered. Sometimes parents might construct trust from intimate detail, so that wearing slippers in the nursery was held to indicate a child's contentment. The active

construction of trust, finally, implied a dynamic role for parents as critical observers and evaluators. There was, however, variation in parents' extent of activity – for instance, in observations carried out or the amount of communication sought. This phenomenon is also considered further in Chapter 7.

## 6 Organisations and trust<sup>37</sup>

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This study seeks to explore as a particular focus the production of trust at the organisational level (research question 3). Chapter 2 presented theoretical propositions which make connections between organisational form and trust. This chapter considers whether organisational form, sector or behaviour was indeed perceived by parents to be a significant indicator of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness. Findings are presented in four parts. First, the concept of an ‘organisation’ *per se* was a significant basis of trust for a number of parents. Second, expectations of reliability and quality were sometimes based upon the type of organisation (for instance, daycare or school-based provision). Third, some parents held *a priori* opinions about the trustworthiness of sectors and ownership forms; however, these opinions, no matter how strong, had little influence upon behaviours and upon parents’ decision-making about the trustworthiness of settings. Instead – and in common with parents’ active construction of trust described in Chapters 4 and 5 - parents evaluated the trustworthiness of settings on the basis of observation of organisational behaviours. Attention therefore switches from *a priori* consideration of organisational form to observed organisational behaviours or structures which were perceived to be more or less trustworthy or which facilitated the development of trusting relationships. This dynamic is considered in the final part of the chapter.

### 6.1 The importance of organisations

A number of parents were distrustful of provision by childminders and nannies. In some cases such distrust was founded upon simple doubts about their competence – whether to control a group of children in the street or to administer a treatment for a child’s allergy. More profoundly, the very concept of an ‘organisation’ was a fundamental basis of trust for some parents. An organised group setting was considered to be a public space in which wrongdoing or incompetence was difficult to conceal:

a nursery is a public place ... there is more control... people who have problems or they’re sick or they do nasty things, they tend to do it in private rather than in public. (preschool parent 5)

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<sup>37</sup> The findings in this chapter have been published as a journal article (Roberts 2011).

There were perceived to be multiple actors who supervised behaviours, and an organisational structure which controlled and monitored:

The big choice ... was whether to use a childminder or a nursery... I felt I trusted a nursery more, trusted ... the organisation more..... You've got the nursery nurses and you've got the supervisory nurses and you've got a structure that's checking and you've got other parents... (forprofit chain parent 2)

The public space of the nursery was contrasted with the uncontrollable and unsupervised domestic setting, which created the opportunity to skimp on quality or to commit abuse behind closed doors:

It's their house, you don't control who goes in there. (social enterprise parent 1)

I wouldn't use a nanny in my home. ... having two girls ... I'm very untrusting of people I don't know looking after my kids... the opportunity's not there for nasty things to happen [in a group setting], whereas, one on one in a home... the opportunity is there. (preschool parent 3)

The parent's specific reference to the gender of her children is noteworthy here. This raises the possibility that children's gender may have a nuanced effect on parents' trust and understanding of risk when choosing nurseries. Research has already indicated that children's gender can affect schools choice (David et al. 1994); the relationship of children's gender to trust and preschool choice merits further attention.

Suspicion of childminders and domestic settings was not universal. One parent currently used a childminder to supplement group provision; others had successfully used childminding in the past. Some parents had rejected childminding not on the grounds of trust, but because a group setting would be beneficial for children's social development. Nonetheless the organisation, as public space, was a pertinent basis of trust for a number of parents.

Previous research, finally, has reported that working-class parents are particularly likely to disapprove of childminding (Vincent et al. 2008); here, however, fears of individual childcarers were equally reported by professional / managerial and working-class parents.

## 6.2 Types of organisation

Parents' discrimination between preschool types (such as daycare, preschool or school-based provision) was often founded upon practical considerations. A need for extended opening hours or the age of the child might indicate, for instance, the use of daycare. In a limited number of cases, however, the type of organisation informed expectations about reliability and quality. Some parents would not consider daycare nurseries for older children: these were perceived to provide only care, rather than an environment for child development. Nursery class parent 4 wanted a transitional step before formal schooling:

I was looking... [for a] more formal nursery... a nursery turning into schools, not just childcare.

Other parents described a fundamental normative rejection of daycare. Nursery class parent 5 judged what she saw during a visit to a daycare nursery to be ethically unacceptable:

I saw babies... lying there ... so many babies to one person... I know you're only supposed to by law have something like three children to one person... But I don't think that's right, one person to three babies. That's not fair... I know sometimes you have to go back to work but I just think it's too much... Personally I'm not that type of a mum...

Nursery class parent 3 had developed a similar repugnance for daycare through her prior experience of a forprofit chain:

...it only really opened my eyes when I saw... a workhouse for babies... it's not the way to be.

One parent, finally, had been 'put off' daycare by the popular books on childcare written by psychologist Steve Biddulph<sup>38</sup>.

There were contrasting views about school-based provision. Two parents rejected such provision because staff:child ratios were poor and groups of children too large. Integrated centre parent 4 explicitly rejected nursery classes on the grounds that they were overly focused on academic development. To an extent this objection was a

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<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Biddulph (2006), in which the author makes an impassioned argument against the use of nurseries by children under three years.

reflection of her preferences, rather than an issue of trust; however, it was underpinned by her belief that schools were pursuing a ‘hidden agenda’, as defined by Ofsted or leagues tables, rather than meeting children’s needs (section 4.3.2 above).

By contrast, a number of parents limited their choice solely to nurseries attached to schools. For nursery class parent 3, given her experiences at a private nursery chain and also her forceful beliefs about childminders, there were few other options. For other parents, the choice of a school-based provision was not an issue of trustworthiness, but was driven by a desire to enter the schools system<sup>39</sup> or to ensure stable provision for their child: if children joined a non-school setting at the age of three, then they would be uprooted again to begin their school career. The decision to choose only a school-based nursery, however, affected the information which parents collected to assess trustworthiness (p.144 above).

While trustworthiness was not a reason for choosing a school-based nursery, nonetheless for nursery class parent 2 the very idea of a ‘school’ was a source of trust when her child first joined the provision:

you have to trust them because they are a school, a big school... Everybody’s children here... so you confident then, not worry [sic].

There is a sense that a school, as a large communal setting, is somehow trustworthy.

### **6.3 Sectors and organisational form as signals of trustworthiness**

There was little evidence that organisational form or sector was a significant signal of trust. For a considerable number of parents the concept of sector or ownership was meaningless or confusing. There was particular incomprehension of the third sector, even sometimes among parents who were using such provision. One parent using the parent-run preschool mistakenly believed that the setting was owned by the state; the social enterprise was mistaken for both a state organisation and a profit-making company by parents who used it. For other parents sector was simply irrelevant:

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<sup>39</sup> Several parents believed, incorrectly, that a child’s participation in a nursery class would guarantee a place at the school in subsequent years.

Taking my child to a private school doesn't necessarily make me more trusting ... you can get a mad teacher in a private school that will ... stress your child out, and you can have the same in the state school. (preschool parent 5)

... didn't really worry us whether it was private or public. (preschool parent 3)

A minority of parents did hold opinions about the predicted reliability of state and forprofit organisations. Yet there was little evidence that such beliefs played a central role in parents' assessments of trustworthiness. These findings are considered in turn.

### **6.3.1 Sectors: opinions and beliefs**

A number of parents held strong, often contrasting beliefs about the trustworthiness of different sectors. There were, for instance, opposing views of state provision. For one parent who used the state integrated centre, state provision brought 'peace of mind':

.... rightly or wrongly, I thought, well, there mustn't be anything dodgy going on here because this is a council nursery. It's not a private nursery where it might be more difficult to keep an eye on what ... [it is] doing. (integrated centre parent 4)

In a similar vein, there were perceptions that regulation of state providers was more robust:

I even prefer to choose a state [setting] at the beginning... because in some private schools... you don't really know if the staff is qualified. (preschool parent 2)

By contrast a parent at the forprofit chain believed that state employees would be poorly motivated because of low salaries and a certain ethos: "...it's going to be government employees set in a certain way." Similar views were expressed by a parent who used the social enterprise and who, perhaps because her child had been allocated a place through social services, mistook the organisation for a government agency. Strong negative opinions were therefore applied by her to the social enterprise as if it were a state provider. She perceived state provision to be inadequately funded; as a result staff:child ratios would be poor and children would receive insufficient attention. The parent's expectations were low:

... I knew it from day one that ... I'm not going to expect the highest, the best quality... it's not that they don't want to do it, they can't because there's not enough staff ... (social enterprise parent 1)

There were similarly contrasting views on the reliability of forprofit provision. Some parents expressed concern that profit-seeking might affect behaviours, and that providers would renege on promised quality behind closed doors:

there are some problems with ..... the profit-related drive... where they are cutting costs to maintain a profit and ... they're employing cheap labour... I'll... be watching out for it. (forprofit chain parent 5)

you pay money in some nursery... when you... visit them, they say, "oh we do this, we do this, we do this", but when you leave them and go home, they don't do nothing. (integrated centre parent 2)

A parent's disturbing previous experience at a large profit-making chain was also firmly attributed to the profit motive:

you have all these entrepreneurs think, "let's make the money" ...opening these awful ..... unfriendly, unloved child-caring places. (nursery class parent 3)

Alternatively some parents who used the forprofit chain believed that the interests of a profit-making provider were aligned with parents' desire for high quality. These beliefs in principle are consistent with preservation of reputation as an incentive for trustworthy behaviour among forprofit firms:

...it is about satisfying ... parents ...[If] a parent is unhappy with the nursery, the child is obviously not getting on... ultimately the nursery will go out of business. (forprofit chain parent 5)

A flourishing forprofit chain was generally considered, by the parents who used it, to be a reassuring signal that the organisation had historically met parent demand, and that it had a successful approach to preschool provision. For social enterprise parent 4, the higher fees charged by a private nursery were held to signal that "the standards would be higher than [in a nursery]... owned by the local authority or by a charity."

There was, however, little support for the proposition that a forprofit chain's behaviour is in practice constrained by the need to protect its reputation. Poor performance in one nursery was unlikely to contaminate other settings in the chain: information about such poor performance would probably not reach parents elsewhere; even if information did filter through, nurseries were considered to be stand-alone entities, each of which must be judged on its own merits:

the people are different ... not because it's a [name of chain] nursery you have to blame all of them... You cannot put the blame one nursery to another one.  
(forprofit chain parent 1)

There was, finally, little comment about third sector organisations. A parent who used profit-making provision was “a great believer in the voluntary sector doing stuff like this”: nonetheless he did not believe that the third sector was more trustworthy than the forprofit sector. By contrast, for a parent who used the nursery class, nonprofit provision carried a stigma: she would not choose for her child a ‘charity place’. None of the parents who used the parent-run preschool identified parent control as a meaningful signal of trustworthiness. This lack of comment upon - or even awareness of - third sector provision and its proposed advantages occurred despite providers’ attempts to draw attention to attractive third sector characteristics. The prospectus of the parent-led preschool gave prominence to ‘mutuality’, ‘community’ and parental involvement. The manager of the social enterprise nursery emphasised to parents its embeddedness in the community and its distinction from the forprofit sector:

I always say that ..... we are a listed charity... every penny we get goes back into the centre for the children.

### **6.3.2 Sectors: beliefs and behaviours**

There were thus diverse opinions about the quality and reliability implied by different sectors. The study sought to understand how far such beliefs were enacted. Significantly, parents’ opinions about sectors, no matter how strong, had little influence upon behaviours. Thus two parents at the forprofit provider supported the idea of a chain – but for neither was it a significant part of their choice process. Another parent was enthusiastic about third sector provision, but made no attempt to seek it out: he was, indeed, unaware that such provision was available locally. Such patterns were repeated by other parents. Beliefs in this context became *post facto* sources of reassurance: knowledge that the nursery was part of a profit-making chain, or conversely that it was state-owned, was a further comfort that choices had been correct rather than an intrinsic dimension within a decision to trust.

To an extent parents’ choices were constrained by availability and affordability of provision. Only four professional parents had a genuine choice across all three sectors;

another four parents limited their own choice set by seeking only provision attached to state schools. Nonetheless, while such barriers to choice were a concern to parents, there was generally no expressed resentment about an inability to access any particular organisational sector. There was one clear exception. Social enterprise parent 1, because she received her child's place through social services, had no choice of organisation. Her preference was strongly for private provision, and her mistaken belief that the social enterprise was state-run informed her lack of trust in the quality of care which her children would receive.

There were no other cases in which *a priori* beliefs about sector or organisational form were offered as a primary or essential reason for trusting or distrusting a nursery - whether because the majority of parents did not hold such beliefs, or because such beliefs were not central to decisions around trust. Instead, parents actively constructed trust through assessment of individual nurseries and their staff:

I didn't really worry about whether they're a chain or not. I was worried about this nursery and ... the care my child's going to get here. (forprofit chain parent 3)

#### **6.4 Active construction of trust: organisational structures and behaviours**

The active construction of trust by parents, as described in previous chapters, typically inhered in the observation and assessment of individual staff members, of children's responses and of other families using the setting. However, the process was also situated within the context of the organisation. Organisational behaviours or structures might themselves be perceived as signals of reliability or unreliability; in addition they might act as facilitators or inhibitors of parents' observations and assessments of trustworthiness. A number of organisational behaviours can be identified which contributed to or confounded the active construction of trust, both at the moment of choice and on an ongoing basis.

##### **6.4.1 *The problem of money and business***

Several parents reported that some forprofit and third sector organisations exhibited a certain emphasis on business behaviours and money-making. Such behaviour might be sufficient reason not to use a provider. Nursery class parent 4, when visiting a forprofit preschool, was taken aback by the immediate and detailed reference to payment:

... you had to pay way ahead ... it was almost like a money-making machine... you had to give ... a whole term notice otherwise they wouldn't give you anything back. I felt that they were really keen on making as much money as they could.

Such a focus on money undermined trust -

I felt it... had a certain purpose... I don't want to say that I thought that maybe I would be taken advantage of, but I didn't like it.

More subtly, a parent rejected a nursery in the social enterprise chain because she was treated not as a mother, but as a customer in a business transaction. The forprofit chain nursery was different: here she “was treated like a mum who was looking for a place for her child” (forprofit chain parent 6). In this case the success of the forprofit chain (and failure of the social enterprise) indicates that it is not profit-making *per se* that is problematic; rather, parents are disturbed by observed behaviours or representations which imply the prioritisation of money within the preschool relationship.

Management of monetary exchange indeed appeared awkward for the social enterprise. Its apparently business-like behaviours contributed to confusion about the sector to which it belonged:

I do get the feeling it's slightly commercial... I don't think it's nonprofit, I do think there's a commercial edge... (social enterprise parent 6)

The social enterprise manager identified uncomfortable moments – for instance, when a parent was late paying fees – when money had to be brought to the forefront of interactions:

I should be... [saying], “Come on now, pay your fees or I'm going to have to close your nursery place.” So it is getting that balance. As much as I want to be there for the parents and offer [a] service... we're not a free service...

#### **6.4.2 Newness**

The newness of the forprofit chain nursery created challenges in gaining trust. First, the nursery did not have a critical mass of users or ex-users from whom prospective parents might receive recommendations. Second, in its early months the nursery inevitably had vacancies. In a market which suffers from under-supply, spare capacity created suspicion:

I was a bit worried about nurseries with availability in London. You think, “Oh my goodness... are there vacancies for a reason?” (forprofit chain parent 5)

Newness might also deprive parents of information which supported their own judgements about trustworthiness. Thus, although forprofit chain parent 2 twice visited the nursery, on neither occasion was the experience satisfactory:

... they hadn't actually opened [on the first visit] but they were able to show me around the rooms... then I came back with my husband when it was open. It was still quite empty, so I wasn't... wholly reassured that it was quite right because... I couldn't see it in action.

The lack of opportunity to observe the responses of other children attending the nursery was considered an especial difficulty. Nor was it meaningful at this stage to ask about staff turnover, an important issue for the parent. Thus there was a profound information deficit which undermined the parent's preferred choice process:

I can talk about ideally what I was looking for, I couldn't look for it here because it wasn't operating, do you see what I mean?

The problem of assessing trustworthiness in an organisation's early stages – and the possibility that this might deter users – would appear to be an example of the 'liability of newness' which afflicts young organisations (Stinchcombe 1965: 148).

Newness, however, could also be a positive signal. Two parents were attracted by the physical newness of the nursery. Such attractiveness was difficult to verbalise:

... I just liked the idea that... it's just new and maybe it meant new, clean, I don't know... (forprofit chain parent 6)

Moreover, because the nursery was not at full capacity, there was the possibility of more focused care for each child (forprofit chain parent 3).

#### **6.4.3 *Trust through familiarity: the integrated centre***

Often the active construction of trust during the choice process implied swift assessments of trustworthiness, based on observations during a single visit. A different dynamic was apparent among those who used the state integrated centre. Parents, through experience of other services provided by the centre at the same physical site, built up knowledge and trust over a period *prior* to nursery use. Relationships with the

centre were typically initiated through use of the drop-in (a play session at which parents stay with their children), before extending to services such as toy library, adult learning and crèche.

Such relationships provided extended opportunities to engage in processes of observation and assessment prior to choice and use of the nursery. First, parents became familiar with the centre and its competence. There were multiple opportunities for professionalism to be exhibited and observed. At the drop-in, for instance, parents received both expert advice about bringing up their children and also other support which implied helpfulness or kindness:

I know most of the staff... they help the parents, they help me as a parent, they give you advice which is good. (integrated centre parent 2)

Through such experiences parents gradually developed expectations of the reliability, competence and benevolence of the centre:

... my son was loving coming to the drop-in... slowly, slowly, my experiences cemented it. (integrated centre parent 4)

Second, parents were specifically able to observe the nursery over time, effectively making multiple in-depth visits before choosing to use it:

I knew the place before. When we play in the drop-in, sometimes we used to come downstairs [to the nursery] and we used to play there. (integrated centre parent 3)

Such visits both enabled assessment of the nursery and created a sense of openness.

Third, parents became familiar with nursery staff. Such familiarity was facilitated by the centre's rotation of staff between drop-in, crèche and nursery:

I get used to staff in the crèche... some of the staff ... now ... work in the nursery. So that's easier to help me settle her in. (integrated centre parent 2)

... the different staff would rotate so you can say, "... you've come down from the nursery, what do they do in the nursery?" (integrated centre parent 4)

Finally, parents observed their child's own responses to the integrated centre. The extended relationship with the centre enabled children's responses to be monitored over time; more importantly, children developed and exhibited their own trust in the setting,

built up through familiarity with the centre and its staff. Children's exhibited trust was a strong reassurance:

... the people, they are friendly for her... all of them familiar... She's not really scared of anything because she always in drop-in and then she come to the nursery... (integrated centre parent 1)

... already my daughter know the place. She knows the people, so that helps a lot. (integrated centre parent 2)

Because parents and children were familiar with the centre, the decision to use the nursery was untroubled:

I didn't really want him to go to another nursery because ... I had built up a rapport ... it was a comfort to know that I knew where I was going to leave him. (integrated centre parent 4)

Such straightforward decision-making implies a level of trust. Parents indeed identified as a basis for trust their familiarity with the centre and its staff:

I used to do the computer course - the crèche worker who was looking after my daughter... they brought her downstairs in the nursery and she's... my daughter's keyworker. That's more for me to trust her... (integrated centre parent 2)

[I had trust]... because I know the place and I got used to all the people and they were nice. (integrated centre parent 3)

[I had trust] ... because I'd been using the drop-in. I had the opportunity many times to come downstairs. It was my son's ease of passage, if you like... there was no hesitation from him. (integrated centre parent 4)

The possibility of trust through familiarity was not limited to the integrated centre. Nursery class parent 5 had a longstanding association with the nursery class because her niece had attended the setting. She had made multiple informal visits when picking up her niece or attending school functions. In consequence she "knew for sure this was a fantastic school". The distinctiveness of the integrated centre, however, lay in the holistic provision of services which directly enabled - prior to the use of the nursery - the accumulation of experience and trust over time.

#### **6.4.4 Transparency**

Organisational transparency supported parents' trust in two ways. First, it facilitated direct observation of the preschool's task performance and a child's contentment:

I came from time to time to sit... to see what's going on, to see how she's playing... how the staff look at her. (integrated centre parent 1)

I ... visited... without warning... just to see what was going on. I was able to look through the window... he seemed to be absolutely having a whale of a time. (forprofit chain parent 5).

All the settings, as already noted, operated 'settling-in' periods, which were productive moments when parents might observe provision. In addition, the preschool operated a 'special day': every two weeks one of the children would be 'in charge' of a tea party, to which his/her parents were invited. This was a valued opportunity to observe the nursery, the staff and the interactions of the child:

we can see what's happening, how the child is developing, how he's interacting. (preschool parent 2)

There were moments when transparency might be especially valued. Social enterprise parent 5 described how the nursery facilitated observation of her daughter when she was beginning to leave her at the setting:

There was the reassurance that I could call back at any time... I could also watch from afar when she thought I had gone, so [I] never felt any pressure or any rush to make the transition...

Transparency might also be important if there was a problem. When integrated centre parent 4's son was among a group of children who were interacting problematically, all the parents were invited to the nursery to observe the interactions first-hand.

Transparency enabled a communicative process:

we had to... watch the boys... so that we, as parents, could actually see the problem wasn't as bad as we thought... it's vital to keep the line of communication open rather than being met with a door in the face.

Of course, trust would not flourish if the observed behaviours or interactions were poor. As noted in the previous chapter, a decision to exit a nursery was informed by what preschool parent 4 saw when he and his wife sat in on sessions (p.167).

Second, transparency indicated that an organisation was confident in its own competence. For one parent the forprofit chain nursery's willingness for him to visit without warning "made me feel reassured". For preschool parent 5:

it gives you trust because you know what they're doing and they're not afraid of anything and they don't want to hide anything.

The multiple visits which parents were able to make to the integrated centre's nursery prior to use similarly created a sense that the nursery had nothing to hide:

... they never did stop you going and... investigating... that was one of the reasons that in my mind cemented it... I don't think other nurseries would allow you just to come in... maybe once or twice a week, have a look around, see what the staff are like... it's all very open ... not hiding. (integrated centre parent 4)

All organisations sought to be transparent: the forprofit chain and social enterprise used the same terminology of an "open door policy", by which parents, in principle, might visit the setting at any time. Managers recognised that transparency might both support a meaningful partnership with parents and enable the nursery to show the quality of its care:

if it was a closed door... there are going to be anxieties but if you're open, and you have that partnership with parents... then they're going to trust you. (nursery class manager)

to invite parents into the nursery, more or less any time of the day... says that we're an open door nursery and we've got nothing to hide. We're proud of what we provide for parents. (social enterprise manager)

The nursery class and social enterprise preferred parents to give prior warning of a visit, in order to prevent disruption. Transparency was, however, especially meaningful if such warning was not given, so that the possibility of manufactured performance was avoided:

... I would like if the government could allow parents to just drop in when they want ... that would be very good. (social enterprise parent 1)

if I'm not working on that day, he sometimes feels like he wants to be with me there... and I sit there and these guys [the staff] don't know that [name of child] might want me there that particular day. So no, they don't mind... it gives you trust because you know what they're doing and they're not afraid of anything and they don't want to hide anything. (preschool parent 5)

The significance of transparency was emphasised by situations in which it was absent. Preschool parent 5 had used a nursery in Spain where “they wouldn’t open the door for you”. This opacity created a confrontational dynamic, exhibited within an escalating game of “cat and mouse”:

... they had a massive window... I would actually go through the garden and just look without anyone noticing me, seeing that he’s happy in his play... But as soon as they found out, they put the shutters on.

Ultimately, the parent felt compelled to undertake covert monitoring:

I had to do some spying... I found a little hole in the wall ... I did my best to check any time I could.

This parent directly attributed her present lack of anxiety to the transparency of the nursery: her ability to observe what went on overcame her strong awareness of risk.

For several parents the structure of the forprofit chain inherently lacked transparency. Parents were not kept informed during a lengthy period of managerial instability:

...the fact that there’s a chain, there are things that go on obviously we don’t know about, that mean that the turnover of managers has been too high... (forprofit chain parent 2).

Thus, while the nursery itself might be transparent, opacity around the wider decision-making of the organisation was destabilising.

#### **6.4.5 Communication**

Communicative interactions, as noted in the previous chapter, supported parents’ trust in multiple ways. All the managers valued and sought to facilitate communication, sometimes directly linking it to trust:

...it’s keeping the dialogue going, it’s keeping the openness going, it’s keeping that relationship going... then you will trust people. (nursery class manager)

I am available for the parents to talk to. I interact with the parents and I think they trust me... (forprofit chain manager)

Settings used similar communicative mechanisms, such as parent visits, record books of children’s achievements, or informal conversations undertaken at the beginning and end of sessions. But there were two organisational factors which appeared key to supporting

trust through communication. First, parents generally valued the rich information provided through informal interactions at the beginning and end of sessions; formal reporting – such as parents’ evenings or record books – was not significant:

I always miss [parents’ evenings]... the reason is because I’ve got that constant interaction with them. (forprofit chain parent 3)

Second, given the importance of informal relations, the accessibility of staff was central. For some parents communication was ideally a daily process; for others it was important that staff were available when needed:

[in] the morning I always have time to have words and find the progress of [my daughter]. (forprofit chain parent 1)

... they are open to talk to... I don’t need appointment... just come and talk... (integrated centre parent 3)

Managers strove to ensure such accessibility. As an example, the forprofit chain manager actively managed the availability of senior staff at key moments:

our communication is good... because the deputy and I are out there all the time, so we see parents when they’re coming to pick up; we’re not sitting in the office where they have to... say ‘is it all right if I disturb you...?’ That doesn’t really build good relationships...

#### **6.4.6 *Enabling parent observation: trials and inductions***

Organisations provided specific opportunities for parents to become more familiar with nurseries and staff prior to use. Such opportunities generally strengthened trust. Prior to choice, for instance, the preschool offered a trial day which, for preschool parent 5, was an opportunity to observe staff behaviours and her child’s responses. Both the statutory settings administered induction programmes, which, while taking place after parents had chosen the provision, nonetheless supported the development of trust prior to preschool use. The nursery class enabled parents to visit the site several times, both individually and as part of a group of new parents. For nursery class parent 3, the transparency of these visits contrasted with the “quick dash round” and office-based “interview” characteristic of private nurseries. The tone of the group meeting, and the expertise exhibited during its course, confirmed nursery class parent 5’s trust in the school:

... everybody made us feel very at home... [The manager] was explaining everything to us and she was showing us... the curriculum and... the well-being of the child. Yeah, I felt really confident.

Staff from the integrated centre visited children and parents at home prior to their use of the nursery. The objective, according to the integrated centre nursery manager, was to strengthen children's trust. But such home visits also strengthened parents' trust, since staff were able to exhibit professional competence and care for the child's well-being:

[it is] very good because they find out what he want, how is his behaviour and ...when he's crying, how you deal with him... They asking you good questions... it's good, really I like it. (integrated centre parent 5)

As a consequence of both her own visit to the nursery and the visit of staff to her home, integrated centre parent 1 was strongly reassured about her daughter's care:

... when we come here for the first time, we see the staff and I have two staff come at home, I feel it's going to be easy for my daughter...

#### **6.4.7 Staff turnover**

Turnover of staff was unsettling for parents. This phenomenon was apparent at one of the social enterprise settings and particularly problematic at the forprofit chain, where management instability and staff turnover had occurred simultaneously. Such turnover disrupted relationships and familiarity which had built over time:

... you are entrusting your child to a group of people... once you get to know the people who are looking after your child, it's unsettling if they then go. (forprofit chain parent 5)

As already observed, for forprofit chain parent 2 the loss of the manager had still more impact. A strong emotional bond had been established by the manager's support when the parent first left her child at the nursery; such a bond could not be recreated.

Turnover also brought new staff into the setting. If such staff were not appropriately introduced to parents, the appearance of strangers was threatening:

... every day there was a new person... whether that carer was in my child's class or not, that person is in this nursery and I don't know him. (forprofit chain 3)

Parents at the forprofit chain described in particular the unsettling presence of temporary agency staff. Because such staff might only briefly work at the nursery, assessment of their competence was not possible:

...obviously you can't draw too many conclusions... some of the women have just come in off... some kind of rota they have in order to get agency people in.

(forprofit chain parent 5)

Turnover at the forprofit chain was compounded by poor communication. Parents were not given explanations for the departure of a manager or other staff:

If they just disappear, it's odd. (forprofit chain parent 5)

'Odd' is not a word that sits well with trust. Two parents at the forprofit chain, indeed, were explicit: the combination of staff and management turnover, poor communication and lack of transparency substantially reduced their trust.

Trust was, on the other hand, supported by staff continuity. Forprofit chain parent 6 had joined the private nursery after the period of instability: the consistency of staff was cited as a reason for her trust in the provision. For forprofit chain parent 5, the continuity of certain key staff underpinned continued use of the nursery despite overall turnover:

There was sufficient continuity of people looking after him. ... in my own mind what seemed to be important was there was always one person... who my son... was sort of attached to...

Similarly social enterprise parent 2 specifically trusted the "old staff" – a statement which simultaneously illustrated the benefit of continuity and, by implication, the uncertainty or unfamiliarity of the new. A number of parents, finally, commented favorably upon the stability enabled by the lack of staff turnover at the nursery class.

## **6.5 Conclusion: organisations and trust**

Certain *a priori* organisational characteristics of preschool providers were significant in decisions about trust. In particular for some parents the very concept of an 'organisation' was a source of trust, being a public space in which the presence of multiple actors and organisational structures was a protection against opportunism or abuse. To a lesser extent attributions of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness were also occasionally derived from organisational 'type' – whether on account of normative

objections to daycare or concerns about the ratios and environment of school-based provision. The ownership structure or sector of organisations, however, received very limited consideration as an *a priori* signal of trustworthiness. For many parents these dimensions were not relevant or even comprehensible. Some parents had strong opinions - there was indeed a miscellany of discourses, ranging from suspicion of the profit motive and trust in public sector processes to belief in the market and critiques of state sector motivations. But a central finding is that these opinions were not enacted: they constituted neither the basis of parents' behaviour nor the principal foundation of attributions of trustworthiness.

Instead - and in common with the findings described in previous chapters - a central theme in parents' interaction with organisations was their active construction of trust through observation and assessment. Organisational behaviours and structures were therefore significant in the extent to which they supported or damaged this construction of trust. Two dimensions can be identified. First, organisational characteristics might present direct signals of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness – for instance, a focus on money or evidence of staff turnover might directly signal unreliability. Second, organisational characteristics might play a mediating role, by enabling or inhibiting parents' direct assessments of trustworthiness. Organisational transparency seems especially significant in the construction of trust, since it cross-cuts both dimensions: it was perceived not only to facilitate parental observation and assessment, but also to signal directly that an organisation was self-confident and honest.

The development of trust was, finally, supported by structures or behaviours which enabled parents to become familiar with the setting and staff. To some extent familiarity might be developed through induction programmes; on an ongoing basis it might be significantly disrupted by staff turnover. The particular structure of the state integrated centre particularly enabled the development of familiarity. Through various interactions with staff, with the centre's other services, with other parents and with the nursery itself, parents became familiar with the nursery even before it was used: there was a gradual process of trust construction through extended interaction and observation over time. In this case parents' assertions of trust in the nursery at the moment of choice were especially strong.

## **7 The nature of parents' trust: strategies, assumptions and variations**

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The preceding chapters have considered the multiple bases of trust which parents used both at the moment of choice and as their children attended preschool over time, including the role of organisations and organisational form in contributing to trust. Within parents' accounts there was in addition evidence of underpinning strategies and assumptions through which parents used and interpreted these various bases of trust. Exploration of these cross-cutting patterns within this chapter supports a more complete understanding of the process by which parents trusted provision; it also offers insights into the nature of parents' trust itself (research question 2).

The chapter begins by examining the strategies which parents used to organise multiple bases of trust (section 7.1): parents might use different bases of trust depending on the outcomes which they desired; they effectively operated hierarchies of information, so that certain bases were privileged over others; they combined bases of trust in different ways to achieve different functions. Parents in particular privileged their own active construction of trust through observation and assessment. Such active construction of trust was supported and enabled by parents' particular understandings and use of knowledge and of intuition, a dynamic which is examined in section 7.2.

Not all parents trusted in the same way. There were variations in the assumptions and behaviours described in parents' accounts. Possible explanations of such variation are identified in section 7.3, which considers the effect of, first, obstacles to the collection of information, and, second, parents' individual understandings of trust and risk. Given parents' strategies and assumptions, and given also variations in their approaches to trust, the empirical report concludes in section 7.4 by considering a fundamental question: the extent to which it can be said that parents did indeed trust preschool provision (research question 4).

### **7.1 Parents' strategies: preferences, hierarchies and combinations**

Previous chapters have described multiple and diverse bases of trust from which parents derived expectations of nurseries. Parents' accounts offered insights into how they negotiated and organised these varied bases. Three strategies are identified. First,

parents' approaches to trust were associated with and affected by the outcomes which they desired from provision: the existence of multiple bases of trust was in part explained by the multiple outcomes which parents sought. Second, parents operated a hierarchy of bases of trust by prioritising certain bases over others. Third, they combined bases of trust in diverse ways in order to inform their decision-making.

### ***7.1.1 Trust for what purpose? Desired outcomes and bases of trust***

Trust, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a positive expectation of the reliability of the other. Providers were expected to be reliable across a range of functions, since parents desired multiple outcomes from the preschool setting. The *immediate happiness of the child*, for instance, was mentioned by all parents and was central within most accounts:

If she didn't like it here, she wouldn't be here. (forprofit chain parent 1)

Parents were also concerned about their child's *safety*:

... that's very important, the most important thing... it has to be [a] safe environment... (preschool parent 2)

There was repeated emphasis too upon *social development*, although with differing levels of specificity: for some parents, interaction with other children and adults was enough; others specified social skills which their children should develop to become ready for school. For three parents, finally, there was an explicit link between preschool provision and long-term conceptions of their *child's educational career*.

These multiple preferences created some complexity around trust: different outcomes or definitions of quality might require different bases of trust; as a corollary, specific bases of trust might have relevance only to specific outcomes. Thus trust that a child would be happy was derived during the choice process from observation of the happiness of other children, the kindness of staff and staff-children interactions, and on an ongoing basis from children's feedback of their emotional state. But trust in a child's safety required other bases; there might be particular assumptions about the role of regulation:

[safety] was very important but I never really checked that because I expected that it was the government's duty... If they open a school, it should be safe... I don't know - how could I have checked it? (preschool parent 2)

... health and safety is all over these organisations... so I felt... confident about it. (forprofit chain parent 5)

Furthermore, parents' understandings of child safety might be multidimensional, so that different aspects of safety were themselves associated with different bases of trust. Preschool parent 3 distinguished between "big safety issues", about which she was reassured by Ofsted's oversight, and "small safety issues" (such as the conduct of activities in settings), about which she constructed trust through her own observations of staff behaviours. For social enterprise parent 1, CRB checks were an essential reassurance about children's safety from abuse; trust in the safety of daily activities was achieved through observations of staff:

the fact that they're actually watching your kids [means]... I feel safe... Cause my child might be eating sand...

A further set of trust bases might be associated with a child's social development. Positive expectations might be derived from the simple presence of other children within group care, observation of a child's behaviour, or reports from staff about the interaction of children behind closed doors:

you want to hear... that they're nice to other children, that they're not horrors, that... they're interacting. (preschool parent 4)

Trust that the preschool would be a reliable foundation for a child's educational career, finally, was constructed through a particular assessment of a provider's reputation:

... I look in the future... okay, she goes to this school, this nursery, she'll go to a better secondary, then from there a good university. (nursery class parent 5)

Assessment of other families at the nursery was also important in this regard (p.141-143). Here child feedback - so powerful as a basis of trust with regard to a child's immediate happiness - was irrelevant, since children had no sense of the long-term:

... [my son] wouldn't care... if a child comes from this family or that family. I do because I know the long run... he doesn't care what he grabs in society, I do. (preschool parent 5)

This association between parents' desired outcomes and their approaches to trust carried further implications. First, parents might trust the setting to achieve one outcome, but not another. Evidence of such co-existent trust and distrust is presented in section 7.4.1 below. Second, a change in preferences might affect approaches to trust. Academic development had not been a priority for preschool parent 2 when her elder son attended

the preschool, but became a central preference upon his transition to a school nursery class. In consequence the parent assessed the trustworthiness of the nursery class through a different lens. After a rigorous evaluation of the academic content of provision and the attainment of other children, the school was assessed to be unreliable as a provider of academic stimulus, and the child was withdrawn:

...it wasn't maybe pushing [him] enough... he was with children who couldn't read... Academically... it wasn't the right place... we could tell he was ready to start the next step and he couldn't get that.

Third, different preferences explained some variation in parents' approaches to trust. Highly specified preferences demanded specific information to support evaluations of trustworthiness. Thus distinctive emphases on creativity (preschool parent 4), the absence of aggression (preschool parent 5) or a loving ethos (nursery class parent 3) implied distinct bases of trust – respectively, observation of the performance of songs, investigation of other families, and evaluation of atmosphere and staff personalities. Variation in preferences, and hence approaches to trust, might also be related to a child's age. As an example, two parents whose children had joined a nursery as babies gave prominence to emotional bonds and personalised relationships with staff.

Finally, specific bases of trust were privileged because of their power in offering reassurance about a particular essential outcome. Some outcomes were more important than others; for instance, a child's happiness was of high importance for most parents:

I'd rather him have a good time at this stage than learn how to read. (forprofit chain parent 5)

Prominence was therefore given to bases of trust which were relevant to child happiness, such as children's feedback and emotional responses. Parents accepted some unreliability across other aspects of quality as long as children were happy:

... places aren't perfect ... we'd have left him at the old one if he'd been happy... you just have to let it go cause [the child's happiness is] the most important thing. (preschool parent 4)

Conversely the low priority accorded to academic outcomes offered some explanation for the lack of references to curriculum or formal reporting in parents' accounts of trust:

I don't see this as... a crammer... he's here simply [to be] looked after and left to have some fun. So I'm not really bothered [about formal meetings]. (forprofit chain parent 5)

The specific associations made between outcomes and bases of trust might vary: the reach or meaning of such bases was subject to parents' interpretations. As an example, Ofsted inspections might be interpreted as an indication of a setting's overall quality or more narrowly as a signal of safety (section 4.3.2); group provision was seen as a safeguard against abuse for some parents, but not mentioned by others (section 6.1). Nonetheless, while specific interpretations varied, parents' desired outcomes had an effect upon how trust was conceived and attained. The complexity of preschool outcomes implied complexity around trust: different bases of trust told different stories.

### 7.1.2 Hierarchies of bases of trust

Parents privileged certain bases of trust over others. This hierarchy of bases of trust is represented conceptually in table 7.1.

**Table 7.1: Hierarchy of bases of trust**

	Characteristics	Examples
<b>Core</b>	Actively considered High importance to expectations of reliability	Exhibited professionalism of staff Child feedback
<b>Secondary</b>	Actively considered Limited importance to expectations of reliability	Observed child development
<b>Underpinning</b>	Not actively considered High importance to expectations of reliability	CRB checks

Certain bases were accorded *core* importance – for instance, during the choice process recommendation was central to the expectations of a number of parents; on an ongoing basis child feedback was significant in most accounts. Parents' active construction of trust through their own observations and assessments was often a core basis of trust both during the choice process and over time:

We saw the nursery... it was the way the nursery was run... we didn't feel anything else would have helped. (forprofit chain parent 4)

... it's good for me to see by my own eyes... how they good and that. (integrated centre parent 2)

Other bases seemed more peripheral, being mentioned only after prompts in interview. Such bases were inferior or *secondary*. Observed child development, for instance, was generally not a core aspect within parents' narratives about trust (p.156), a finding which perhaps reflects the relative low priority of child development as an outcome. Similarly nursery class parent 2, while acknowledging the relevance of qualifications, valued more highly her own ability to judge staff competence:

Sometime you get all these things [qualifications], but... the teacher has no common sense.

Where bases of trust were in tension, core bases would be favoured. Thus social enterprise parent 5 valued her own judgement above a nursery chain's brand name:

the brand name possibly gave some reassurance. ... I had expected to like that one the most and actually I liked it least.

Preschool parent 2 overcame concerns about the nursery's crumbling décor (p.137 above) through her assessments of staff: "the most important thing was the teachers, the staff...". The communication received by preschool parent 4 from staff at a previous nursery indicated that his son was happy, but his son's feedback suggested otherwise (p.150-151 above). The parent prioritised his son's feedback over the information from the nursery, with the result that his son was removed from the setting.

Certain bases of trust, however, were peripheral in parents' accounts not because they were unimportant, but because they were not consciously considered. Regulatory systems were rarely central in parents' narratives. Nonetheless qualifications were for some a foundational reassurance; for most parents CRB checks were fundamental. Such bases of trust performed an *underpinning* function, being an assumed foundation on which more active decisions to trust were situated. For many parents, the development of relationships with staff also appeared to fulfil an underpinning role: the

growing sense of familiarity or ease with staff created a stable environment within which more active attributions of trust might be constructed.

Table 7.1 indicates typical examples of bases of trust for each category. The exhibited professionalism of staff was a core basis for most parents. The hierarchical positions of other bases of trust were, however, dynamic. They might depend upon the preferences or interpretations of individual parents. Thus Ofsted's oversight might be categorised as a core or secondary basis of trust – or, indeed, as irrelevant, either because it was unknown or because it was rejected by parents. Communicative or personalised relationships for some were an unsought but helpful foundation, but for others were an acknowledged core reason for trust.

The hierarchical position of specific bases of trust might also vary with time. Child feedback became more consistently significant once children attended a nursery. The importance of external bases of trust, by contrast, waned. Forprofit chain parent 5, when choosing provision, had been worried about the level of vacancies at the nursery, which he interpreted as a possible sign of poor provision (p.188). Over time his experiences superseded such external signals:

... the fact that they may have vacancies now doesn't really matter so much, because... I know what it's like...

Similarly the opinions of other parents – which, as recommendations, were often significant during the choice process - became a secondary resource over time, being infrequently consulted and considered of lower value than participants' own assessments:

[other parents' views did] not affect me at all because I feel I know my son and the teacher... (nursery class parent 2)

Reference to Ofsted was also generally absent from parents' accounts of trust over time. There were two exceptions: integrated centre parent 2 was reassured by Ofsted's continued oversight; social enterprise parent 2, previously unaware of Ofsted, was impressed by a plaque at the nursery which displayed an 'outstanding' inspection grade.

Finally, specific circumstances might affect the importance accorded to bases of trust. Thus, as described in Chapter 5, exhibited child development might become a core basis

of parents' expectations in certain situations – whether as a basis of trust if the nursery resolved an entrenched behavioural difficulty, or of distrust if a child was observed to be developing for the worse. In a situation of crisis or anxiety other parents' opinions might regain relevance as a source of information or reassurance:

... you only really want to [consult other parents]... when you have a sense that things are going wrong... if you have the sense that everything's okay, then there's really no point... if I felt that things weren't right, I might... collar somebody outside and say, "what do you think of this?" (preschool parent 4)

when [name of child] was in her non-settling-in period... she'd be howling... all the mothers... say that everyone's been through that... It's at those sort of times you... chat to people. (preschool parent 3)

### **7.1.3 Combinations of bases of trust**

A small number of parents more or less utilised a single basis of trust during the choice process: forprofit chain parent 3 and her husband, for instance, relied solely on their assessments of nursery staff. Generally, however, parents used combinations of trust bases both as they chose the nursery and over time. Different types of combinations can be identified: *complementary*, *differentiated* and *confirmatory*.

*Complementary combinations:* parents combined information from varied sources to develop an understanding of the nursery from which expectations were derived. During the choice process recommendations (if received) were followed by visits in which parents made their own assessments of reliability. Parents generally did not attribute more importance to either basis. Instead recommendation and parents' observations were incrementally combined to paint a picture of the nursery:

I came here, I talked to my friends, and I had a feel for the place ... and at the beginning, the mums are allowed to stay with the children. So I knew ... what they are doing, what kind of place it is. (preschool parent 2)

Where recommendations were received for several settings, observation during a visit guided decisions about comparative reliability: thus, for preschool parent 3, her child's response determined which of two recommended nurseries would be trusted and used.

Parents similarly used complementary combinations over time. Forprofit chain parent 6 described a multi-layered “whole situation” which supported her trust. Dimensions such as child feedback, communication, personal relationships with staff and a lack of staff turnover were combined to offer an insight into the trustworthiness of the nursery:

[I trust]... because of my daughter’s happiness, because of the report I get, because of the communication we have, it’s a whole situation... the staff is... the same staff, it’s consistent... they will always go the extra mile asking... “how are you, how was your day... what do you do for Christmas...?”

*Differentiated combination:* as described in section 7.1.1, parents might seek multiple outcomes from provision. They might therefore invoke different bases of trust, each basis offering reassurance about a different outcome. Thus, for preschool parent 3, Ofsted oversight was an assurance of safety; recommendation and her child’s feedback created positive expectations about her child’s likely happiness.

*Confirmatory combination:* when choosing a nursery, many parents made a decision to trust based upon their own assessments or recommendation; this decision was then confirmed through reference to a further basis of trust. There was generally a clear hierarchy: the initial basis of trust was core to parents’ decisions; the confirmatory basis was secondary. Typically Ofsted reports fulfilled such a confirmatory function:

[I looked at the Ofsted report]... to confirm what I felt that I wanted to do, rather than the other way round. (social enterprise parent 5)

... I could see that the place was good for my daughter but also [through Ofsted] I had that kind of a little bit when you go to work and you have a contract, you’ve got something to lean on... (forprofit chain parent 6)

During the choice process there was a single case in which the confirmatory basis was as powerful as the initial decision to trust. Social enterprise parent 4 received a recommendation for the nursery after he had chosen to use it: this affirmation of his choice was a strong reassurance.

On an ongoing basis there were two contexts in which bases of trust were similarly invoked to confirm prior perceptions. First, in the early stages of use, parent observation and child feedback were often used to confirm whether the choice of nursery had been correct:

... what I saw [on the visit] I liked and then... they come home and you can tell whether they're happy or not. (nursery class parent 1)

... the look of my daughter, the way she was talking about it, I feel happy with it... oh, my instinct might be right. (forprofit chain parent 1)

In such cases the confirmatory basis of trust was often considered more robust than the initial basis on which a decision to use the nursery was founded:

... you learn a lot more... after you've sent your children there from how they feel, you can tell how they feel. (nursery class parent 1)

Second, where parents perceived some problem at the nursery, they might seek out extra information to confirm or refute their perceptions. The opinions of other parents might be sought as an additional basis of trust (p.205). Alternatively, as described in chpt 5 (p.166), a parent might make use of some kind of calculative approach to trust when an assessment of character or competence had proved unsatisfactory.

## **7.2 Actively constructing trust: assumptions about knowledge and intuition**

Within parents' accounts, there was heavy emphasis on direct assessment of providers' trustworthiness – whether through parents' observations of the exhibited professionalism of staff or through evaluation of children's feedback. As the following sections describe, this active construction of trust was in turn enabled by certain underlying assumptions and processes. First, parents generally held that it was possible to observe the quality of a nursery, and therefore to obtain meaningful knowledge which informed decisions around trust. Second, the evaluation of observations and experiences was frequently described by parents not as calculation or as a definable step-by-step cognitive process, but as 'instinct' or 'feeling'.

### **7.2.1 Observation, 'knowledge' and trust**

Within parents' accounts there was generally an assumption that the quality and even the outcomes of preschool provision might be observed and evaluated. This assumption underpinned parents' prominent emphasis upon their own active construction of trust, both during the choice process and as settings were used over time.

*'Knowledge' during the choice process*

Chapter 4 described how, even within a short visit during the choice process, many parents made observations not only of physical aspects of the nursery, but also of substantive dimensions of care, professionalism and even staff motivations and personalities. Frequently parents used phrases such as “you can tell” to express this capacity to acquire meaningful knowledge:

... you could tell that the kids... are enjoying it..., that they were... getting well developed..., that they knew what they were doing, people were looking after them in the right way. (forprofit chain parent 4)

I know kids... you can tell a mile away if they're not happy. (social enterprise parent 6).

... if you're relatively astute, you can... work out for yourself if it's a good one or a bad one. (preschool parent 4)

The forprofit chain manager similarly identified parents' capacity to make swift assessments:

You can't bluff parents through something like this because they can see things that are happening... even within a half an hour... show-round.

There was nonetheless awareness of the limitations of knowledge thus obtained. Physical aspects (such as cleanliness) could be readily observed and known. Uncertainty remained with regard to other aspects - a short visit could not provide comprehensive knowledge:

I'll find out as much as I can but it can never be 100% guarantee. (preschool parent 5)

... you can't know from a half hour visit, you can't know from a prospectus... it's hard for a school or a nursery... to say, “Oh trust us, we're fantastic.” You can't *prove* [emphasis], I suppose you... have to take a chance. (nursery class parent 1)

The act of using a nursery therefore remained some kind of leap of faith. But, while observation of the nursery did not bring certain knowledge, the knowledge thus obtained was a fundamental foundation for such a leap:

I don't think you can [know] fully... you get an idea and you hope that it... fulfils your expectation... you've got to take a leap of faith. (preschool parent 4)

... you can't be sure... but you get an idea. (nursery class parent 1)

The leap of faith into preschool use was more challenging for parents who did not have access to such knowledge. Forprofit chain parent 2 was unable to watch the nursery in operation, since she visited before it opened: because of this knowledge gap she pejoratively described her decision to use the setting as a ‘gamble’. Although integrated centre parent 1 was to some extent familiar with the centre through use of the drop-in, language barriers nonetheless limited her knowledge of the nursery. Her experience was of high anxiety; initial trust was difficult.

### *Knowledge over time*

As the nursery was used over time, meaningful knowledge about quality was perceived to become more attainable. Information might be gathered from child feedback, parents’ own observations and communication with staff, so that knowledge about both processes and outcomes was possible. Small details might reveal much:

... it’s easy for anybody to see... If you can’t even wipe a baby’s nose... then I’m really worried about other things. (forprofit chain parent 3)

The possibility of such meaningful knowledge was enhanced by iterative interactions:

If you... come in every day to the nursery, if you don’t see something today, you can see it tomorrow and the next day... (social enterprise parent 2)

The acquisition of knowledge might be instant or gradual. Children’s responses, in particular, enabled swift evaluation of the nursery: for some parents knowledge and trust were consequently immediate -

... you can say from the first day or second day, the nursery is good or no [sic].  
(integrated centre parent 1)

For others, trust was constructed gradually as experience grew over time:

... day after day we realised that the place was right... we couldn’t have known... from the beginning... (preschool parent 2)

... he have to stay at least... six months and you notice what is good... (nursery class parent 2)

There were occasional references to the limits of knowledge acquired over time. Preschool parent 4 acknowledged that he saw only ‘glimpses’ of nursery life – nonetheless glimpses were sufficient. Two parents were more pessimistic. For social

enterprise parent 1, who had used the provision for only a few weeks, the behaviour of staff behind closed doors was inherently unknowable. Social enterprise parent 4, unsettled by media reports about abuse at a nursery, questioned not only what could be known, but also his own trust:

... how would I know if something like that happened here... Well, I don't know, to be honest, but I just trust that's not happening. I mean, at the nursery I believe it's not happening.

For this parent, trust was a belief which had little grounding in knowledge:

I just trust... I don't know [why], but I trust it ... I think because I was supposed to trust it and that's why I trust it!

Most parents, however, believed that meaningful knowledge of the nursery was both possible and also sufficient to create a foundation for trust:

I know roughly what goes on... I'm happy with what I've seen. (integrated centre parent 4)

### **7.2.2 *Instinct and intuition***

Such descriptions of the construction of trust tend to imply a structured cognitive process from observation to analysis to inference. But for a significant number of parents their observations – particularly when choosing a setting - were assessed or mediated through an interpretative process which was variously termed 'feeling', 'instinct', 'intuition' or 'sixth sense':

Just a good feeling of... being comfortable. Knowing that my daughter will have a good time... (forprofit chain parent 6)

I just go on my intuition. (forprofit chain parent 3)

I'm a person who... feels with my instincts... (forprofit chain parent 1)

Such feelings were grounded in parents' responses to their observations of nurseries, staff and children. But the evaluative process by which impressions or feelings (and ultimately beliefs about trustworthiness) developed out of observations was difficult for parents to explain or identify. Forprofit chain parent 6, for instance, rejected a nursery because "there was something missing"; nursery class parent 4 described how -

... sometimes I don't even know why I have a good impression. It feels right...

Although instinct or ‘feeling’ was hard to explain, it was nonetheless of strong importance to a number of parents. When information was perceived to be scarce – especially at the moment of choosing a nursery - ‘instinct’ was a vital resource:

I don't think you can ever be sure. You go with your instincts... what I saw that day I liked and then you send your children. (nursery class parent 1)

Within some parents’ accounts there was a sense, moreover, that such feelings were more than simply a remedy for bounded rationality. ‘Instinct’ or feelings were a fundamental resource which reliably informed expectations of the future:

I can feel when my son is in a good hand and I can feel... when he is in a bad hand... maybe you find it strange but I had a very good feeling about this nursery. (social enterprise parent 2)

I tend to be right about my first impressions. (nursery class parent 4)

It was through ‘instinct’ that forprofit chain parent 1 concluded that she had found the right nursery and did not have to search further; similarly the instant affinity which forprofit chain parent 3’s husband felt towards staff was attributed to a ‘sixth sense’. Such reliable intuitions were occasionally attributed to a specific maternal instinct, a tangible skill which mothers naturally possessed. According to forprofit chain parent 6, maternal instinct generated her ‘sense of trust’ in staff:

when you are a mum, I think you know... It’s a natural instinct when you’re a mum, that’s how you become.

In consequence ‘instinct’ or feeling might sometimes be privileged over other analytic processes or external sources of information as a basis for trust. Nursery class parent 5 found reassurance about her daughter’s safety from abuse not in CRB checks, but in her ‘good feeling’ about the school. Social enterprise parent 6’s impressions as he walked around the nursery were central to his assessment:

I know... the curriculum and the rest of it is really important, but it’s the... first couple of minutes or even thirty seconds really tell you everything.

Parents occasionally distinguished between helpful and unhelpful feelings. Forprofit chain parent 1 believed that, as a young mother some years before, her fearful response to her child’s exhibited emotion had prevented appropriate evaluation of the nursery:

... I didn’t have any experience so when I put my child in nursery, I saw my child crying... I was afraid... it won’t matter if the nursery was good standard, all I was

thinking... [was] “oh, is he going to be happy here...?”... now I know that the most important thing is that you’ve got the right people to take care of your child...

The parent nonetheless emphasised the centrality of her ‘instincts’ when she chose the present provider.

One parent was more generally critical of feelings or emotional responses. She contrasted, unfavourably, her ‘emotive’ approach with the behaviour of her husband during a visit. He, a teacher, enquired about child development, activities and curriculum; she assessed the character of staff:

I wasn’t thinking about [the curriculum]. I was thinking..., “oh, I’m going to leave you, are you going to be all right with this person?” (forprofit chain parent 2)

Such affective assessment was held to be amusing and inferior:

[husband’s name] did all that kind of sensible questioning. I was more concerned about emotive things... (laughter)

The mother appeared to hold an embedded belief that ‘rational’ or technical enquiry was a more legitimate decision-making process than the ‘emotive’. The contrast between the approaches of mother and father also implies possible gender differences with regard to trust – a methodical assessment of technical competence by the father, an affective observation of benevolence and personality by the mother. The data is, however, insufficient for such an inference: other fathers showed no interest in the early years curriculum; the father’s approach is most obviously attributable to his profession.

‘Instinct’ or feelings were not necessarily a substitute for more structured ‘rational’ analysis. Often parents might describe parallel analytic processes: first, an explicit cognitive process of observation, evaluation and inference, so that, for instance, predictions about future performance might be directly formed from the adequacy of observed staff / child interactions; second, less tangible and more compressed interpretative processes through feeling or instinct. Such parallel processes powerfully underpinned parents’ active construction of trust.

### **7.3 Explaining variations in parents' approaches to trust**

Across parents' accounts there were variations in approaches to trust. Parents might prioritise different bases of trust, sometimes on account of diverse preferences. Other significant variations included the models of information collection used during the choice process, the extent of parents' activity as they collected information which supported trust, and the apparent depths of observation and assessment, both during the choice process and on an ongoing basis.

Such variations were associated, at least in part, with two sets of underlying variables. First, parents' ability to collect information to support decisions about trust was sometimes constrained by situational obstacles to information. Second, parents held individual understandings about trust and risk which informed their approaches. These themes are explored in turn.

#### ***7.3.1 Obstacles to information***

Previous chapters have described how information which supported decisions about trust might be derived from resources such as observation, recommendation, regulatory report or communication. Some parents faced obstacles which obstructed such collection of information. Three such obstacles are identified which particularly affected parents' approaches to trust: being a newcomer to a locality, facing some kind of disadvantage, and inexperience of preschool provision.

##### *Newcomers*

Almost half the parents were newcomers to the setting's locality. Some were from overseas; others were moving across London. They had sparse knowledge of local provision and were isolated from local networks:

I was new to the area. I didn't know anyone. (preschool parent 5)

I found it hard to get information to start with, to find crèches... cause I was new to the country. (preschool parent 3)

Such geographical mobility significantly affected approaches to trust. Newcomers, as noted in Chapter 4, had no immediate access to recommendations through social networks: they were thus deprived of the rich information which might be derived from

others' experiences. In addition, parents from overseas might be unsure about regulatory oversight:

... I am completely ignorant of [regulation] here... I've grown up with the Australian... system... but I haven't grown up with it [here]... (preschool parent 3)

Parents' responses to this situation were varied. Degree-educated, professional or managerial parents – including parents from black and minority ethnic backgrounds – were generally comfortable in relying on their own agency and observations. Preschool parent 3 nurtured connections through local networks, so that she obtained not only a recommendation, but also insight into the regulatory system. Other parents were content to proceed without recommendation, having confidence in their capacity to evaluate nurseries in the preschool market:

...we've had plenty of choice... we didn't need any more information than was our responsibility to observe and find out. (forprofit chain parent 5)

In these cases parents' status as newcomers underpinned a qualitatively different approach to trust which did not utilise recommendation; but there was no indication that the process was especially troubling.

There were contrasting experiences for a number of newcomers who faced some kind of disadvantage, all of whom had come to the UK as refugees and all of whom were of BME origin. Integrated centre parent 5 powerfully described her isolation before using preschool provision:

You are lonely... there is no friend...

Such isolation was compounded because she did not speak English. This language barrier prevented meaningful choice of a nursery; it also prevented communication with staff which, as previous chapters have indicated, might be central to trust:

I don't speak... English, so I can't choose nursery... everything is difficult.

... if I see something's wrong, I can't say it so I have to accept [it]...

There was a consequent powerlessness and a reluctance to engage with provision:

I don't know nothing... Information? I didn't know where to go... (integrated centre parent 5)

After the baby, [the outreach worker]... said to me, I have to go out... but I don't feel like it. (integrated centre parent 3)

In such a vulnerable situation, the outreach work of professionals from the local Sure Start centre supported parents' first steps towards trust in services for children. Integrated centre parent 3's relationship with an outreach worker, established during her pregnancy, supported her eventual engagement with services:

[The outreach worker] said... "Now you have to go [to the centre]"... I'm not going if she didn't go. She said, "Oh, we'll come together". She show me everything...

For such parents, the gradual development of familiarity with the integrated centre prior to preschool use was central (section 6.4.3). Where such familiarity was not developed, the disadvantaged newcomer lacked a foundation of experience upon which trust might be built, so that the early stages of use were traumatic:

The first time, you don't know the people, you don't know anything... it's very difficult... (integrated centre parent 5)

#### *Disadvantage and lower socio-economic status*

These contrasting responses to being a newcomer indicated how disadvantage might hinder trust. Both challenging circumstances (whether lone parenthood, experience of domestic violence or being a refugee) and more broadly lower socio-economic status were associated with barriers to information which might support trust. An association has already been observed between challenging circumstances or lower socio-economic status and a lack of awareness of regulatory systems (p.129). Weaker or less substantial recommendations (p.118) were also associated with some kind of disadvantage or circumstance which created a barrier to accessing social networks.

Further, while all parents actively constructed trust through their own observations, professional / managerial parents tended to be more proactive in assessing staff or seeking out communicative interactions which might support trust:

I talk to the teacher or I go to the special days, so I can see what's happening, how he interacts. I have my own ideas. (preschool parent 2)

The information collected by parents who faced disadvantage or who were from lower socio-economic groups occasionally seemed thin and their assessments less energetic. Nursery class parent 1's visit to the school was "not a big long visit". Social enterprise parent 3 described limited investigation both during the choice process and over time -

I just come and drop him and pick him up.

Sometimes the foundation for judgements about staff seemed weak or superficial:

I never had any problem with them... they smile... they open the door for me, “hello”, very friendly. (social enterprise parent 2)

Disadvantaged parents might also suffer from a lack of self-confidence, thus obstructing the relationships which might support trust. Social enterprise parent 2 was reluctant to communicate proactively with staff because “they are busy with kids”. For nursery class parent 3, recovering from domestic violence, interactions with the manager were initially challenging:

I always felt quite wary... cause she’s so knowledgeable... I’m unworthy sort of thing. But that was when my self-confidence was at its lowest.

Associations between disadvantage or lower socio-economic status and parents’ dynamism, however, were nuanced and not inevitable. Not all such parents described investigations which were limited or lacked depth. In some cases too the absence of detail within parents’ accounts might be explained by lack of fluency in English, which prevented rich descriptions in interview. The extent of parental activity might also be deceptive. Parents who trusted a nursery through prior familiarity with the institution (all of whom were of lower socio-economic status) often reported apparently limited investigations, especially during the choice process. But such reports disguised a lengthy engagement with the setting which underpinned trust. Perhaps most significantly, with experience and with the development of skills some disadvantaged parents became more dynamic and critical. Supported by increasing fluency in English, integrated centre parent 5’s approach to trust became more assertive:

because I speak English now... I’m more confident and I ask more questions. I’m not so quiet...

In consequence, the parent engaged in an active choice process when subsequently selecting a nursery class for her son: she purposefully sought recommendations from existing users, thereby creating her own access to rich information about the setting.

#### *Inexperience of preschool provision*

Inexperience of preschool use might present a barrier to the effective collection of information through parents’ own observations and assessments. Parents lacked a

resource of understanding to guide their activities. There might be, for instance, a lack of clarity about the function of ‘childcare’ or ‘preschool’:

... you don’t really know... what to ask... I mean, obviously it’s not a school.  
What will you be doing here? (integrated centre parent 4)

Because of uncertainty about the information which should be sought, focus might be upon superficial items, such as the nursery’s physical aspect:

I had no experience of leaving a child before so I didn’t really know what I was looking for... I was happy with the facilities in terms of the actual building and the rooms were all new... lots of things for the children to do. (forprofit chain parent 2)

Alternatively parents might turn to others for advice. Preschool parent 3 sought reassurance from other parents when her child was struggling to settle (p.205) because, as a first-time user, she had no experience of the situation. Integrated centre parent 4 similarly sought the views of others, a process which, with hindsight, she considered inferior to her own judgement:

...being a first-time parent... you do unfortunately take a lot of advice from other people... I wasn’t very confident so I couldn’t say, “oh, I’m happy with this and I want this”...

For this inexperienced parent, prior familiarity with the provider was reassuring:

... it was a comfort... that I knew where I was going to leave him. ...I was... nervous of taking him to a place that I didn’t know...

By contrast, through prior experience parents might obtain an understanding of preschool which supported confidence in their own assessments of trustworthiness. Thus integrated centre parent 4 – whose decisions about her first use of preschool were, as just observed, tentative and reliant upon others’ assessments - utilised very different strategies when making choices for her second child. She was confident in her understanding of the purpose of preschool and in her ability to assess child and staff behaviour; she was prepared to disregard the views of others “because I had lived through the experience”. Forprofit chain parent 1 also described the development, with experience, of the skills which enabled swift assessments of the nursery:

I know... signs that you look at in the nursery... if you’ve seen that before, you will know it is something you don’t want... to happen again.

Parents, finally, responded in different ways to using preschool provision for the first time. Forprofit chain parent 3 exhibited strong confidence in her capacity to assess the nursery and its staff. But forprofit chain parent 2, assessing the same nursery for a baby of similar age, was conscious of her inexperience and the limits of her observations. The parents appeared, simply, to have varied degrees of confidence in their own agency.

### ***7.3.2 Individual understandings of trust and risk***

Parents' approaches were in addition contingent on their individual understandings of trust. Variations in such understandings were not obviously attributable to parental circumstances, but seemed instead to be derived from personal worldviews, characteristics or needs. Three significant variations in understanding are identified below, each of which might have a strong effect upon parents' beliefs and behaviours.

#### *Perception of vulnerability*

Vulnerability is a precondition of trust: without vulnerability to some kind of harm, trust becomes redundant (p.42). For some parents, however, their perception of vulnerability was so pronounced that trust was especially challenging to attain. Occasionally trust was indeed impossible: parents exhibited distrusting behaviours or avoidance of a given activity.

For preschool parent 5 heightened perceptions of vulnerability and risk permeated her approach to preschool. The parent was fearful of the aggression of other children (p.142), and distrustful of any person from outside her family looking after her child. Even when a well-known family acquaintance provided care, the parent's continual monitoring indicated distrust:

I have a person who's been ... helping my husband's family for years and she's taking care of ... [my son]... it took me five months ... [of observing] her every single day, to make sure... even so, I sometimes drop in the house without telling on my lunchtime. I just come in and see what's happening...

Such heightened awareness of risk had an exceptional impact on the parent's behaviours as she chose provision. While no other parent visited more than six settings, she visited 15. Her observations were highly structured. Settings were subjected to three visits, each of which had a discrete rationale: first, observation of the local area and of the

behaviours of children and parents at drop-off or pick-up times (p.142); second, a visit by appointment to be shown around; and third, an unannounced spot-check of staff behaviours and nursery cleanliness. On an ongoing basis the parent's gathering of information, although not so obviously exceptional, remained comprehensive and structured. It included visits to the setting, continual questioning of staff and of her son, monitoring of the work her son brought home, and conversations with other parents:

... casually, I've talked to all of them....That's part of the research...

Trust in others' care was a challenging psychological state for this parent to attain. She required extensive information before she could experience any sense of positive expectation.

More often parents' heightened perceptions of vulnerability were focused upon a specific situation. Chapter 6 has described how some parents would not use nannies or childminders because children's vulnerability to abuse in such contexts was perceived to be too high (section 6.1). For integrated centre parent 5, it was the uncontrollable world outside the home and nursery which was threatening. As described in Chapter 5 (p.166), the external door to the nursery – the interface with this risky outside world - was a profound worry. This anxiety also undermined the possibility of any trust in nursery trips. The parent accepted their developmental value, but feared the perceived dangers. She preferred to accompany trips herself, even though she could ill-afford the costs of monitoring:

I don't want to go there but I have to go for my son... I'm a single mum. I have to clean the house..., go shopping... so I'm busy. [It's] difficult.

When first-hand monitoring was impossible, she sought to withdraw her son from a trip:

[the manager] say to me, there is no space [for the mother to accompany the trip].  
So... I bring him late [as] I don't want him to go. When I came here... they are waiting for me.

There were, finally, instances of an opposite dynamic. Parents occasionally perceived vulnerability to be reduced; trust, in consequence, became easier to attain. Such a dynamic was apparent when parents intended to use a setting for only a short time. A less rigorous process of information collection was therefore acceptable:

[the choice process] wasn't very detailed. I didn't go to ten schools or something... [It's] just to get her a bit of socialisation... it's... only for a short period because we're actually going... back to Australia. (preschool parent 3)

### *Interpretations of necessary activity*

When making a judgement about trust, there is a conundrum: how much information should be collected before a judgement is made (see p.66)? Parents described contrasting extents of activity. Variation was sometimes attributable to perceptions of vulnerability (p.218ff), to disadvantage and socio-economic status (p.215ff), or to familiarity with a setting: parents who trusted through prior familiarity tended not to visit other nurseries or to seek wider information during the choice process. There were, however, instances when variation in activity was not obviously explainable by parental characteristics or contexts: parents simply held different conceptions of the degree of agency necessary to support judgements about trustworthiness.

Particular variation in activity was exhibited during the choice process. As illustrated by the contrasting perspectives of two professional parents, the range of investigations showed marked variation:

we obviously checked on the internet... made sure that... we haven't missed anything, be quite careful about it. (social enterprise parent 6)

... we didn't research it in any depth, go online... we tend not to operate like that. (preschool parent 4)

There were also differences in the number of settings visited. Just under half of parents visited multiple settings, including five parents who visited four or more. The remaining parents visited only one. Again, such variation was not obviously attributable to dimensions such as occupational status, educational attainment or experience of preschool provision: within these categories there remained variation.

Explanations for such varied activity were not exclusively trust-related: a perceived lack of available provision prevented at least one parent from visiting multiple settings. However, parents' levels of activity did seem to indicate particular approaches to information collection and to trust. First, a decision to halt the choice process at an early stage indicated confidence in parents' own agency. Several parents at the forprofit

chain, despite an absence of recommendation, drew sufficient positive expectation from their own assessments so that they did not need to explore multiple nurseries:

I looked into another place... but by the time I'd... got all the contact details... I'd looked here and was satisfied... (forprofit chain parent 5)

Such confident decision-making was sometimes attributed to instinct or gut feeling (section 7.2.2 above).

Second, parents held different views about the extent of activity which was necessary and appropriate. For some, limited information collection was not only practical but preferable:

It's nice to know that you made the decision yourself without outside influence. (forprofit chain parent 4)

Other parents found reassurance from the comprehensiveness of their investigations. For nursery class parent 4 comfort was attained through “really thorough research”, which included visits to multiple settings and consultation of Ofsted reports and nursery prospectuses. Forprofit chain parent 2 experienced unease precisely because her choice process was not thorough and “not how we normally make decisions”. Integrated centre parent 4, despite having apparently decided to use the centre’s nursery, nonetheless visited other settings:

I had gone round to these other nurseries knowing you know, half-heartedly, “Oh, I don’t want him to go here”.

These visits seemed superfluous. But they conferred a necessary reassurance that the parent’s choice process was thorough and hence legitimate.

Over time, variation in the extent of parents’ activity was more subtle. There were nonetheless degrees of difference in the extent of communication with and monitoring of providers, as illustrated by the contrasting approaches of two parents at the forprofit chain nursery. Forprofit chain parent 5 did not purposively monitor the nursery:

I haven't really been sort of actively... testing everything and trying to trip them up or check on them.

His *laissez-faire* approach was justified by an underlying feeling, developed over time, that his child was content and cared for. By contrast, forprofit chain parent 3 undertook continual first-hand observations: she had over time made unarranged visits at most

times of the day. Further, there were moments when she actively manipulated a situation in order to trust. She would not, for instance, leave her child until specific workers were present:

... if there's none of the ones that I completely trust... I'll just hang on another five minutes...

The parent's behaviours indicated a need for a certain level of personal oversight; they also implied suspicion of aspects of the nursery. Both factors pushed her towards more extensive agency.

Parents, therefore, resolved the conundrum of how much information to collect in various ways, according to individual interpretations of the activity necessary to underpin trust. In consequence the collection of information was more involved and challenging for some parents than for others.

#### *Views of the state*

Finally, parents pre-existing views about the state might affect their approaches to trust. Parents, for instance, held contrasting beliefs about government regulation as a source of reassurance (section 4.3). Such contrasts were perhaps attributable to cultural background: the most powerful affirmation of state oversight was offered by a French parent (preschool parent 2), and the most vehement dismissal by a South African (forprofit chain parent 3). Alternatively, preschool parent 4's scepticism about Ofsted was informed by his wife's experiences as a teacher.

The effect of prior beliefs was especially visible in the contrasting understandings of parents who received places from social services. For integrated centre parent 1 and social enterprise parent 2, the involvement of state social services implied the trustworthiness of a nursery (p.119). In sharp contrast, social enterprise parent 1 was sceptical of state involvement and suspicious of social services. She was thus profoundly doubtful about the quality of the placement. She believed that there was little incentive for the nursery to be responsive to social services clients (p.120), and that state provision (her incorrect designation of the social enterprise) was inherently inferior (p.183). She held, further, a deep suspicion of the partnership between the

nursery and statutory authorities. The nursery was perceived to monitor parents on behalf of social services<sup>40</sup>. Such monitoring created barriers to a trusting relationship:

... are they really keeping an eye on the child or... the parent...? ...people have told me... you shouldn't go there because ..... they watch you...

In this context the parent perceived a chain of nurseries to be threatening. The structure of a chain enabled information about the parent to be shared widely, so that statutory agencies might exercise 'control':

... it's a way for them to have... control of families... if I was to go elsewhere with my kids, they would already know about me... the question is, do I like that? Do I want everyone to know my business...?

Such suspicions influenced her interpretation of ongoing experience, so that a desultory show-round (p.132) was a confirmatory signal of the poor quality of state provision, and so that any glimpses of the nursery's beneficial impact upon her children were summarily rejected:

... my kids can say big words like I don't even use on... a daily basis. I don't know how they get it, certainly not from here.

The parent, therefore, distrusted not only the competence of provision, but also the benevolence of staff towards her family. Nonetheless the placement was too valuable to refuse. An expectation that her child would at least be safe was sufficient to support use of the nursery as respite care.

### ***7.3.3 Explaining variations: concluding thoughts***

There were, therefore, varied contexts and individual perspectives which caused trust in settings to be more or less straightforward to attain, and which affected how trust was achieved and the priority accorded to specific bases. Parents' varied approaches were attributable both to situational variables and to individual understandings of trust, risk and appropriate agency. Particular effects upon parents' trust might result from interactions between variables: being a newcomer appeared to be traumatic for some disadvantaged parents, but not for professional / managerial parents; inexperience hindered the development of trust, but the effect was moderated when parents were

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<sup>40</sup> This suspicion was not unfounded. The nursery monitored and reported the behaviours of parents who received social services places – for instance, whether they delivered their child punctually each morning.

especially confident in their personal agency. Finally, behaviours which appeared *prima facie* similar might admit subtly distinct explanations. As an example, limited information collection when choosing provision might indicate a parent who was isolated from information sources, a confident parent who felt able to halt the choice process at an early stage, or a parent who had grown familiar with a provider through long association before preschool use.

#### **7.4 The extent of parents' trust in preschool provision**

Given the multiple bases of trust which parents used, their strategies for negotiating and ordering such bases, and the variations in their approaches, there is a final fundamental question: to what extent did parents indeed trust the preschool setting which they used?

Evaluating the extent of parents' trust is not unproblematic. There is an immediate conceptual controversy: can there be 'extents' of trust? One parent did not consider that it was meaningful to conceive of degrees of trust:

I trust them and that's it ... it's not like... they've done something that would make me trust them more or... trust them less. I just trust... (social enterprise parent 4)

Most parents, however – as the following sections describe - believed that trust might grow, become 'stronger' or, indeed, weaken: it was possible to trust more or less. Consideration of the extent of trust also encounters some of the difficulties inherent in empirical investigation of the topic. Parents' assessments did not always fit with their described behaviours. Forprofit chain parent 3, for instance, considered her ongoing trust to be 'so complete... there's not very much more they could do'. Yet her behaviours towards staff and the nursery suggested significant distrust in aspects of provision. Parents' terminology around trust might also cause anomalies. Forprofit chain parent 4 described his trust when choosing the nursery as 'complete'; however, following observation of the professionalism of staff, he trusted a 'a bit more'. To understand the extent of trust, therefore, it is necessary to explore not only parents' assertions but also, importantly, their nuanced behaviours and the mix of strategies they utilised in order to negotiate uncertainty in the preschool transaction.

Such exploration reveals that the extent of parents' trust was multidimensional and fluid. Section 7.4.1 presents a qualitative typology which explores this complexity and

identifies patterns and contrasts. Within this typology there is an evident temporal dimension: in the absence of disruptive problems, parents generally described a growth in trust as they used a nursery. Section 7.4.2 describes this typical ‘trust journey’. Finally, parents were prepared to make compromises around trust – to trust enough, rather to trust perfectly. Such trust ‘satisficing’ is considered in section 7.4.3.

#### ***7.4.1 The extent of parents’ trust: a typology***

The extent of parents’ trust, as exhibited in their accounts of current and previous preschool use, was varied and fluid. It was contingent upon time and circumstances, and also upon parents’ preferences and understandings of trust. Parents might mix trusting and distrusting behaviours; they might trust a nursery to accomplish one outcome but not another. Parents’ trust, therefore, did not conform to a simple continuum of ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ trust. Instead, the extent of trust is exhibited as a qualitative typology in table 7.2.

##### *Habitual trust*

Parents, after an extended period of use, often developed strong positive expectations of a nursery’s reliability. With familiarity over time, and in the absence of serious problems, trust might become habitual:

I don't ask myself the question... “Do I trust the people here or not?”... [I] intuitively feel... that he's going to look forward to coming here, he's going to be safe here, he's going to be looked after... when I pick him up he's obviously had... a good time, likes the people and that's been the case... for such a long time ... as I say I don't ask... myself the question. (forprofit chain parent 5)

Such habitual trust was indicated by two characteristics. First, while parents might continue to assess their child’s happiness and to interact with staff, they did not engage in purposive monitoring or investigation of the nursery to collect information about its trustworthiness. Second, descriptions of trust were emphatic; expectations were characterised by an absence of doubt:

... the question is... do I have some confidence and trust and I think I do now. I do definitely. (forprofit chain parent 5)

I absolutely trust that everybody’s doing as much as they can. (social enterprise parent 5)

**Table 7.2: The extent of parents' trust in preschool provision: a typology**

	<b>Extent of positive expectations</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Examples of typical conditions</b>
<b>Habitual trust</b>	Strong	Expectations certain: trust not questioned Limited monitoring	Over time Familiarity No breaches
<b>Managed trust</b>	Varied	Expectations not certain Proactive monitoring and assessment	Early stages Heightened perception of vulnerability
<b>Contingent trust</b>	Strong, weak or none	Trust in one dimension but not another	Early stages Specific breach of trust or difficulty
<b>Damaged trust</b>	Weak	Suspicion of nursery's benevolence / competence / integrity Primary trust bases fail; secondary bases invoked	Serious breach of trust relating to central preference Some reason for continuing at provider
<b>Distrust</b>	Weak or none	No engagement with provision, exit, extensive monitoring or unhappiness	Serious breach of trust relating to central preference Heightened perception of vulnerability Social isolation

The strength of positive expectation could be inferred not only from such assertions but also from reported behaviours. Several parents resolved to retain their children at a nursery despite contrary temptations. The rejection of more convenient options indicated a depth of trust in the current provision:

I had the chance to apply for a nursery place at my son's school... it would be so much... easier to have them both together... I thought, "... what you doing? You didn't do that for your son, don't do it for your daughter." (integrated centre parent 4)

### *Managed trust*

In some circumstances, parents' positive expectations of a setting were supported by proactive interventions and monitoring: trust was actively managed through purposive behaviours and assessments. Such a dynamic was characteristic of the early stages of use, when parents checked their decision to choose a setting through the use of confirmatory combinations of bases of trust (p.206). Some parents were especially active in seeking out such confirmation through direct monitoring of the setting, through careful assessment of child feedback, or through conversations with other parents:

... when my daughter she start... I came from time to time to sit ...to see what's going on, to see how she's playing... how the staff look at her... (integrated centre parent 1)

At the beginning I talked to other people to see what they thought... Everyone seemed to be very happy... (forprofit chain parent 5)

The settling-in period was a valuable context in which the nursery's trustworthiness might be actively assessed:

What that first settling-in week does was confirming what I thought... if I at that stage realised, "oh no, I made a mistake", I would have pulled out immediately. (forprofit chain parent 3)

There was a sense that, during these early stages, trust was not yet robust. Parents held positive expectations of the nursery, but required corroborative information about the nursery's behaviours and the child's responses.

Less frequently parents continued proactive interventions on an ongoing basis. Preschool parent 5 monitored the nursery comprehensively - a behaviour associated with her heightened awareness of vulnerability (p.218ff). Forprofit chain parent 3 also purposively monitored the nursery over time; in addition, being distrustful of specific staff, she actively managed situations in order to establish sufficient trust to leave her child (p.222). In these cases ongoing expectations of the nursery were not habitual, but founded upon proactive management and monitoring. Despite the assertion of both parents that their trust was strong, these behaviours implied a certain level of distrust.

### *Contingent trust*

As noted earlier in this chapter, parents might desire multiple outcomes from preschool. In some cases parents held positive expectations that the setting would achieve certain outcomes but not others: parents, in other words, simultaneously trusted and distrusted. Such contingent trust was sometimes visible in the early stages of preschool use. There might be sufficient information to support trust in one dimension, but not another:

I knew that she'd be safe. I didn't know... she'd be happy. (forprofit chain parent 2)

Social enterprise parent 1 held no positive expectations about the quality of care:

[I] don't expect them to... wipe my child's nose every minute, even though I think they should...

She held, however, sufficient trust in the nursery's cleanliness and safety to enable its use as respite care:

... in terms of keeping the place clean, which is really important... I'm happy...

Alternatively, over time parents might perceive a difficulty around a specific outcome. Thus, integrated centre parent 5, while trusting the nursery with regard to her daughter's care and happiness, was distrustful of its security (p.166) and the safety of trips (p.219).

Finally, trust might be contingent not only upon outcomes, but also upon different characteristics of the nursery. Forprofit chain parent 3, for instance, trusted some staff but distrusted others (p.160). In addition, during the nursery's period of management instability, she distrusted the nursery chain's wider management, while maintaining trust in frontline staff with whom she was familiar:

... although you don't get on with them [the wider management]... what's happening here depends on the manager... and the staff... I only stayed here because of some of the staff... my child still has that one or two he can count on...

The parent's contingent trust caused her to actively monitor and intervene in the nursery, so that contingent and managed trust were complementary states.

### *Damaged trust*

Occasionally parents might continue to use a setting even though some serious breach of trust had occurred. In this situation of damaged trust there was not only a reduction in the extent of trust, but a qualitative shift to some alternative basis of expectation.

Thus, after the incident in which her son's eyes were splashed with chlorinated water, integrated centre parent 4 moved from a state of habitual trust, underpinned by familiarity and 'rapport', to a calculation of the constraints and incentives which might affect the nursery's behaviour (p.166). Nursery class parent 2, after observing unsafe practice (p.167), relied more heavily on monitoring and watchfulness. Both parents in some way continued to expect that the preschool placements would provide desired outcomes. Such expectations were not, however, derived from any sense of the intrinsic benevolence or competence of the settings, but were grounded in perceptions about how unreliable behaviours might be controlled – whether through external constraints or through supervision. Such a derivation of expectation was not comfortable for the parents, since an underlying disquiet remained about the provider's conduct. Such damaged trust was, perhaps, akin to managed or functional distrust.

### *Distrust*

Parents sometimes held no positive expectations of a setting. Such distrust might originate from contrasting conditions and exhibit different symptoms. First, the social isolation of some disadvantaged parents underpinned a suspicion which obstructed engagement with preschool or other services. Second, distrust might result from some significant breach of reliability with regard to a desired outcome. Often parents consequently removed their child from the provision. If a parent continued to use a nursery in such a condition of distrust, there might be emotional trauma: the distrust was not functional. Nursery class parent 3, for instance, was distressed at leaving her unhappy son at a nursery; the situation was not sustainable, and the child was removed. Third, distrust might be associated not with a nursery's performance, but with a parent's own heightened sense of vulnerability. For preschool parent 5 any sense of positive expectation was hard to attain (p.218ff). Preschool use was, in the case of both her family childminder and a previous nursery, facilitated by extensive monitoring and spying – activities which were expressive of her distrust.

A typology of this kind tends to imply clear-cut boundaries between ideal-types of trust. Parents' trust was less precise. There was a blurred boundary, for instance, between managed trust and habitual trust: the development of habitual trust was gradual, so that there was no defining moment when parents ceased to make active assessments of trustworthiness. The extent of parents' trust was also fluid. It might change, in

particular, over time: managed or contingent trust might be characteristic of the early stages of preschool use; as familiarity with a provider grew, parents often moved from managed to habitual trust. The effect of time is explored further in the next section.

#### **7.4.2 Trust journeys: the growth of trust over time**

Parents generally recognised a temporal dimension to the extent of their trust. Trust grew as a nursery was used over time:

I probably trust them more now.... [when] the child's been here longer, you... learn to trust them more... you're always a bit cautious to start with... (preschool parent 3)

I feel more comfortable now... with him here, than I did even at the beginning - and I was fairly happy... at the start. (preschool parent 4)

Time, indeed, was identified as a necessary condition for the evolution of trust:

... [trust] just has to evolve over time... (forprofit chain parent 2)

... trust is something that you build up over time. (social enterprise parent 5)

This development of trust can be traced through three stages of choice and use, so that a typical 'trust journey' can be identified. First, during the choice process parents drew inferences about settings' trustworthiness; however, given the limitations of the knowledge acquired, the decision to trust was perceived as a 'leap of faith' (p.208). Second, during the early stages of use, parents moved through a process of managed trust, whereby additional information was actively sought to confirm initial decisions to trust. Finally, trust generally grew as settings were used over an extended period, so that eventually a state of habitual trust might be attained. Such growth was supported by the acquisition of meaningful knowledge of the setting, and by the development of relationships with staff. In addition, parents commonly identified the absence of problems as a prominent explanation for the growth of trust. As long as trust was not disappointed, it was strengthened:

my children... haven't had any bad experiences or anything that I've had to... sort out... because nothing like that happens your trust does develop over the years. (nursery class parent 1)

I have never saw any signs that would make me worry [sic]... [I] worry about everything... [because] I just didn't find a reason to really worry, it was a good sign. (nursery class parent 4)

Finally, as well as the active acquisition of knowledge, there was some evidence that trust grew through a more passive process of acclimatisation: parents and children became accustomed to the setting, its staff and the idea of preschool itself:

[trust grew] because I'm getting used to the idea and the people and my boy as well. (integrated centre parent 3)

The typical trust journey is exemplified by the accounts of forprofit chain parent 5 and preschool parent 2. Forprofit chain parent 5's initial use of the provision was supported by the 'good impression' which he received when he visited the nursery during the choice process: staff appeared to be professional and committed (p.135); a deputy manager used the nursery for her own child, which provided reassurance to the parent (p.117); other children appeared happy. Yet it was 'difficult' to know the nature of the setting at this moment. There followed, in the initial stages of nursery use, a period of managed trust. The parent purposively collected additional information about the nursery through active checking and investigation: he undertook unannounced visits, during which he observed the operation of the nursery and his son's interactions (p.191); he sought the views of other parents 'to see what they thought' (p.227). Subsequently such deliberate investigations ceased. Over time his trust was supported by ongoing communicative and personalised relationships with nursery workers, such as his 'banter' with staff (p.174) and his perception of the special care which they showed to his son (p.175). Trust was based too upon an ongoing perception of his son's happiness and of the continuing professionalism of staff – perceptions which were drawn not from purposive monitoring, but from a general 'sense' of the nursery derived from frequent interactions and growing familiarity. In this context trust resembled a "continuous state" (Giddens 1990: 32) rather than an active decision. Despite occasional concerns about the turnover of staff (p.196), the parent's trust became habitual and emphatic (p.225).

The bases of trust utilised by preschool parent 2 sometimes contrasted with those used by forprofit chain parent 5: there was, for instance, a focus upon the role of government which forprofit chain parent 5 did not share. Nonetheless similar stages of a trust journey can be identified. Preschool parent 2's initial step to nursery use was facilitated by a perception that, at the least, the nursery was regulated by the government; she drew positive inferences about the professionalism of staff from her visit to the nursery and

from recommendations received from other parents. Nonetheless at this initial moment of use she conceded, in common with forprofit chain parent 5, that the nature of the provision could not be easily known:

*[interviewer]:* Do you think it was easy to tell that [the preschool] was going to provide those things that you wanted?

Maybe not from the beginning, no... you always have to try things.

The initial stage of ‘trying things’ was again characterised by a process of managed trust. The settling-in process provided insights into the nursery and its staff; her son’s ‘special day’ at the preschool, to which the parent was invited, was a significant moment when the parent could evaluate the nursery and her son’s response to it (p.191); the parent also carefully monitored her son’s emotional responses. After these initial moments of active investigation there was a gradual progression to a more habitual trust, supported both by experience accumulated “day after day” (p.209) and by a developing relationship with the manager. The contrast between the starting-point and end-point of the trust journey – and in particular the importance of knowledge of the nursery accumulated over time - was eloquently captured by the parent:

[We trust the nursery]... because we know more. At the beginning I was just a mum among others. Now I’m a mum who had already a son with them.

The state of habitual trust which both parents attained should not, finally, be interpreted as inertia. Both parents continued to engage in communication with staff and to be sensitive to the happiness and development of their respective children.

Not all parents’ journeys followed this typical course. The journey might be disrupted by problems; as Chapter 5 described, these might be powerful moments when trust was boosted or eroded. Thus forprofit chain parent 3’s trust had been disturbed by managerial instability and communication problems. The trust journey had been turbulent:

[my trust] did go down, but it picked up and I’m happy again.

The trajectory of integrated centre parent 4’s trust journey was dramatically altered by contingent events. As already observed, the parent had, through experience of the centre’s drop-in and nursery and through growing familiarity with staff (p.189-190), gradually achieved a state of habitual trust. Such habitual trust was shattered by the chlorinated water incident (p.165-166), and replaced by suspicion and calculation – a

state of damaged trust (p.229). The parent in this context returned to the beginning of the trust journey. Her expectations of the nursery's reliability, now low, had to be rebuilt through her observations and judgements of the integrated centre's exhibited professionalism and behaviours. Ultimately trust was reconstructed sufficiently so that she sent her second child to the setting.

The course of a trust journey was dependent too on individual approaches. Not all parents, for instance, undertook proactive monitoring in the early stages of preschool use. By contrast some parents, such as forprofit chain parent 3 and preschool parent 5 (p.227 above), continued to monitor nurseries proactively over time: such parents did not achieve the final transition of the trust journey from managed trust to a state of habitual trust. The rate of trust growth was also affected by parents' interpretations of their observations: for some parents trust grew swiftly after they had used a nursery for only a few days; more often trust grew gradually with extended experience (p.209).

There is the possibility, finally, that parents' trust journeys might follow different trajectories at different types of organisation. There are two explicit findings in this respect. First, as section 6.4.3 has described, parents at the integrated centre built up knowledge and trust in the nursery prior to use through extended interactions with other services at the same site. Through familiarity with the centre and the development of relationships with its staff, the decision to use the nursery became straightforward: a strong, even habitual, trust was achieved before nursery use.

Second, the extent of staff turnover at the forprofit chain nursery created a heightened probability of a turbulent trust journey. As Chapter 6 described, hard-won familiarity with nursery workers might dissipate if staff departed (p.195). In the most dramatic case an emotional bond, central to trust, was lost when a manager left her post (p.176). In these cases there was disruption to the trust journey, so that there was a movement from a habitual trust to a renewed process of monitoring and active investigation – a situation, in other words, of managed trust. If staff turnover was unexplained parents might experience a particular sense of unease and a reduction in trust (p.196).

Aside from these findings, parents' trust journeys were similar across different organisations. A progression through initial stages of active investigation and managed

trust to a more habitual state of trust was visible in parents' accounts at all organisations. Such journeys, as indicated earlier, were a product of time: as time passed, so familiarity with the provision grew and relationships with staff developed. Serious problems which disrupted trust were also reported at all types of organisation. Parents identified such problems at the forprofit chain nursery and at the integrated centre in the present study; in describing prior preschool experiences, parents further identified disruptive problems at a nursery class, a third sector preschool and a third sector social enterprise. In this context the course of the trust journey seemed to be associated with the behaviours of individual organisations - and of individual workers within organisations - rather than specifically with organisational 'type'.

### ***7.4.3 A satisficing approach to trust***

Within the typology presented above, there are opposing states of habitual trust and distrust - the former characterised by a strong and certain trust, the latter by the absence of trust. Other states (managed, contingent and damaged trust) implied a functional compromise – a trust (or managed distrust) which was not optimal, but sufficient. In this sense the accounts of many parents indicated a satisficing, and not a maximising, approach to trust<sup>41</sup>. Positive expectations about a setting's reliability were not as certain or comprehensive as parents might wish - but they were sufficient to support the desired function of preschool use.

Numerous examples of satisficing behaviour have already been described – for instance, parents' continued use of settings despite severe damage to their trust, or a parent's discrimination between trusted and distrusted staff. This idea of satisficing was particularly explicit in the narrative of forprofit chain parent 2. The parent was uncomfortable about the limitations of her choice process (see p.188). Nonetheless, the process supported a qualified trust which was sufficient to enable nursery use. Her decision to use the nursery was further supported by a belief that, if such qualified trust was misplaced, exit was possible:

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<sup>41</sup> The term 'satisficing' is borrowed from Simon's observation that economic actors do not always seek to maximise profit, but may simply desire a 'satisfactory return'. They may, in other words, operate a 'satisficing' strategy (Simon 1959: 262).

I was satisfied enough that this was going to be okay... it could be a short-term measure. If I didn't like it, I might change.

Later the parent's trust was undermined by the departure of the nursery manager and by management instability (p.176). Yet there remained sufficient trust that at least her central desired outcome – the happiness of the child – would be achieved:

... I don't always like everything myself, [but] she's quite content, so that's why she's still here.

Trust was not optimal or comprehensive, but was adequate to permit continued preschool use.

A satisficing approach to trust might require moderation of aspirations. Parents, for instance, might accommodate a situation in which there were specific staff whom they did not trust; forprofit chain parent 5, whose trust was strong and habitual, nonetheless had to accept the nursery's reliance upon supply staff, a strategy with which he was not at ease. Most obviously, social enterprise parent 1 gave up any expectation of child development; she focused only upon her child's safety and happiness (p.228). Through her adoption of lowered aspirations, the breadth of trust required to enable preschool use was narrowed and hence more attainable. The desired endpoint – use of a nursery for respite care – thus remained possible.

Such renegotiation of aspirations and preferences raises a further possibility. Might there be moments when, given a pressing need to use provision, the basis of parents' trust was moderated or negotiated in such a way that trust was akin to wishful thinking? There were, indeed, compelling incentives to use a specific nursery, and therefore to ignore evidence which might undermine trust:

I didn't want the upheaval of her changing childcare after just getting established...  
(forprofit chain parent 2)

... this arrangement is very convenient for me, be very inconvenient if I found something wrong! (forprofit chain parent 5)

Preschool parent 4 proposed that some parents might ignore evidence of poor provision. He removed his child from a nursery because of bad practice, but other parents did not:

... they all said, oh yeah, we noticed that, but there is a tendency to let it go maybe cause it's convenient.

Wishful thinking is difficult to identify empirically, since parents are likely to present coherent *post facto* explanations and justifications for their conduct. Within the current study there was no explicit evidence of wishful thinking – of trusting, in other words, despite contrary evidence. Nonetheless, given that trust was often founded upon parents' own observations of settings and their evaluation of their child's emotions, there were obvious opportunities for subtle bias in the interpretation of information. Sometimes parents, for instance, appeared uncritical in accepting positive information about a setting – whether in their interpretation of child feedback, or their belief in descriptions of nursery life provided by staff. Bias in parents' assessments cannot be ruled out.

The incentive to wishful thinking was strong for parents who had been allocated provision by social services, since the placement was the only available option for essential respite. Two such parents did not, indeed, provide rich or detailed accounts of their trust: trust was founded upon a faith in the decisions and involvement of social services (p.119). The response of social enterprise parent 1 was more complex. Her doubts about the nursery and her need for respite care were tangibly in tension:

... what am I going to do? Not take my kids to nursery because I'm worried all the time?

Her use of the valuable nursery place was facilitated by lowered aspirations and a satisficing approach to trust. In addition, trust, being in a sense enforced, became imbued with a certain fatalism:

I can't control what goes on when I'm turning my back from my kids. I just have to trust other people to do it. Do you know what I mean?

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter completes the empirical portrayal of parents' trust in preschool provision. It has explored the strategies and assumptions which supported parents' judgements around trust. There are a number of insights. First, the multiple outcomes which parents desired from provision were associated with multiple approaches to trust: expectations about a setting's reliable production of a specific outcome might require a specific basis of trust. Second, parents prioritised certain bases of trust, so that recommendation (where available), parents' own observations of settings and child

feedback were privileged as core bases. The underpinning role of regulation was also significant, a finding of relevance to policy. Third, parents combined bases of trust in different ways to achieve different functions at different moments.

Underpinning parents' approaches was a significant assumption about knowledge. Parents tended to believe (although to differing extents) that the quality of preschool provision was observable and knowable. This belief in the possibility of obtaining meaningful knowledge about a nursery was an essential precondition for parents' active construction of trust. Parents' intuitions, particularly during the choice process, were also held to be a valued resource in establishing a belief about the nursery.

The chapter explored variation in parents' accounts of trust. Variation was partly attributable to situational factors which obstructed access to information. Sometimes such barriers did not appear harmful – professional / managerial parents were not obviously disturbed by the absence of recommendation. At other times, where barriers to information were associated with inexperience or, in particular, disadvantage, trust (and hence preschool use) became challenging. Variation in parents' approaches was also attributable to individual perceptions of trust. Parents held different conceptions of the activity necessary to ascertain the trustworthiness of providers, and different beliefs about state institutions or provision. For some a heightened awareness of vulnerability was a considerable barrier to the attainment of trust.

Drawing on insights from this and preceding chapters, the final section presented a qualitative typology of the extent of parents' trust. Some parents held strong positive expectations of providers. Trust typically grew over time, so that, in the absence of problems and with the growth of familiarity with the setting, trust became habitual.

But sometimes the extent of trust was not so complete. Parents might trust only certain aspects of provision; trust might have been damaged by past problems; it might be less robust in the early stages of use. Some parents therefore, in order to use provision, utilised a mix of trusting and distrusting strategies. Often parents, at different times and for different reasons, were content to trust enough rather than to trust completely.

## **8 Trust and preschool provision: discussion and policy implications**

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This final chapter discusses and draws conclusions from the findings of the empirical investigation. The study has, as described in Chapter 3, sought to understand the dynamics of trust through qualitative interviews with a small selection of parents in a single locality. The benefits of an in-depth exploration of this kind were confirmed as the study progressed. Qualitative interviews produced rich and detailed accounts of parents' experiences and perceptions around trust. Through such accounts the dynamic and multi-dimensional process of trust construction could be traced, both within the choice process and as parents used provision over time. Nuanced perceptions, meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions became apparent within parents' narratives as interviews progressed. The interview process also enabled identification of the sometimes complex combinations and hierarchies of bases of trust which parents used, and of subtle variations between the approaches of different parents.

The study has uncovered a range of empirical findings which support analytical understanding of trust in the preschool field and which carry implications for theory, policy and practice. The first part of this concluding chapter (section 8.1) draws upon such findings to develop theoretical explanations of parents' trust in preschool provision. In so doing it focuses on the study's primary research question – the bases upon which parents trust provision. It further explores empirical insights into the nature of trust (research question 2), and considers to what extent parents can indeed be said to trust provision (research question 4). Within these sections the study's findings are related back to the theoretical themes and debates about trust presented in Chapter 2; in addition innovative links are made to literature on care and on intuitive reasoning which have not typically been associated with explanations of trust.

Drawing upon these theoretical explanations and insights, the second part of the chapter (section 8.2) considers preschool policy and practice. In the light of concerns about the impact upon trust of welfare service reform (Chapter 1), the section explores how preschool institutions and practices supported, impeded or interacted with parents' trust. There is specific focus upon parents' trust in organisations (research question 3). Implications for public policy and organisational practice are identified as appropriate.

## **8.1 Parents' trust in preschool provision**

The study's primary research question sought to understand the basis upon which parents trusted preschool provision (research question 1). This section brings together empirical findings from preceding chapters and the theoretical conceptions of trust introduced in Chapter 2 to offer a number of conclusions. It begins by identifying the significance of the nature of the preschool transaction as an antecedent factor which framed the production of trust (section 8.1.1). Section 8.1.2 discusses a central emerging theme – that parents' trust was actively constructed through the collection of information about providers and that, as a corollary, trust was earned (or lost) through providers' 'exhibited professionalism'. Such active trust was a dynamic process, an important effect being the development of familiarity with a provider which supported trust (section 8.1.3). The study also offers insights into the nature and process of parents' trust (research question 2): section 8.1.4 discusses such broader insights, considering specifically the relationship of trust and rationality; it evaluates the applicability of propositions about the nature of trust in theoretical literature, thus refining understandings of the concept. Variation between parents in their approaches to trust is discussed in section 8.1.5, with particular reference to associations between a state of disadvantage and parents' approaches. The section concludes (section 8.1.6) by considering whether parents indeed trusted preschool, or whether they made use of some functional equivalent in order to engage with provision (research question 4).

### ***8.1.1 Setting the scene for trust: the preschool transaction and its interpretation by parents***

The dynamics of parents' trust in preschool provision cannot be fully understood without acknowledgement of a significant set of antecedent factors. The study revealed how both the nature of the preschool transaction and also, importantly, parents' *interpretations* of the nature of the transaction framed the process of attaining trust. Three dimensions are identified.

#### *Multiple qualities: what are providers trusted to do?*

The proposition that quality is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon in the preschool field, as in welfare services more broadly, is not new. But the implications for trust of such complexity have not been adequately acknowledged. Chapter 2

(section 2.2.3) raised the possibility that such multidimensionality of quality might have an impact on the dynamics of trust, and parents' approaches to trust were indeed associated with and affected by the outcomes which they desired (section 7.1.1). Different outcomes might demand different bases of trust, so that the multidimensionality of quality implied the multidimensionality of trust: expectations that a child would be safe, for instance, required a different set of trust bases from expectations that she/he would be happy. There were a number of consequent implications. First, there were instances of 'contingent trust', when parents held positive expectations that a provider would achieve certain outcomes but not others (p.228): parents trusted and distrusted simultaneously. Second, changes in parents' preferences might affect approaches to trust (p.200-201). This is a relevant finding in the preschool context, given that desired outcomes may be fluid as children move through developmental stages towards entry into school. Finally, it is possible that regulatory interventions, rather than crowding out interpersonal trust, simply respond to different aspects of quality. In order to understand the nuance and complexity of parents' trust in preschool provision, it is thus necessary to unpick which specific functions providers are trusted (or not) to perform, and on what basis.

Further, parents' approaches to trust were affected by the specific outcomes which they prioritised: bases of trust were privileged if they were perceived to offer reassurance about a key preference (p.201). Two particular effects are noteworthy. First, all parents prioritised their children's happiness, so that those bases of trust which offered reassurance in this regard (such as children's feedback) were privileged. Second, a number of parents were concerned about peer group effects. They consequently assessed not only the trustworthiness of providers, but also the trustworthiness of fellow users: trust in preschool provision was a broader phenomenon than trust in providers' behaviours alone.

### *Care and trust*

A second antecedent factor which framed parents' approaches to trust was their understanding of 'care'. Chapter 2 described the attributes of another about which an actor might seek reassurance: three such dimensions of trustworthiness – competence, benevolence and integrity – were identified (Mayer et al. 1995: 719). Both the significance which parents accorded to these dimensions, and also how these

dimensions were construed, were influenced by parents' understandings of 'care' and caring work. Such interpretations in turn affected how trust was attained.

First, trust could not flourish where there was profound incongruence between parents' values and their perceptions of the care which providers offered. In such cases providers' ethical integrity became a fundamental problem. In particular some parents considered nursery-based care of babies to be distasteful; a perceived emphasis on money-making might also breach parents' ethical understandings of care. In such instances of fundamental value incongruence, as Sitkin and Roth (1993) suggest, there was little possibility of trust, and parents in the current study chose not to use the particular settings.

Second, there was a desire that providers should not only look after children, but also possess a deep-rooted concern for their well-being (p.136). It was especially significant if a staff member apparently held a particular concern about a parent's own child (p.175). Such empirical findings are consistent with analyses of caring work which identify dual dimensions of 'caring for' and 'caring about' (for instance, Ungerson 1990): 'caring for' describes activities which meet the recipient's physical or emotional needs (Himmelweit 1999; Folbre and Nelson 2000); 'caring about' refers to the feelings felt by the carer for the recipient, "the desire for the other's well-being that motivates the activity" (Himmelweit 1999: 29; Folbre and Nelson 2000). The importance of 'caring about' derives from the relational nature of care; it is suggested that a successful care relationship requires a belief by recipients (or, in the present case, parents as guardians of recipients) that they are genuinely cared about (Himmelweit 1999). There is an obvious congruence between the idea of 'caring about' and benevolence as a dimension of trustworthiness: both describe an intrinsic concern for the well-being of the other. The importance which parents placed upon staff members' intrinsic concern for children – upon, in other words, 'caring about' – indicated the particular relevance of benevolence as a dimension of trustworthiness in the preschool context.

Third, as well as seeking reassurance about providers' benevolence, parents strongly focused upon the competence of care – how, in other words, their children were 'cared for'. The construal of such competence was again influenced by parents' interpretation of 'care'. Certainly 'competence' was held to include technical skills, such as the

prompt changing of nappies, appropriate supervision of children or the planning of suitable activities. However, given the relational content of ‘care’, and given also parents’ prioritisation of the immediate happiness of their child, understandings of competence extended beyond technical skills to the ability of staff to be warm, kind and patient with children. Such behaviours might in turn be motivated by benevolence, so that in the preschool context the boundary between competence and benevolence as discrete dimensions of trustworthiness was blurred.

These interpretations of care contributed to the contextual frame within which judgements about trust were made. The emphasis on preschool workers’ intrinsic concern for children’s well-being, and the value placed on relational skills such as friendliness and patience, indicated an affective dimension to trust. It also indicated that trust, at least in part, was located at an interpersonal level, being assessed through perceptions of the character of individual preschool workers. The focus upon benevolence, and the perception that competent behaviours emerged from benevolent traits and motivations, informed parents’ conceptions of the professional role of preschool workers, so that limited significance was accorded to the presence and level of qualifications (p.267-268 below). Most importantly, the centrality of benevolence demanded assessment of the intrinsic motivations of staff; so too the importance of kind and patient behaviour required a judgement of intrinsic personality or affective disposition. Chapter 2 noted Adam Smith’s (1776/1852: 7) contention that the “self-love” of tradesmen, and not their “humanity”, underpinned the reliability of their actions. Yet, in the particular context of early years education and care, it was precisely the intrinsic ‘humanity’ of staff which parents assessed in considering the trustworthiness of provision.

### *The possibility of knowledge*

Parents, as described in Chapter 2, are predicted to face significant informational difficulties when using preschool provision. It is proposed that structural characteristics of the transaction – time lag between purchase and evaluation of outcome, third-party purchasing, and the complexity of the good – cause deep information asymmetries between parents and providers (section 2.2.1). Parents, however, held a more optimistic view of their capacity to obtain meaningful knowledge about the quality of provision (section 7.2.1). They generally felt able to collect information about settings through

their own observations. Assessment of outcomes or of professional behaviours was not perceived to require particular expertise. Much could be learnt simply from visits to a setting; iterative interactions, moreover, facilitated observation so that knowledge of provision grew over time. Such observations were powerfully supplemented by messages from children (sections 4.4.4 and 5.1): contrary to propositions within commentaries on preschool (p.49), children were considered able to transmit information about their happiness and their development, so that quality and even the outcomes of provision might be swiftly assessed. While references to children's feedback in the present study may be associated with the age of the children, who were mostly three to four years old, parents also seemed able to derive significant information from the responses of younger children.

Parents' belief that knowledge about preschool provision was attainable in turn influenced the dynamics of trust. The accessibility of meaningful information effectively reduced the uncertainty which parents faced, so that the 'trust problem' was perhaps not as acute as predicted in Chapter 2 (section 2.2). Most importantly, the possibility of parents' own collection and assessment of information about preschool provision was a precondition for their active construction of trust both during the choice process and over time.

The context of the trust relationship was, therefore fundamental. The findings imply that the dynamics of trust in a welfare service such as preschool provision are contingent not only upon the service's technical characteristics, but also upon actors' interpretations of its purpose and nature. Parents' preferences and understandings of the early years influenced the functional role which trust was required to play, the importance of particular dimensions of trustworthiness, and the feasibility and desirability of specific approaches to trust. Among parents there were, further, differences of interpretation – whether about the outcomes desired or about the extent of their own capacity to evaluate provision – which affected approaches to trust. In sum, parents' understandings of preschool provision created a contextual frame within which their trust was constructed.

### 8.1.2 *The active construction of trust*

Trust in the reliability of another, as described in Chapter 2, may be a taken-for-granted assumption or an actively considered decision. Further, in situations where trust is purposively considered, trustworthiness may be automatically designated on the basis of *a priori* characteristics, or it may be actively won (or lost) in the interactions between parties. Within parents' accounts there was a dominant theme. Trust was neither primarily taken-for-granted nor primarily based on *a priori* designations of trustworthiness. There was little indication, for instance, that trust was awarded deferentially on account of professional status; nor, as discussed further below (p.274), was organisational form an *a priori* signal of trustworthiness which influenced parents' behaviours. Parents instead gave prominence to their own critical determinations of the reliability of provision; such assessments were underpinned by the belief that information asymmetries were not insurmountable. Trust was thus actively constructed (or undermined) within the interactions between parents, children and providers, a finding consistent with Giddens' (1994a: 186) notion of 'active trust'.

That is not to say that taken-for-granted assumptions did not constitute some *part* of parents' expectations of providers' reliability. In-depth interviewing provided the opportunity to explore taken-for-granted beliefs which parents held but which they did not immediately identify as part of the trust process. Parents in particular held assumptions about regulation; such assumptions provided an underpinning foundation for more actively considered constructions of trust (section 8.2.1 below). Trust too might sometimes become taken-for-granted over time, as parents became familiar with a setting (section 8.1.3 below). There were, further, three contexts in which *a priori* characteristics of another party led to immediate designations of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness. First, several parents assessed the characteristics of other families. Swift social categorisations of these families signalled their reliability or unreliability as co-users; as a result some settings were avoided. There is a similarity here with studies of schools choice which find that school quality is partly assessed through parents' categorisation of students by race or social class (Gewirtz et al. 1995). Second, the involvement of social services in arranging a preschool placement created strong beliefs about a provider's reliability – although whether the provider was considered trustworthy or untrustworthy depended upon parents' interpretations (p.119-120). Finally, parents occasionally made judgements based upon *a priori* categorisations of

staff: certain characteristics – being a man, being young, being foreign - suggested inappropriateness for the role of preschool worker (p.134). Such examples of characteristic-based distrust were infrequent and not apparently powerful: as an example, parental concern about a manager's foreignness was quickly superseded by observations of her professionalism.

*Actively constructing trust: sources of information*

Typically, however, trust was neither taken-for-granted nor automatically conferred. Parents instead actively constructed a picture of providers' trustworthiness from three central sources – recommendations, messages from children, and parents' own observations. Each source held a particular power and reliability as a basis of trust. First, for around half the participants recommendations from other parents were powerful bases of trust. Recommendations offered rich first-hand information about a provider. Such information, being derived from a third party, was generally held to be unbiased, so that the recommendation might itself be trusted. Nonetheless some parents checked the characteristics of the recommender and even of the recommender's children in order to confirm the recommendation's reliability. Use of a setting by a staff member was effectively a powerful recommendation, perhaps because, as insiders, staff had access to the 'backstage' reality of provision which parents could not necessarily see. Some parents also effectively utilised Ofsted grades as recommendations which informed their assessment of nurseries' reliability.

Second, messages from children were of importance to all parents. When choosing provision parents might observe the affective responses both of their own children and of children already using the preschool. Over time feedback from their children was an essential constituent of parents' positive or negative expectations about a setting. The power of such messages derived partly from their relevance to key quality dimensions. Child feedback, for instance, offered insights into the vital interactions between child and staff. Children's behaviours indicated how well they were developing: behavioural indications that a child was developing for the worse might severely undermine trust in the provider. Above all, through verbal messages, behaviours and affective responses children communicated the extent of their happiness as they attended settings: such happiness, as has been observed, was a central desired outcome for all parents. Children's affective responses, finally, derived further potency as sources of

information through their apparent authenticity: such responses were considered largely immune to manipulation by providers; children's responses and behaviours were held to offer a reliable window into essential aspects of provision. Indeed, through children's verbal and nonverbal communication, certain desired outcomes were considered to be observable while the setting was being used, so that the time lag between use and the discernment of outcomes was perceived to be limited. The discovery that children's messages were thus a core basis within parents' assessments of providers' trustworthiness is striking and unexpected, given pessimistic commentaries on children's ability to communicate their preschool experience.

Third, parents gave prominence to their own observations as sources of information for their assessments of providers' trustworthiness. Observations and evaluations were made not only as settings were used over time, but also during the choice process: indeed, observations made during brief visits were central to judgements about a setting's likely reliability. Evaluations were made across multiple dimensions (sections 4.4. and 5.2); the focus of assessment might depend upon the specific outcomes which parents desired. Parents' evaluations, even during a short visit, were generally not confined to easily observable dimensions of the setting, such as the physical environment, but extended to the substantive competence of staff. Parents typically assessed such competence both through their own interactions with staff, and also from observations of the conduct of the nursery and the actual production of care. Moreover, from observations made during initial visits and as settings were used over time, parents strove to explore the intrinsic character of staff. Parents drew inferences about the enthusiasm, pride or benevolence which motivated staff, and about the personality traits, such as kindness or patience, which they possessed.

As parents moved from choosing to using a setting, the relative importance of these information sources shifted. During the choice process, external sources of information – such as recommendation and Ofsted reports – might be significant bases of trust. Over time the importance of external information ebbed as parents drew upon their observations and upon messages from their children: this increasing self-reliance reflected extended opportunities to assess the provision and to build relationships with staff; it also implied parents' belief in their own capacity to undertake evaluations.

### *Earned trust*

There were thus three central sources of information from which parents constructed expectations of providers' trustworthiness. Across these dimensions there was a common requirement: trust must be in some sense 'earned' by the provider, a dynamic again consistent with Giddens' (1994b) proposal of an 'active trust' which must be won and nurtured (p.64 above). Recommendation implied that a setting had historically offered an effective service to the recommender; children's messages indicated whether a setting was providing appropriate conditions to enable a child's happiness or development. 'Earned' trust was especially explicit as parents made their own critical observations of a nursery. The study identified moments when trust was both won and lost through the behaviours or demeanours which parents saw during initial visits and as settings were used over time. Problems or moments of crisis were the most manifest examples of this dynamic. The resolution of problems through the intervention of staff strengthened parents' trust; but, if problems were attributed to workers' lack of competence, or if nurseries failed to respond to parents' concerns, trust might be substantially eroded.

Numerous behaviours of providers contributed to winning or nurturing trust – from professionalism exhibited in interactions with a child to an enthusiastic demeanour which indicated commitment. Two themes are especially noteworthy. First, parents derived specific inferences of intrinsic benevolence from care or support which was perceived to extend beyond that which might be typically expected. Such care might be offered as part of preschool provision, such as a committed attempt to resolve a child's behavioural problems or a particular affinity with a parent's child. Studies in the medical field similarly identify how behaviours which are perceived to extend beyond the typical may especially support trust (Brown et al. 2011). But there is a significant additional finding in the current study: acts of care offered to parents *outside* the preschool transaction were held to indicate that staff were motivated not by instrumental motivations but by benevolent concern for the parent; this interpretation in turn influenced beliefs about the benevolence which underpinned the provision of care itself. Such findings confirm that perceptions of altruistic behaviour can support the construction of trust (McAllister 1995). They also indicate that an expectation of benevolence can be transferred from one situation to another, so that kindness shown in one context creates an expectation of kindness in another.

Second, the communicative relationship between providers and parents was an essential interface where trust might be won and sustained. Initial communicative interactions between staff and parents were central as parents built up a picture of a provider's trustworthiness; over time open and regular communication contributed to an underlying sense of ease and familiarity. As Chapter 2 describes (p.78), studies of physician-patient relationships have similarly identified communication as an important contributor to trust (Dibben and Lean 2003; Brown 2008). The current study furthers understanding of this process by offering an expanded account of the multi-layered mechanisms by which the communicative relationship supports trust. In common with physician-patient relationships (Brown 2008), through communicative interactions staff might display their benevolence, empathy or commitment. Effective communication might also create a sense of openness which supported belief in a provider's integrity. Importantly, however, communicative interactions enabled the construction of trust not only in actors' benevolence or integrity, but also in their competence - a contribution which has not generally been acknowledged in academic commentaries. Providers could, through responses to questions, through the advice they offered or through narrative descriptions of their daily work, represent their expertise to parents; in addition the very existence of an effective communicative relationship supported an expectation that problems would be acknowledged and discussed - and hence competently resolved. Finally, discussions of the connection between communication and trust can, by focusing on the process or affective content of the interaction, overlook an obvious substantive dimension - that communication often involves a transmission of information which may itself support trust. Despite incentives for providers to be partial in their descriptions of nursery life, information received from staff was regarded by parents as a valuable resource which enabled them to know what was happening. This sense of 'knowing' explicitly contributed to trust (p.169).

The emphasis upon 'earned trust' created a final dynamic. For trust to be won it was not sufficient for staff to be competent or benevolent: such expertise or intrinsic motivation had to be plainly visible. An "exhibited professionalism" was necessary (p.130 above). Yet opportunities to exhibit these qualities might be limited to brief interactions during parents' visits or to passing moments when parents dropped off or picked up children. There appeared to be at least some pressure upon providers to

consider deliberate representations of their competence or benevolent character at these moments. This dynamic is considered further in section 8.2.4 below.

Parents thus drew together information from various sources in order to achieve an expectation of a setting's reliability or unreliability. "Good grounds" for trust (Baier 1986: 235; p.60 above) were established by assembling some kind of knowledge about the setting's past and current performance, and about the character of staff as revealed by their past and current behaviours; from such knowledge beliefs about trustworthiness were derived. In addition, the very sense of 'knowing' about the provision seemed a psychological state which brought reassurance, even if such 'knowing' was partly derived from providers' own accounts. As a corollary, a sense of 'unknowingness' was disturbing: when there were barriers to information collection, so that knowledge was not perceived to be adequately assembled, some parents described disquiet.

Parents' approaches, as already observed, conformed to Giddens' (1994a) notion of active trust: providers were required to earn the trust of parents who critically assessed their behaviour. Giddens (1990; 1991) also emphasises that trust is necessarily characterised by some kind of leap: "*All trust is in a certain sense blind trust!*" (1990: 33; italic in original). On one level this proposition is supported here: parents understood that their knowledge of provision remained incomplete, so that trust, in particular during the initial stages of preschool use, required a leap of commitment; the future remained uncertain. Yet there is a sense that Giddens does not fully acknowledge the implications of the active trust which he describes. The corollary of a trust which is actively constructed and earned is a trust which is at least partly founded upon knowledge and experience. Trust can be more or less blind: the active construction of trust, as identified in the current study, indicates a trust which was less blind and more informed.

### ***8.1.3 Trust, time and familiarity***

In common with theoretical propositions (p.61 above; Rousseau et al. 1998; Möllering 2006), parents' trust was a dynamic process which evolved with time. As preschool use extended over weeks and months, so parents accumulated a history of interactions with providers which influenced the current trust relationship: there was a "feedback loop" (Mayer et al. 1995: 728). Specific interventions or problems might, as noted above, be

focal moments when trust in future interactions was earned or undermined. In addition to such contingent events, a gradual evolution or 'trust journey' was identified (section 7.4.2). When choosing a setting and during the early stages of use, parents tended to be especially active in collecting information and making critical assessments of trustworthiness - a level of activity which implied both the challenge of attaining trust and also the importance of monitoring interactions at the inception of a relationship (Nooteboom 1996; Hardin 2006; Kramer 2009; p.60-61 above). Over time, as familiarity with the nursery grew, parents' activity in collecting and assessing information tended to reduce. The representation of such a 'typical' journey must be qualified, of course, by acknowledgment both of contingent events which might disrupt the journey, and of parents' subjective approaches to agency which might affect their degree of activity at a given moment.

Central to parents' accounts of such trust journeys was a growing familiarity with the nursery and staff. There is a resonance with the proposition of 'knowledge-based trust' (Lewicki and Bunker 1996: 121; p.61 above), whereby trust develops with the knowledge acquired through experience. As Lewicki and Bunker (1996) propose, the experienced reliability of the setting informed parents' expectations: the observation of successful task performance and the absence of problems supported the growth of trust. But the importance of prior interactions extended beyond accumulated knowledge of past performance. Over time the unfamiliar became gradually familiar. The act of leaving a child at a nursery, which at first might be strange and even threatening, became familiar through daily repetition. This sense of acclimatisation might be strengthened by a child's own familiarity and ease, so that a child's response when left at the provision became positive and predictable. Most importantly, insights into staff members' character developed into a sense of familiarity with the 'sort' of person they might be, as indicated by parents' references to workers' motivations, to the 'genuineness' of their care or to their kindness. Such familiarity might contain an affective component. Parents sometimes described an affinity with staff which provided reassurance, a finding consistent with propositions that over time empathy may develop between actors which supports trust (McAllister 1995; p.59 above). There were occasional suggestions too of something more intimate – an idea of staff as friends or as family, or the existence of an emotional bond between manager and parent. Parents thus did not perceive that they left their children with strangers, but with

individuals who were known and often liked; from such knowingness and affinity was derived reassurance and an expectation of the other's good intentions. For a small number of parents, familiarity was established even before a nursery was used; this was the experience in particular of several disadvantaged parents at the state integrated centre.

The association between familiarity and a growth in trust is consistent with Luhmann's (1979) proposition that trust relationships are built gradually over time. Further, as familiarity developed there was also a qualitative shift in parents' trust. Parents' knowledge of the provider's reliability, their acclimatisation to the transaction and their sense of knowing and liking staff created the conditions for trust to become habitual or routine (Garfinkel 1967/1984; Möllering 2006; p.57-58 above): the purposive decision-making around trust at the beginning of preschool use evolved into a more "continuous state" (Giddens 1990: 32) so that, as observed above, there was a reduction in the active collection and consideration of information about trustworthiness. Habitual trust was also associated with a sense of ease and declining anxiety. The extent to which trust became habitual depended upon parents' individual approaches to trust and upon the interactions which they had experienced.

Nooteboom (2002) warns that habitual or routinised trust may imply a dangerous inertia, so that trust continues although it is not justified. Such a possibility cannot be excluded. But parents' habitual trust was not accompanied by a complete inertia or suspension of observation. Parents continued in particular to monitor the happiness and behaviour of their children. Further, a serious problem might shatter the habitual state. Where there were perceived to be significant problems, parents tended to retain, or to return to, an active process of information collection and assessment of providers' trustworthiness.

Finally, the dynamic nature of parents' trust and the trust journeys which they described raise a methodological issue. Interviews in the current study were undertaken at a single moment in time, requiring parents to recall the dynamic progression (and

occasional regression) of trust. Future research might usefully undertake longitudinal study of parents' trust journeys in order to trace the evolution of trust more closely<sup>42</sup>.

#### ***8.1.4 The rationality of parents' trust***

The relationship of trust to rationality lies at the heart of debates about the nature of trust (section 2.3.1). It is also a central theme within accounts of trust in welfare services: as described in Chapter 1, there are concerns that welfare service reform, by privileging an instrumental and rational understanding of human agency and of trust, neglects and damages affective or value-based trust relations. The following sections interrogate in more detail the nature of parents' active construction of trust in preschool provision, with particular reference to theoretical perspectives on trust and rationality presented in Chapter 2. There is little evidence that, as proposed in rational actor accounts of trust, parents make a calculation of the constraints and incentives which act upon providers. Instead, emerging from the empirical study are parallel processes of decision-making around trust: first, a conscious and deliberate assessment of past and present performance and the characteristics of the setting and its staff; second, a less conscious and perhaps more affective intuition about providers' trustworthiness.

##### *Trust as calculation?*

Rational actor accounts propose that trust is a probabilistic calculation (p.54ff above). And it is a calculation of a particular kind: the actor who is evaluated (in the present case the preschool provider) is assumed to be a self-interested utility-maximiser; calculation is made of the constraints and incentives to which the actor is subject. Trust is indicated where the interests of the actor who trusts align with the interests of the actor who is trusted (Hardin 2006). The empirical study, however, provides little support for such proposals. Parents rarely made use of probabilistic calculation to predict settings' future behaviours. Instead they attempted to construct a picture of the provider's competence and character upon which beliefs about reliability could be based. The focus of evaluation was not constraints, incentives or alignment of interests, but inductive assessment of character, skills and behaviour drawn from information

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<sup>42</sup> Longitudinal research would require sensitive interventions. Repeated enquiries about the status of actors' trust may disrupt assumptions or beliefs, so that the research enquiry itself intervenes in actors' trust journeys.

collected through observation and past experience (whether of the parent or of a recommender).

Such privileging of inductive assessment over calculative prediction was sharply illustrated by the manner in which parents used recommendation and reputation to support trust. Contrary to the proposal of Hardin (2006), there was no indication that parents calculated that a provider would behave in a trustworthy manner in order to protect reputation and future recommendations; instead, recommendation, as Granovetter (1985) suggests, was a source of rich information about a setting's substantive care and past performance. Similarly parents did not regard an iterative relationship as a signal that providers would be incentivised to behave reliably in order to protect future transactions. The significance of iterative interactions lay in the opportunities for observation, experience and the development of familiarity which they permitted, through which positive expectations of the future might be derived.

Moreover, the notion of instrumental self-interest was largely antithetical to parents' understandings of trustworthiness. Rational actor accounts contend that actors' reliability is underpinned by self-interest: trustworthy or untrustworthy behaviours are explicable insofar as they further actors' interests, including the acquisition of extrinsic rewards (Smith 1776/1852; Hardin 2006; p.54-55 above). But parents associated providers' trustworthiness not with caring for the self, but with caring about the other: they collected evidence of staff members' intrinsic benevolence, altruism and deep-rooted motivations to care for children; emphasis on extrinsic rewards and constraints, such as money-making or league table performance, created suspicion. Self-seeking was welcome only in a very particular sense: the perception that staff experienced intrinsic contentment from the act of care – whether from a love of children or from professional pride – might be a powerful indication of benevolence and reliability. Again, parents' interpretation of the preschool setting seemed central: an essential benevolence and a genuineness of care was privileged which was held to derive from intrinsic motivations and character, not from extrinsic controls on self-interested actors.

There was, however, one moment when a calculative approach to trust was utilised. As described in Chapter 5 (p.166), a parent, in response to a serious incident, changed her approach to assessing the integrated centre's future reliability. Her expectations,

previously founded upon rapport with staff and familiarity with the nursery school, became calculated: beliefs about reliability were derived from assessment of the incentives and constraints upon the nursery and the probability of harm given that her child would soon move on to school. This exceptional example indicates that calculative approaches might occasionally be useful as a strategic response to a trust problem. But it also emphasises that such approaches were not generally preferred. The parent's calculation of the constraints and incentives upon the nursery was a secondary mechanism of reassurance, invoked only when a primary assessment of competence and character had proved unreliable and trust had been damaged. The expectation derived from such calculation was also less comfortable for the parent than the trust she had previously experienced; suspicion and disquiet remained. The calculative approach described within rational actor commentaries is perhaps more accurately regarded – at least in the preschool context - as strategic management of distrust rather than as an account of trust.

There is, therefore, a basic tension between parents' approaches to trust and proposals in rational actor accounts. Probabilistic calculation of constraints and incentives was not a primary strategy for evaluating trustworthiness. Further, it was precisely not the 'self-love' of preschool providers which parents valued and assessed, but their 'benevolence': parents, it appears, did not accept Adam Smith's analysis (Smith 1776/1852: 6-7; p.55 above). It is necessary to be clear about the theoretical implications of these findings. Rational actor proposals retain viability as a theory of *trustworthiness* – a theory, in other words, of why providers are reliable or unreliable. Providers may indeed behave in a trustworthy manner in order to further their interests; a test of such a proposition requires an investigation of providers' actual motivations and behaviours. But the current study indicates that rational actor proposals do not offer an adequate theoretical explanation of *trust* – why, in other words, parents consider that providers will be trustworthy. That does not mean that there are not contexts where accounts of calculated trust have explanatory force; the error made by contemporary theorists such as Hardin (2006) is to present the calculation of interests, constraints and incentives as an explanation for trust in all contexts.

### *Trust as deliberation*

The absence of probabilistic calculation did not indicate the absence of a considered analytic process. As parents assembled a picture of a provider's character, skills and track record upon which trust might (or might not) be founded, a conscious process of cognitive deliberation took place. A sequential procedure of information collection, assessment and inference supported expectations about trustworthiness: as a simple example, beliefs about a provider's future reliability might be derived from observations and conscious assessments of staff behaviours when parents visited a setting. There were also numerous examples of more nuanced deliberations. Parents might explicitly weigh the relative significance of information (Chapter 7); they used combinations of trust bases in order to construct and confirm their initial assessments of providers' trustworthiness (section 7.1.3); based on their observations, they made comparisons of the reliability of staff at different nurseries; they might be strategic in their collection of information, deliberately watching providers at moments when observations might be particularly insightful (p.158). In sum, parents' active construction of trust comprised, at least in part, conscious deliberations about assembled information.

These were not narrow or individualised deliberations. Parents' assessments were embedded in and influenced by the social context. The social environment provided resources of information to parents as they constructed an inductive picture of settings, whether through social networks or through more diffuse voices, such as outreach workers, Ofsted or a bestselling childcare 'expert'. Further, social norms and beliefs might influence how parents assessed information. Evaluations of staff were sometimes explicitly framed by normative ideals of how a preschool worker should appear and behave. Particular behaviours, such as chewing gum, smoking or a melancholy disposition, were disturbing, since they apparently breached normative ideals; cheerfulness or a 'maternal' manner, by contrast, were normatively desirable and supported trust. Assessment of such normative signals seems again related to parents' wish to identify the intrinsic character and motivation of staff, certain behaviours or appearances being indicators of appropriate or inappropriate character. Broader values and beliefs also influenced deliberations around trust, so that contrasting views of the state, perhaps derived from different cultural backgrounds, affected interpretations of regulation and organisations (p.222).

In describing this process of cognitive deliberation, there are two necessary qualifications. First, with growing familiarity over time, conscious deliberation ebbed as trust became more taken-for-granted (section 8.1.3 above). Second, the extent and nature of the deliberative process varied among parents, whether on account of the circumstances which they faced or their subjective individual agency; section 8.1.5 below considers this dynamic further.

### *Trust, affect and intuition*

Parents' judgements about trustworthiness did not emerge only from structured procedures of conscious deliberation. There were also less conscious and more compressed interpretative processes characterised by affect, 'feeling' or 'instinct'. Feelings of affinity and empathy might develop over time to underpin a more continuous or taken-for-granted state of trust (section 5.3.2). More immediate judgements during the choice process might also be informed by parents' specific affective responses to a particular characteristic of the setting, such as an immediate affinity with individual workers or even a recoiling at a certain smell. In these cases parents made reference to such feelings as they deliberated about settings' trustworthiness. Such a process is consistent with theoretical descriptions of 'feelings-as-information', whereby actors cognitively evaluate their own feelings as data in decision-making (Schwarz 2012: 289).

In addition parents' described more intangible feelings about the atmosphere or ethos of a setting, or some intuition about the character of staff. There is a resonance with studies of parents' choice of secondary schools which similarly identify the meaningfulness of intangible impressions and affective responses (David et al. 1994; Gewirtz et al. 1995). The evaluative process by which such intuitions developed out of parents' experiences or observations was elusive: parents struggled to describe the origins of their feelings, sometimes attributing them to a natural 'instinct'. Nonetheless, intuitions about a setting might be integral to judgements about trustworthiness, and integral too to decisions to halt the collection of information and bring the choice process to an end: in this sense parents trusted the reliability of their intuitions. Further, a number of parents trusted responses of their children which they perceived to be derived from 'gut instinct': children's 'instincts' were held to offer an uncomplicated but incisive insight into the nature of a setting and its staff.

Parents' descriptions of an intangible intuition within their judgements about trust are consistent with theoretical accounts of intuition or the "cognitive unconscious" (Epstein 1994: 710). Such accounts describe judgements which are swift, sufficiently powerful to enable action, and yet non-deliberative: the decision-making process occurs outside conscious awareness, so that the underlying reasons for decisions are unclear to actors (Epstein 1994; Stanovich and West 2000; Gigerenzer 2008). Various cognitive heuristics have been proposed to explain the mechanism of such judgements (Tversky and Kahneman 1984/2002). The data in the present study is insufficient to determine the processes which specifically underpin parents' intuitions. It is indeed characteristic of the intuitive process that actors, like the parents here, struggle to explain their judgements: these are "skills lacking descriptive language" (Gigerenzer 2008: 16). It can at best be tentatively suggested that parents' descriptions of their intuitive responses indicated some affective dimension - whether expressed by an immediate sense of liking or disliking staff, by 'good' or 'comfortable' feelings during a visit, or by swift impressions of staff character. Parents' judgments may thus be mediated by some kind of "affect heuristic": various situations, objects and observations are consciously or unconsciously "tagged" with affective responses; it is to these stored affective responses that actors refer, swiftly and unconsciously, in daily interactions (Slovic et al. 2002: 400). Emerging investigations in psychology and neurology may also offer clues to parents' swift judgements about staff: impressions of others' trustworthiness, for instance, may be formed spontaneously through unconscious evaluations of facial expressions (Todorov et al. 2009).

There is much debate about the reliability of intuitive judgements (for instance, Kahneman and Tversky 1996; Slovic et al. 2002; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier 2011). Todd and Gigerenzer (2003: 144) propose that the effectiveness of an intuitive process depends upon its "ecological rationality" – its fit, in other words, with the task in hand. In this context the affective dimensions of preschool provision can be recalled – parents' desire for the happiness of their child, their interpretation of care, their search for intrinsic benevolence in staff. Such outcomes and characteristics have a certain intangible quality; they may not be easily amenable to assessment through deliberative cognitive processes. In such circumstances the use of some kind of affective intuition may be a fitting, even a rational, strategy.

In establishing ‘good grounds’ for trust, therefore, parents assembled an inductive picture of settings from which expectations of future reliability were drawn; the picture’s focal point was not the likely behaviours of self-interested providers, but the identification of intrinsic benevolence and competent care. Such inductive assessments of trustworthiness did not conform to any simple conception of ‘rational’ or ‘non-rational’. There was evidence of both deliberative analysis, which was nonetheless infused by the social environment, and also less deliberative affective and intuitive judgements. The balance between deliberation and feeling, and the interpretation of both, was in turn subject to parents’ individual agency.

### ***8.1.5 Individual agency and trust***

Theoretical accounts of trust allocate a role to the interpretative agency of the individual who trusts (Möllering 2006; section 2.3.5). The prominence of active trust in the preschool context, featuring parents’ collection of information and judgements about trustworthiness, further emphasises individuals’ agency, and raises the possibility that parents may make distinctive interpretations around trust. Certainly there were variations. Parents used varied models of information collection as they made judgements about trust when choosing settings (section 4.5): in particular around half did not make use of recommendations, thus being deprived of a potentially rich source of information. There were variations too, both during the choice process and as settings were used over time, in the extent of information which parents collected, in their interpretation of such information, and in the richness of detail which supported judgements about trust. Trust, finally, was achieved not only in different ways, but also more comfortably by some parents than by others.

Variations in parents’ agency were partly a consequence of situational obstacles which, as described in Chapter 7, might hinder the collection and assessment of information about providers’ trustworthiness. Trust might thus become harder to attain; parents might also be pushed towards particular means of resolving trust problems. Three such obstacles were identified. First, parents who were newcomers to a locality faced multiple barriers to information: most importantly, they were deprived of immediate access to recommendation through local networks or acquaintances. Parents typically relied upon their own observations and judgements: their situation pushed them towards a self-reliant approach to trust construction which did not utilise recommendation.

While the concentration of ‘newcomer’ parents in the study was probably attributable to its location in inner-city London, migration and geographical mobility imply that the challenge of being a newcomer will not be uncommon.

Second, inexperience of preschool provision was perceived by some parents to impede assessment of providers’ trustworthiness. Parents might be initially unsure of the characteristics which they should look for or how they should interpret children’s responses; the very purpose of provision was not self-evident. Judgements about trust might consequently be superficial; parents might look to extrinsic sources of trust, such as reassurance from more experienced peers. As familiarity with provision grew, parents became more confident in their interpretative agency around trust, so that their own assessments were privileged over those of others.

Third, some parents who faced disadvantage or who were from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggled to collect and assess information about trust. The recommendations accessed through social networks might lack substance; observations and judgements around trust were sometimes thin and passive; unawareness of regulation was associated with disadvantage and lower educational attainment. Parents’ contrasting responses to being a ‘newcomer’ were especially revealing: professional / managerial parents actively engaged with and made confident judgements about preschool settings; but parents who had come to the UK as refugees described isolation and a reluctance to engage with provision. Difficulties in developing trust were exacerbated by a lack of fluency in English: given that trust, as described earlier, might be produced through communicative interaction, linguistic barriers are likely to be unhelpful. The social isolation and linguistic barriers which migrants face are familiar (for instance, Bloch 2002; Nawyn et al. 2012); the significant finding here is that such contexts prevented parents from participating in activities or collecting information which might develop trust.

Socio-economic status is often invoked as a central explanation of parents’ preschool practices (Vincent et al. 2008), and also more generally of actors’ propensity to trust (section 2.3.5). These findings provide some explanation for the difficulties which parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may experience in trusting provision (p.36 above). Yet parents’ accounts also warned against an overly deterministic interpretation

of socio-economic status and trust. Not all parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds were cut off from information or described limited investigations around trust. Most importantly, there was a progressive quality to some disadvantaged parents' interactions with provision. Parents who had been passive or isolated became over time critical judges of trustworthiness and quality, in some cases confidently confronting staff about poor provision or withdrawing a child from a setting because of poor quality.

The study does, however, indicate a possible mechanism through which socio-economic status may be linked to distinct approaches to trust. Numerous studies propose that parents' preschool preferences are differentiated according to socio-economic status (Melhuish et al. 1999; Duncan et al. 2004; Vincent et al. 2008; p.52-53 above). Given the present finding that parents' desired outcomes affected the bases of trust which they used, it is plausible that socially differentiated preferences may partially explain socially differentiated approaches to trust. There is, however, a caveat. In the current study it was not apparent that parents' preferences were indeed differentiated by socio-economic status. Parents held a shared priority that their children should be happy, a preference which was associated with certain common approaches to trust. While some (but not all) professional parents focused upon educational outcomes and child development, so too some working class parents emphasised language and skills development and, in one case, preschool as the first step in a planned school career. The proposal of a relationship between parents' socio-economic background, their preferences and their approach to trust remains tenable – but it may be that class-based distinctions in preschool preferences are more nuanced than some analyses have suggested.

Situational obstacles offer only a partial explanation of variations in parents' agency. There was evidence too, as described in Chapter 7, of subjective individual interpretations around trust and risk. First, some parents experienced a pronounced sense of vulnerability around the care of their child which created a need for high levels of reassurance or information before trust was attained; this perception of vulnerability influenced parents' behaviours, being associated with a prolonged process of information collection during the choice process, with extensive supervision of specific aspects of a nursery's operation, and with proactive management of trust through regular monitoring. Second, there were varied responses to the conundrum of how much information to collect. Parents held contrasting normative conceptions of the

extent and content of information collection which should underpin a legitimate or thorough judgement; some parents especially trusted their own capacity to assess settings, so that they were confident to make swift decisions around trust when choosing a provider. Third, parents' different views of state regulation and provision might affect approaches to trust, so that the involvement of the state might variously strengthen or undermine trust. Finally, parents might desire different and nuanced outcomes from provision; on account of such distinctions they might privilege different bases of trust.

There is the possibility that distinct interpretations of agency around trust are associated with individual traits or demographic characteristics (p.67-69 above). Evidence of such associations was limited. Some effect can be attributed to parents' cultural backgrounds, which seemed occasionally to contribute to contrasting opinions around state oversight and state provision. There is a resonance with descriptions of cultural biases towards more or less trust in institutions such as the state and market (Slovic 1993; Hofstede et al. 2010). In general, however, parents' distinct approaches were not apparently linked to pre-existing traits. Parents' heightened sense of vulnerability, for instance, was not obviously attributable to any antecedent characteristic: parents simply held in common a perception of uncontrollable threats in the preschool environment.

Nor was there any persuasive indication of gender-based distinctions. In one instance a contrast was discernible between a mother and a father as they assessed a setting's trustworthiness: she observed the personality of staff and her emotional responses to them; he considered formal activities and structures (p.212). This contrast might support Baier's (1985, 1986) proposals that, in considering trust, men look to formalised contract, women to an ethic of love or care. Yet there was an alternative and perhaps more probable explanation: the father was a teacher who referred to his own technical knowledge in making an assessment. Mothers and fathers did not obviously present different approaches; parents, whether male or female, focused on care and benevolence rather than contract and calculation. In making such assessments, however, some mothers claimed a special skill of unconscious reasoning – the 'maternal instinct' – which was, by implication, not shared by fathers. Such inferences around gender, trust and preschool are tentative: the study did not seek explicitly to explore this question; the bias towards female participants, justified by the primary role which mothers typically

take in preschool choices, limits the depth of insight. There would be merit in further study of gender-based variations around trust and preschool.

In addition to exploring differences between mothers' and fathers' approaches to trust, there remains a further and profound gender-related issue. Chapter 1 noted propositions that a policy framework which privileges individualised economic rationality may be inappropriate specifically to mothers' experiences of the family and of childcare (Duncan et al. 2003; 2004); a similar dissonance is identified around mothers' choice of schooling (David et al. 1997). There may be an analogous incongruity around trust – to use Baier's framework once more (1985, 1986), policy, through market-based structures and regulation, tends to privilege a contract-based, instrumental and arguably male conception of trust, thus neglecting a female conception of trust as an ethic of love or care. The evidence from the current study is limited, but two observations can be made. First, while participants seemed to be comfortable constructing trust within a market-based context, it was not primarily to the instrumental logic of the market which parents (whether men or women) referred (section 8.2.2 below): instead participants introduced an idea of trust as an 'ethic of care' into the market-based transaction. Second, there was a striking moment when a mother apologised for her 'emotive' evaluation of preschool workers' character (p.212). Such an apology indicates a strong normative pressure to conform to a more legitimate 'rational' model of trusting, a model apparently encapsulated by her husband's investigation of curricula and pedagogy; normative pressures may thus push mothers away, or cause them to feel guilt about, their preferred affective approach to the evaluation of trustworthiness. Again, the data here is limited, and a specifically gender-based focus upon preschool / educational choices and ways of trusting would be beneficial.

The study identifies, in sum, the significance of individual agency as parents assembled an inductive picture of providers' trustworthiness. Variations in agency were attributable both to obstacles which constrained information collection, and also to subjective individual interpretations of trust and of appropriate parental activity. Parents exhibited a range of needs, capacities and beliefs: some parents interpreted the world to be especially risky; some were especially confident in their own agency and judgement. Explanations for such variations may be located within individual

biographies or particular responses to parenthood which lie beyond the current study's scope.

#### ***8.1.6 Do parents trust preschool provision?***

The preceding sections have considered how parents trusted preschool provision. A complex picture has emerged of parents' active construction of trust - a process which draws upon multiple sources of information, which develops with familiarity over time, which utilises both deliberative and intuitive mechanisms, and which is mediated by individual agency. Given this picture, and given also proposals of declining trust within society and specifically in welfare services, this section considers whether parents did indeed trust preschool provision (research question 4).

Chapter 7 presented a qualitative typology of the extent of parents' trust, derived from parents' assessments of their trust and from their described behaviours and strategies. Despite selection biases which potentially increased the likelihood that participants might report strong trust (p.100-101), parents' trust was not always robust. Instances of limited or weaker trust were drawn both from parents' accounts of prior use of other provision, and also from their interactions with the setting currently used. Certainly parents sometimes described, and their behaviours appeared to confirm, a trust which was strong and taken-for-granted – a 'habitual trust'. But often expectations of providers' reliability were not so strong. Parents might hold positive expectations about certain outcomes but not others ('contingent trust'); expectations about a provider might require corroboration through monitoring and interventions ('managed trust'). Where trust had been explicitly breached by a provider's actions, parents were especially watchful: in such a condition of 'damaged trust' not only did trust decline, but the basis of parents' expectations shifted from belief in the intrinsic benevolence and competence of staff to vigilance and calculation about how unreliable behaviours might be contained.

Distrust is proposed as a functional alternative to trust which enables action in a condition of uncertainty (p.44 above): actors maintain their presumption of likely harm (Luhmann 1979; Lewicki et al. 1998) and take precautions against risks (Elster 2007). Parents, as they responded to the uncertainty inherent in preschool use, at times indeed utilised precautionary strategies which indicated some distrust. The process of

‘managed trust’, for instance, incorporated a complementary mix of trusting and distrusting approaches which enabled preschool use. Most explicitly, parents might maintain a clear expectation of likely harm about some specific aspect of provision, such as a particular worker’s lack of competence (p.160) or the danger presented by an unsupervised door (p.166). In such a state of evident distrust, parents drew upon their awareness of a setting’s poor practice to undertake targeted monitoring and checks: such precautionary actions enabled continued use of the setting. Distrust also characterised parents’ management of situations in which their trust had previously been breached by providers. Knowledge of poor practice, indeed, created an essential conundrum. Such knowledge might undermine positive expectations of a setting. But it might also facilitate strategies through which parents regulated known poor practice, so that nursery use might continue. In certain circumstances, therefore, an ancient dictum – “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know” – guided parents as they approached a trust problem.

Distrust, however, was not always functional. While parents might utilise distrusting strategies at specific moments or towards specific aspects of provision, a generalised and chronic state of distrust might obstruct preschool use. If parents held no positive expectations of a setting, they might be reluctant to engage with provision or, if a child was already attending a nursery, he/she might be removed. Use of a nursery in a condition of generalised distrust might cause emotional trauma and disquiet.

Variations in the extent of parents’ trust had multiple explanations. First, the possibility of ‘contingent trust’ – trust in one aspect of provision and not in another – flowed from the existence of multiple outcomes in the preschool field. Second, temporal ‘trust journeys’ were identified (section 7.4.2). As indicated in theoretical and empirical accounts (Luhmann 1979; Möllering 2005; p.60 above), during the early stages of a relationship parents proceeded cautiously through a strategy of ‘managed trust’: settings were observed and monitored, and children’s responses closely evaluated. Over time, in the absence of trust breaches and with increasing familiarity, trust typically became habitual. Such growth in trust, however, depended upon parents’ experiences. A third explanatory factor, therefore, was the impact of contingent events. Problems might erode trust; alternatively trust might be boosted if a provider was perceived to exhibit exceptional benevolence or competence. Finally, the extent of trust was affected by

parents' individual interpretations. Responses to contingent events, for instance, were mediated by parents' interpretations, so that the impact of a given event upon trust might be of varying magnitude. Some parents simply held a low propensity to trust, whether on account of situational barriers or because of some heightened awareness of vulnerability. In such cases reassurance was derived from parents' own monitoring: a transition to a condition of habitual trust was unlikely.

In many instances, therefore, parents' trust was neither certain or comprehensive, but simply sufficient to enable the use of provision: parents, as described in Chapter 7, utilised a 'satisficing', and not a maximising, approach to trust. Such a satisficing approach seemed a practical response to the trust problem which parents encountered, incorporating functional compromises and adjustments to aspirations in the light of experience. Such satisficing approaches and behaviours offer an insight into the functional operation of trust more generally. Trust, as identified in Chapter 2 (p.43-44), is a psychological state which enables action. Parents' accounts emphasised that this functional role depends not upon the certainty or strength of trust, but upon its sufficiency: trusting enough, rather than trusting optimally, is the threshold for action. The definition of sufficiency, of course, depended upon parents' propensity to trust: for some the threshold to action was especially hard to cross.

Previous studies have noted parents' compromises around preschool quality (Uttal 1997; Vincent and Ball 2006). Vincent and Ball (2006) attribute such compromises to a dysfunctional market: the insufficiency of affordable places compels parents to accept inferior provision. But the origins of parents' satisficing approaches to trust lay also within tensions and dilemmas inherent in the preschool transaction itself, the resolution of which might require trade-offs. A first dilemma emerged from the split between purchaser and user. Both children's feedback and parents' own observations were over time core bases of trust, but sometimes presented contrasting information about a setting's reliability. Parents, despite their own limited trust in aspects of provision, might retain a child at a setting because he/she seemed content: the immediate happiness of a child was a priority against which a provider's possible unreliability in other dimensions might be traded-off. A related tension arose from the relational content of provision. The development of relationships between children, parents and staff might support trust, but also provided incentives for inertia. Even where

contingent events implied the unreliability of a provider in some dimension, parents were sometimes reluctant to uproot a child from a familiar setting. The temporal structure of preschool usage further encouraged inertia. Impending transitions, such as a move to primary school, created natural breaks. It was less disruptive for parents to make compromises around trust than to move a child for a short time. In sum a set of conditions – the centrality of child happiness as an outcome, the relational content of care, patterns of preschool usage, and, as described earlier, the value of accumulated knowledge of a provider (including knowledge of poor practice) – pushed parents towards a satisficing approach to trust.

## **8.2 Trust and preschool: implications for policy and practice**

The second half of this chapter discusses the implications of this study's findings for policy and practice. It explores how far preschool institutions and practices were congruent with the bases, process and nature of parents' trust which have been described; it considers the relevance of concerns about the negative impact of public service reform upon trust, described in Chapters 1 and 2. There is specific focus upon parents' trust in organisations, a dimension which has typically been overlooked in investigations of trust in welfare services, and which was consequently isolated as a research question in the current study (research question 3).

This discussion is arranged according to the multi-level framework of trust production set out in Chapter 2 (section 2.4), exploring in turn insights and implications in relation to overarching institutions and systems (both regulation and market-based delivery mechanisms), organisational form and behaviour, and professionals' behaviours. There is also specific consideration of the challenges around trust which disadvantaged parents may face and of consequent implications for policy.

### **8.2.1 Regulation**

As Chapter 1 described, there are contrasting proposals about the impact of regulatory systems upon trust. Government ministers expressed an explicit hope that the expansion of preschool regulation during the New Labour administrations might increase parents' confidence in provision. But there are warnings that mechanisms of audit and inspection may undermine belief in professionals' benevolence and competence; there are specific concerns that institutionalised systems of regulation may

crowd out interpersonal trust, thus removing from trust relationships essential moral and affective dimensions. In considering such questions, a significant caution emerges from this study in relation to the preschool context. Regulatory systems in the preschool field are multiple, and parents' perceptions of such systems were correspondingly multiple. Different regulatory systems produced different effects and were perceived in different ways. There is a consequent risk that generalisations about the benefit or harm of institutional systems of trust conceal the nuanced impact of different systems.

Parents' responses to regulatory systems are therefore discussed in turn. First, several regulatory mechanisms – the early years curriculum, national standards and statutory staff:child ratios - were absent from parents' accounts and appeared to have no direct impact upon trust. There remains the possibility of an indirect effect: inasmuch as such mechanisms may improve the quality of provision, and inasmuch as parents observe such improvement, then parents' active construction of trust may be affected by these and other regulatory interventions. Second, CRB checks were strongly valued by most parents as a basic but vital reassurance about staff. Parents generally exhibited a blind trust in the CRB system itself, assuming that the process was effective and also appropriately implemented by the state and by providers.

Third, it is suggested that professional certification or status might be interpreted as a signal of trustworthiness (p.72 above). The findings provide some support for this contention: qualifications were generally significant to parents, being an indication that staff held certain skills. Yet there was ambivalence too: some parents considered qualifications to be essential, but for others they were not a vital prerequisite. Parents were often unaware of the precise qualifications which staff held. Nor did they typically perceive any benefit from higher level qualifications – although several parents took reassurance from staff members' status as qualified teachers. Such perceptions again derived from parents' interpretations of the preschool context and the particular emphasis upon workers' benevolence as a dimension of trustworthiness: the likely effectiveness of preschool workers was associated not with their exposure to theoretical learning, but with experience, basic skills and natural attributes of kindness and common sense. Only in one case did a parent present a perspective of the early years as a period of complex child development which required expert theoretical understanding; this parent derived reassurance from the presence of qualified teachers.

Preschool experts continue to advocate the raising of qualification levels (Tickell 2011; Nutbrown 2012). Nutbrown (2012), in her review of the preschool workforce, recommends that staff should possess at least a Level 3 preschool qualification, and reiterates that every setting should be led by a graduate<sup>43</sup>. A requirement that all staff are qualified is likely to support trust; but the raising of qualification levels does not obviously fit with parents' perspectives of preschool work, and is thus unlikely to affect their evaluations of workers' reliability. Nutbrown (2012), noting preschool practitioners' continued lack of professional status, further proposes that the EYP qualification should be replaced by specialist qualified teacher status. Given the responses of several parents in this study, an increase in the number of professionals who are named 'teachers', with the association of knowledge and professional training which the term brings, may improve trust in some cases.

Ofsted inspections and reports, finally, provoked contrasting responses. The simple fact that a nursery had been inspected and approved by Ofsted might offer an important reassurance of basic quality and safety. In addition some parents used Ofsted reports, and especially the awarded inspection grades, to inform their choice of provision within the preschool market. Ofsted reports thus effectively became quasi-recommendations; in this context Ofsted reports were typically not primary sources of trust, being used instead to confirm parents' own assessments. A number of parents, however, derived no reassurance from the inspection regime. For a regulatory system to support trust, it must itself be trusted (Möllering 2006) - but some parents criticised the relevance, competence and impartiality of the Ofsted process in the preschool context.

Within these findings there is little evidence that regulatory systems crowded out other valuable forms of trust. Instead two complementary dynamics are visible. First, regulatory systems might provide reassurance about specific dimensions of provision, such as the overarching safety of settings or the prevention of abuse, which supplemented parents' investigations into other aspects of quality. Second, such systems provided an underpinning foundation for parents' active evaluations of

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<sup>43</sup> Individuals without level 3 qualifications would not be precluded from preschool work, but would not be counted in staff:child ratios. At the time of writing the Government had not responded to the Nutbrown Review.

providers' trustworthiness. There is a resonance with Luhmann's (1988) proposals that trust in systems, far from substituting for interpersonal trust, provides an essential stable foundation for the development of such relations. Further, and again consistent with Luhmann's (1979, 1988) conception of trust in systems as a latent 'confidence', parents frequently took for granted the underpinning role which systems fulfilled. Often, as parents' explored the trustworthiness of settings, regulatory systems were not consciously considered: parents' blind trust in the CRB process is an example. That regulatory systems were rarely central in parents' accounts indicated not their insignificance, but that their underpinning function was thus assumed.

Nor was there evidence that systems of audit and control contributed to a culture of distrust. The prescriptive preschool curriculum may indicate policy-makers' distrust in practitioners (Penn 2011a), but it had no such effect upon parents, for whom it was largely irrelevant. Chapter 1 noted fears that the CRB regime might encourage suspicion of adults who work with children. The current study implies an opposite relationship: from parents' perspectives, CRB checks were a necessary reassurance in the context of pre-existing perceptions about the riskiness of society and the possibility of abuse. Regulatory oversight had an explicit negative effect in only a single instance. A parent was clear that a primary school's behaviours were guided not by the interests and needs of nursery class pupils, but by Ofsted criticisms and by school league table pressures. This allegation of gaming behaviours related not simply to the preschool regulatory process, but also referred forward to the accountability systems to which maintained schools are exposed. It is may be that the regulatory systems associated with schools are perceived by parents to be especially intrusive or distorting of professionals' motivations: this issue would benefit from further empirical study.

There is some comfort in these findings for policy-makers who aspire to strengthen parents' confidence in preschool provision: regulatory systems were generally significant to parents as a foundational reassurance as they used provision. Yet there were also instances where there was no obvious fit between parents' approaches to trust and regulatory developments. Further, several parents, all of whom were in some way disadvantaged, had no knowledge of CRB checks or Ofsted inspections and could therefore derive no reassurance from them. Given policy-makers' desire to increase the

participation of vulnerable families in preschool provision, this knowledge gap is concerning.

### **8.2.2 *Markets and quasi-markets***

The preferred institutional mechanism for the delivery of preschool provision in England has been the market and parental choice (section 1.2.2). Parents' interactions with market mechanisms in the current study were diverse. Some participated in a conventional market, purchasing provision with their own funds; provision for others was free at the point of delivery in a quasi-market arrangement. A number of parents, by restricting their choice to school-based nurseries, effectively participated not in the preschool market / quasi-market but in the schools quasi-market: assessments of trustworthiness were not specific to the nursery class, but were applied to the whole school as an institution (p.144). While parents' experiences of market-based structures were thus varied, most made some kind of market-style choice between competing providers (section 4.5).

Chapter 1 described concerns that the delivery of welfare services through market-based mechanisms may threaten trust relationships between providers and users. Perceptions of providers' benevolence may be eroded: extrinsic incentives, directed at providers' self-interest, may crowd out intrinsic motivations of altruism or professional ethics; the instrumental rationality of market exchange may be incompatible with the affective relations and moral commitment which are held to be essential to trust and to caring relationships (Taylor-Gooby 2009; p.22 above). Irreconcilable tensions are specifically identified between market exchange and the shared values, care and love which parents seek from preschools (Vincent and Ball 2001, 2006; p.37 above). Alternatively there is a contrasting proposal that trust is not damaged but reconfigured. Rational actor accounts imply that the alignment of the interests of provider and consumer through the market mechanism may be a powerful basis for trust.

There is an obvious initial inference about parents' interpretations of trust in a market-based context. It was not to the market logic of aligned interests which they referred. The perception of instrumental self-interest, driven by extrinsic rewards and constraints, was largely inimical to trust: the motivations of Adam Smith's self-seeking market actor were not considered a reliable basis for trust. Instead parents constructed a picture of

trustworthiness through consideration of providers' professional competence and their intrinsic motivations of care, altruism and professional pride.

Yet parents' accounts did not indicate an irreconcilable conflict between market participation and trust. The findings instead argue for a more nuanced understanding of the practical operation of the preschool market / quasi-market and its interaction with trust. Many parents appeared comfortable in the role of proactive consumer. They were sufficiently confident to make their own critical assessments of trustworthiness both during the choice process and over time; parents, indeed, preferred to make their own active evaluations of trustworthiness. This active construction of trust appeared to have a good fit with a consumer model of choice and proactive interaction with providers: the autonomy of decision-making in the market provided a space in which parents might exercise their own agency in constructing trust.

Moreover, while there was occasional suspicion of money-making when parents paid fees to providers (section 6.4.1), there was little evidence of corrosive scepticism about providers' motivations. Parents' assessments of staff resulted in frequent attributions of intrinsic benevolence, kindness and commitment; within the market-based context parents and their children formed affective and communicative relationships which supported trust. Critical accounts of the impact of market-based mechanisms upon trust may, therefore, over-emphasise the extent to which instrumental rationality and extrinsic motivations are perceived to infuse transactions. There is, instead, a resonance with Granovetter's (1985) conception of a market embedded in social relations, in which personal relationships and normative commitments remain central to its practical operation. Propositions that market exchange is inherently incompatible with the particular affective and value-infused nature of preschool provision, evocatively conveyed by Vincent and Ball's (2005: 565) description of an 'impossible market', also appear overly deterministic. Parents' accounts imply, in common with propositions from literature on care work (Ungerson 1990; Folbre and Nelson 2000), that market-based care does not inevitably exclude affective relationships or a sense that staff 'care about' children.

Market-based mechanisms, therefore, do not necessarily obstruct trust. Further, a tentative proposition can be made that in some cases the operation of the market may

*support* trust. There is a possibility that those organisations which appear to parents to be trustworthy may be more successful in attracting and maintaining users: the study has identified, for instance, moments when parents chose or rejected organisations in part on the basis of evaluations of trustworthiness; parents might also remove their children from a setting if it was perceived to be no longer reliable. In principle, therefore, there would seem to be market-based incentives for organisations to fit with parents' conception of trustworthiness: the market, in other words, encourages providers to be responsive (Le Grand 2007b), in this case to parents' preferences around trust.

The proposal that trustworthiness – or, more accurately, the appearance of trustworthiness – can be an asset in the market has been advanced in other contexts<sup>44</sup>. Beckett (2005: 22) describes a 'competition for trust' as providers vie for customers; such competition is likely where information asymmetries create a need for trust. This notion of trustworthiness as a source of competitive advantage has an especial relevance to preschool provision and other welfare markets precisely because, given the vulnerabilities and information asymmetries inherent in such services, trust is so central. Moreover, this study has described how trust is actively constructed by parents, and that, as a corollary, providers must earn parents' trust. There is thus still more emphasis on providers to exhibit those behaviours and motivations – professionalism, commitment and benevolence – which signal trustworthiness in order to gain advantage in the competition for users. With a few exceptions (for instance, Rowe and Calnan 2006), the notion that the demands of a welfare market may compel organisations to pay attention to trust has received little attention in commentaries on markets and quasi-markets. It has, however, significant theoretical implications for how the dynamic of trust within the preschool market is construed. It suggests that trust and market-based provision may not be antithetical: the market and consumerism, far from directing providers' focus away from the needs of users (Taylor-Gooby 2009), may push providers to respond to users' experiences and interpretations around trust and other aspects of provision (Le Grand 2007b; Brown et al. 2011).

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<sup>44</sup> The idea of trustworthiness as 'competitive advantage' is introduced by Barney and Hansen (1994: 175), who argue that mutual trust between organisations reduces the governance costs of collaborations, thus bringing competitive benefit.

Two caveats must be raised around this notion of trustworthiness as a competitive advantage. First, a ‘competition for trust’ requires – in common with any attempt to improve quality through market-based systems (Le Grand 2007b) - a genuinely competitive market (Beckert 2005): the extent of meaningful choice available to parents remains problematic (West 2006; Waldfogel and Garnham 2008). Second, since advantages accrue from appearing to be trustworthy, there is an incentive for untrustworthy providers to fake trustworthiness (Barney and Hansen 1994; Bacharach and Gambetta 2001). Beckert (2005: 22), indeed, describes the ‘competition for trust’ as an ever-increasing series of ‘performative acts’ which seek to give an ‘impression of trustworthiness’: there is little sense of real reliability. A central concern in the preschool market, therefore, may not be trust which is eroded, but trust which is misplaced.

A number of disadvantaged parents, finally, did not engage so easily with preschool use in the marketplace. Their experience is considered in section 8.2.5 below.

### **8.2.3 Organisations and trust<sup>45</sup>**

Organisational form has been a focus of welfare service reform. In the preschool field a mixed economy of organisations has been encouraged, with emphasis on the expansion of PVI provision (p.27-29). Empirical research into trust in welfare services has, however, given little attention to users’ trust at an organisational level. This study has, therefore, sought specifically to explore how organisational form or behaviours might contribute to trust (RQ3). The findings confirm that, in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of trust in the preschool context, consideration of the construction and facilitation of trust at the organisational level is important.

A number of perspectives and perceptions have been uncovered which have implications for policy and practice. The very concept of a preschool ‘organisation’ was a source of trust for some parents. It was a public space in which the presence of multiple actors and organisational structures was perceived to protect against opportunism or abuse. By contrast, care by an individual in a private setting, such as

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<sup>45</sup> Parts of this section have been published in a journal article (Roberts 2011).

childminding, might be considered risky or worrying. Other studies have identified similar anxieties about childminding (Harries et al. 2004; Vincent et al. 2010). Increasing policy interest in the expansion of childminding in order to provide affordable preschool places (Truss 2012; Centre for Social Justice 2012) does not, therefore, necessarily fit with parental preferences.

However, despite theoretical propositions about the perceived trust advantages of state, forprofit and third sector organisations (section 2.4.2), the form or sector of such organisation received limited consideration as a signal of trustworthiness. For many parents these dimensions were not relevant or even comprehensible. Others expressed a miscellany of opinions, ranging from suspicion of the profit motive and trust in public sector processes to belief in the market and critiques of state sector motivations. These perceptions, however, did not constitute the basis of parents' behaviour or, except in a single case, a primary foundation of attributions of trustworthiness. Nor was there support for rational actor propositions that organisational reputation is perceived as a significant incentive which encourages trustworthy behaviour. Several parents expressed views consistent with this position – but again there was no evidence that such beliefs informed behaviour. Further, parents' approaches to the forprofit chain confounded theoretical propositions: evidence of poor quality at one nursery was not seen to affect trust in other settings in the chain. The absence of association between opinion and action may be partly attributable to limited opportunities for parents to choose between organisational sectors. Fundamentally, however, *a priori* beliefs about the relative trustworthiness of organisational forms carried little weight. Parents instead privileged their own active collection of information and critical construction of trust over such *a priori* signals of trustworthiness.

Such dynamic trust construction creates practical challenges for organisations, since trust must be earned and nurtured in the interactions between organisations, parents and children. Organisational behaviours and structures affected trust in two ways: first, by presenting direct signals about a provider's reliability or unreliability; and, second, by enabling or hindering parents' own evaluations of trustworthiness. There appeared to be isomorphic pressures which pushed providers to respond to these challenges in similar ways. Such isomorphism is partly imposed, such as conformance with statutory curricula, inspection and safety regulations. But organisations also displayed similar

non-coerced behaviours, such as transparency, regular communication and settling-in periods, all of which supported parents' development of trust. The common focus on such behaviours may derive from normative conceptions of good practice; but, as described above, competitive pressures in the preschool market may also drive organisations towards similar behaviours and structures which support an appearance of trustworthiness.

Additionally, PVI providers faced a specific representational challenge in order to gain trust. In contrast to state provision, which is free at the point of delivery, PVI providers, as trading organisations, must manage the collection of fees. This study suggests that neither profit-making nor monetary exchange *per se* undermined trust. Instead, parents were disturbed if they perceived an *excessive* emphasis on money-making or an explicit intrusion of money and business into the preschool relationship. Such an emphasis implied inappropriate and instrumental motivations.

The relationship between familiarity and trust also carried implications for the impact upon trust of organisational behaviours. Staff turnover undermined trust precisely because it disrupted familiar relationships, the known staff member being replaced by a stranger. Here the structure of the state integrated centre offered a specific advantage. Through parents' various interactions with staff, with the centre's other services and with the nursery school itself, trust was developed through experience even before the nursery was used. In contrast to the abrupt leap into provision characteristic of market choice, parents progressed to nursery use through a series of unthreatening steps. Parents at the centre were generally disadvantaged; some had previously been reluctant to engage with services or were nervous about preschool provision. A gradual process of trust construction may be particularly beneficial in such contexts. Disadvantaged parents can also be isolated from detailed knowledge about provision which flows through middle-class networks (Vincent and Ball 2006): the community of parents at the centre's drop-in provided a partial remedy to such isolation by enabling the exchange of information about the nursery (p.118).

A number of specific policy challenges arise from these findings. Given political emphasis on the benefits of third sector organisations, there was a striking lack of awareness among parents of both the idea and the availability of such provision. To an

extent this finding may be attributable to the research selection. The parent-run preschool provided services to a mobile group of parents, many of whom were from overseas. It is therefore not necessarily an exemplar of a parent-run and participatory community-based service; propositions that third sector organisations may incubate trust through community involvement in the co-production of services remain tenable (Laville and Nyssens 2001; Pestoff 2009). Nonetheless the idea of third sector preschool provision seems to have little institutional embeddedness. Third sector organisations' relationships with both the state and the market may also be problematic. The social enterprise provided places for vulnerable children under contract to state social services. This relationship confused the boundaries of state and third sector; for one parent who received such a place, some kind of distrust was created – a certain barrier in the relationship between parent and setting – which potentially undermined any trust advantage which the social enterprise might possess. Such a dynamic recalls warnings about the dangers for third sector organisations if they become close to the state (Dahrendorf 2000; Alcock 2010a). Trading in the market also held pitfalls: the social enterprise was mistaken for a profit-making organisation; its business-like treatment of a parent as a customer, and not as a mother, undermined trust. Again, there is resonance with broader warnings that commercial behaviours may conceal or displace the value-based ethos of third sector organisations (Frumkin and Andre-Clark 2000).

Most importantly, the understanding that trust is constructed through familiarity creates three significant policy challenges. First, there is the issue of staff turnover, which disrupts familiarity and therefore trust. Daycare settings exhibit markedly higher turnover rates than maintained nursery schools and nursery classes (Phillips et al. 2009); in the current study, it was indeed the forprofit daycare nursery which experienced disruptive turnover. High staff turnover thus becomes – in common with quality, levels of qualifications and levels of funding – a matter of concern in relation to provision through market-based daycare settings. Second, those characteristics of the integrated centre which enabled the gradual acquisition of trust – namely, provision of multiple services at a single site by a single organisation, so that staff and setting become familiar prior to preschool use – are not prioritised in current policy. They are unlikely to be produced within a fragmented market; nor have they inevitably been achieved through the Sure Start children's centres programme. This initiative has favoured PVI preschool provision, with the result that such provision may be disconnected from other

services within a centre; in addition, services in children's centres, especially in urban areas, are not necessarily contained at a single site, but may be dispersed across a local area (Lewis 2011). Such 'virtual' integration of services is unlikely to support trust production. Third, a functional market implies the exit of ineffective or unsustainable providers. There is indeed organisational volatility in the preschool field – over 800 providers (around 3% of the total) left the Ofsted early years register in the quarter to September 2012 (Ofsted 2012; see also Penn 2011a). But the closure of a setting suggests –for those parents and children who wish to continue to use it – a sudden dissipation of the acquired familiarity with place, people and organisation which supports trust. There is a resonance here with wider concerns about the impact upon users of organisational closures in market-based welfare services (Scourfield 2004; Alcock 2010b; Glasby et al. 2011).

Finally, while the study strongly implies that organisational form or sector had little relevance as an *a priori* signal of trustworthiness, it remains possible that different organisational forms or sectors may be more or less effective in facilitating the behaviours which contribute to or confound the active construction of trust. All the organisations in the current study aspired to enact similar trust-supporting behaviours. But there were instances when specific behaviours or structures which impacted upon trust seemed to be associated with organisational form. It was the maintained settings which explicitly provided support to parents which extended some distance beyond preschool provision itself – support which, as described in Chapter 5 (p.162-163), strengthened trust by indicating intrinsic benevolence and commitment to the parent. Two dynamics at the forprofit chain, by contrast, inhibited trust: staff turnover disrupted relationships; the corporate structure inhibited transparency around organisational decision-making. Empirical research might usefully explore further the relationship between organisational forms and the trust-producing and trust-harming structures and behaviours identified in this study.

#### **8.2.4 Staff behaviours**

The study's findings identify the importance to trust of interactions and behaviours at an interpersonal level. Parents constructed expectations of trustworthiness through observations of workers' professional behaviours, and communicative interactions and personal relationships between staff and parents were often important to the

development of trust. This emphasis on trust at an interpersonal level carried multiple implications for practice. In particular, there were challenges of display or self-representation. The study identified the importance of “exhibited professionalism” (p.130): for trust to be earned, preschool workers must not only behave in a competent manner, but be *seen* to do so. Further, given parents’ attempts to understand workers’ intrinsic character and motivations, there was a need for practitioners to provide some (apparent) window into their inner world of motivations and personal character. Yet opportunities to make such displays of professionalism and disposition to parents were often confined to brief moments, such as the beginning or end of a nursery session or parents’ visits to the nursery during the choice process. Parents’ assessments of workers and their behaviours might be correspondingly swift, in part based upon intuitive response or social categorisation.

This imperative upon staff to achieve some representation of competence and benevolent character creates a dynamic akin to Goffman’s (1971: 109) conceptualisation of ‘front-region’ performance (see p.78 above). In common with the clinicians described by Brown et al. (2011), it was necessary that preschool staff displayed conformance with normative ideas of their role: trust was imperilled where workers’ behaviours or appearance were considered inappropriate or illegitimate for the role of preschool worker (p.255). Specific actions and displays especially supported an impression of trustworthiness. These included the deliberate presentation of expertise within interactions with parents; the demonstration of friendliness and cheerfulness to parents and children; and apparent openness and responsiveness in communication. Perhaps most importantly providers expressed their caring disposition through displays of warmth, ‘maternal’ concern and patience around children. Such displays held particular power when concern seemed especially focused on a parent’s own child.

The enactment of such behaviours and displays often contained an essential emotional component. While trust theorists have tended to utilise Goffman’s (1971) metaphor of theatrical performance as a conceptual framework for understanding how actors give an impression of trustworthiness, there is also an insightful resonance with accounts of ‘emotional labour’. Hochschild’s (1983/2003: 7) seminal definition of such labour focuses upon a worker’s management of her/his own feelings in order to “sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others”. This description

summarises well nursery workers' presentation of benevolence, cheerfulness and patience which often supported parents' construction of trust.

Emotional labour can also be conceived as more active attempts to deal with and manage the emotions of the other (James 1989). As Chapter 2 (p.78) noted, Williams (2007) makes a connection between such active emotional management and trust, describing strategic attempts by actors who wish to be trusted to minimise the perception of threat experienced by the other party. Such dynamics were visible in the present study. Staff sought to understand and assuage parents' particular anxieties: a range of displays and actions attempted to reframe the preschool context as less threatening, so that positive expectations of preschool use might become more attainable to parents. Exhibitions of empathy can be identified as especially significant (p.163): such displays indicated altruistic fellow feeling, thus signalling benevolence (see also Williams 2007); in addition they showed respect for and comprehension of parents' concerns. From such a basis of apparent fellow feeling workers offered reassurance to parents which, perhaps, had more purchase precisely because parents' anxieties had been acknowledged and respected. Workers' "outward countenance" of warmth, compassion and confidence was again central. But there were also other processes by which workers eased parents' concerns, such as explanations of the nature of preschool provision, presentation of workers' expertise and experience, reassurance about children's responses when left at the setting, and provision of selected information about the daily operation of the nursery.

All staff might support or undermine trust by their behaviour or demeanour. But the nursery manager's behaviours and character held special importance as a signal of the nursery's reliability (p.133-134; p.160). The manager was assessed by parents both as a nursery practitioner, whose exhibited expertise and warmth might especially support their trust, and also as the leader who set the nursery's ethos and standards. In addition, the emotional support which the manager provided at key moments might be fundamental: a manager's reassurance during an initial visit, or when children were left at the nursery for the first time, might strongly support parents' trust; the emotional connection with a manager which might develop at such traumatic moments was sometimes central to trust on an ongoing basis. Within emerging commentaries upon early years management and leadership there has been little explicit consideration of

managers' role in building parents' trust. Lindon and Lindon (2011) describe preschool leaders' important role in nurturing trust - but their focus is inward, upon trust among workers and between staff and leaders, and not outward towards parents' trust in the nursery. Other commentators identify the manager's importance in facilitating communication and partnership working with parents (for instance, Daly et al. 2009), but make little reference to building trust. The current study identifies, however, nursery managers' direct impact upon parents' trust - a demanding challenge which required not only effective self-presentation in the dual roles of caring practitioner and effective leader, but also strong skills of emotional management and responsiveness to parents' specific needs and vulnerabilities.

The emphasis upon performance and emotional labour does not imply that workers' behaviours (and their trustworthiness) were false or contrived. For Beckert (2005) such performance by the party who wishes to be trusted is not a manipulation, but a support which enables the other (here the parent) to take the step to trust. But there are hazards for both parents and providers. For parents there remains in theory the possibility that exhibited behaviours or emotional labour are inauthentic (Steinberg and Figart 1999; Bacharach and Gambetta 2001). Providers, on the other hand, face a performance trap: they must ensure that their competence and benevolence is seen; yet a deliberate attempt to appear trustworthy, if perceived as a contrivance, is likely to be counterproductive.

### ***8.2.5 Disadvantage and trust***

The participation of vulnerable children and families in preschool provision has been a central focus of policy for successive governments. The study has offered some explanation for the difficulties which disadvantaged parents may face in trusting provision. This section considers consequent implications for policy.

Given that disadvantaged parents faced obstacles in collecting information to support decisions about trust (p.215-216), interventions which seek to support parents' market participation by providing information about provision, regulation and the choice process may offer some benefit. There already exists a statutory duty upon local authorities to provide information about preschool provision to parents (Childcare Act 2006: section 12). The local authority in which the empirical study took place employed childcare outreach workers to supply information and to support parents'

decision-making (p.87). None of the parents, however, reported contact with these workers, indicating that the practical reach of such programmes may be limited. Further, it is commonly stressed that the information thus disseminated is factual and ‘impartial’ (Local Authority website). Such information, while useful, may have only limited impact upon the development of trust: it is not equivalent, for instance, to the insight provided through personal recommendations, which derive their power not simply from factual content, but from the offering of explicit opinion about the nature of specific provision.

There were, further, two groups of disadvantaged parents for whom the development of trust seemed especially challenging and distinct. First, a number of disadvantaged parents experienced particular obstacles to, and isolation from, preschool use. Difficulties in trusting might be a barrier to participation; at the least, use of preschool provision might be a traumatic process. Such findings confirm that certain actors may not have the immediate capacity to engage in the critical construction of trust within welfare markets (Taylor-Gooby 2006; p.69 above) – although, as noted earlier, the findings argue against an overly deterministic pessimism around the relationship between disadvantage and trust. Central to the construction of trust for such parents were two interventions which allowed its gradual development even before preschool provision was used. First, as described in section 6.4.3, the provision of integrated services at a single site by a cohesive organisation enabled parents to build familiarity and trust incrementally before nursery use. Second, parents might build a trusting relationship with a key professional, such as a health visitor, midwife or outreach worker. Signposting of preschool provision or other services by such trusted professionals was akin to a valued recommendation; sometimes only encouragement by a trusted outreach worker enabled a parent to engage with early years services (for a similar finding, see Garbers et al. 2006). Recognition of such a dynamic in part shifts the challenge of developing trust to an earlier moment. It reaffirms the importance of outreach work; it suggests too that interactions with professionals in one sphere – such as midwifery - can be utilised to build trust in other services.

Such findings support the emphasis on integrated early years services which has been characteristic of the Sure Start Local Programmes and children’s centres initiatives. It was precisely the close links between services co-located at the centre, facilitated by key

professionals, which enabled parents' gradual development of trust in preschool provision. As noted, however, policy emphasis on preschool provision by PVI organisations, and the dispersal of children's centre functions across multiple sites, risks the disconnection of preschool provision from other services. The removal of the requirement for children's centres to offer full daycare in disadvantaged areas (DfE 2010) may similarly weaken connections between preschool provision and other services.

A second group for whom there was a particular and sometimes difficult set of dynamics around trust were parents who received places from social services. Parents were offered no choice of provision: perhaps in consequence there was a certain fatalism and passivity as parents considered providers' trustworthiness. Social services' involvement was not necessarily troubling: it might, indeed, be interpreted as a recommendation that the provision was trustworthy. But a social services placement might also be held to signify poor quality and a parent's inferior status as a preschool user; the monitoring and safeguarding function undertaken by providers on behalf of social services presented to one parent a particular barrier to trust, raising suspicions about the provider's benevolence towards the parent. The sensitive management of such suspicions is an essential task for practitioners, given that social services placements may be the foundation for vulnerable parents' interactions with wider services. The insights here are derived from a small number of cases; there would be benefit from further empirical investigation.

### ***8.2.6 Trust and preschool policy: concluding thoughts***

This study has found little support for more pessimistic warnings of the negative impact upon trust of welfare service reform. Market-based provision – as long as any monetary exchange was sensitively handled - was not antithetical to parents' construction of trust; there may indeed be a competition to win parents' trust as providers seek customers in the marketplace. Regulatory systems provided an underpinning foundation for trust – although not all aspects of regulation fitted with parents' understandings of the preschool context. Within these frameworks of service delivery parents assessed trust at least in part by seeking to identify the intrinsic benevolence and commitment of staff: there was no obvious driving out of value-based or affective understandings of trust.

Instead, there are more nuanced challenges for policy and practice. First, parents' active construction of trust carries implications for practice at interpersonal and organisational levels. There was a requirement for preschool staff to make explicit displays of competence and intrinsic benevolence in their interactions with parents, and to make use of skills of emotional management; organisational behaviours and structures such as transparency, communication and stable staffing might strongly facilitate or impede parents' construction of trust. Second, the relationship of familiarity to trust creates a set of challenges for policy and practice. Staff turnover – especially among managers – and organisational closures may weaken trust because acquired familiarity is lost. For parents who are vulnerable or unconfident consumers there is particular value in the gradual acquisition of familiarity with a nursery. In these cases there is benefit in a move away from fragmented market-based mechanisms to more holistic and integrated service provision at a single site, by which means trust may be constructed even before preschool provision is used.

There is a final but fundamental consideration. Trust, as described in this study, is a valuable and often essential psychological state. It can enable participation in preschool provision; it eases the painful anxiety which may accompany the giving of one's child to the care of another. The strengthening of parents' trust in preschool provision is in this sense an appropriate aim of policy and practice. Yet not all trust is good: misplaced trust can be extremely harmful. The preferred goal of policy must, therefore, not simply be that parents trust preschool provision, but that such trust is well-placed – that parents invest their trust in provision which is trustworthy. Such an outcome depends in part upon the accuracy of parents' evaluations of trustworthiness. But it also depends on the actual reliability of providers. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the trustworthiness of providers and parents' trust in provision are distinct phenomena which demand distinct explanations. Policy interventions which encourage providers' trustworthiness are not necessarily those which strengthen trust. It may be, for instance, that extrinsic market incentives, although dismissed by parents, indeed encourage reliable provision; it may also be that higher level staff qualifications, although lacking meaning to parents, would support more consistent and effective preschool provision (Sylva et al. 2004; Nutbrown 2012). There is thus a requirement for a dual policy approach which both supports parents' trust, but also seeks to improve the reliability of provision so that such trust is justified.

### **8.3 Concluding thoughts and future research**

Seabright (2010: 3), in his discussion of the origins of economic transactions, considers it to be ‘a miracle... that we ever trust strangers at all’. This study has explored an especially remarkable example of such trust – the entrusting by parents of their young children to the care of a group of other people. It has provided a range of insights into how – and indeed whether - parents achieve such trust. The study has thus added to emerging understandings of parents’ choice of and interactions with preschool provision; it has provided empirical insights into the operation and nature of trust within a significant welfare service.

There are multiple possibilities for future research. A similar study might be undertaken in a contrasting geographical area in order to explore whether trust construction and information collection are affected by local contexts. In addition the study’s findings imply multiple avenues for focused research into specific dimensions of trust in the preschool field. Certain possibilities have already been described, such as the effect of gender upon approaches to trust (p.261-262), the relationship between organisational form and the structures and behaviours which support or impede trust (p.277), and the challenge of attaining trust for parents who receive places from social services (p.282). Other directions for research also emerge from the study’s findings. First, the study emphasises that providers must actively earn parents’ trust. While some data was obtained from preschool managers, the study’s primary focus has been upon parents’ perspectives and behaviours. There would be benefit in investigation of preschool workers’ own approaches to and perspectives upon trust-building. Two issues especially merit exploration: the role of preschool leaders in earning trust and reassuring parents; and the conceptual and empirical link between emotional labour and trust. Second, the study has described powerful moments when trust was perceived to be breached by providers. There is growing conceptual and empirical interest in the process of “trust repair” in such circumstances (for instance, Kim et al. 2009; Kramer and Lewicki 2010); the specific dynamic of trust repair in the preschool setting, and in welfare services generally, merits closer examination. There is, finally, the intriguing dynamic of children’s own trust in provision. Children’s expectations of settings, transmitted to parents in various ways, fundamentally informed parents’ trust and decision-making. Empirical investigation of children’s trust is therefore not only of

intrinsic value in adding to knowledge of children's own experiences of preschool, but may also further support understanding of a specific basis of parents' trust.

There is the question, finally, of whether the theoretical insights which emerge from this study have explanatory power across other welfare service contexts. As Chapter 1 observed, the market-based mechanisms, mixed economy of organisations and regulatory systems within the preschool field have much in common with contemporary trajectories of welfare provision. Analytic insights developed in the current study – for instance, around the active construction of trust, around the use of deliberative and intuitive assessment, and around the extent of trust - may support interpretation of users' approaches to trust in other contexts where individual choices are made within a welfare market or quasi-market.

In addition, certain properties of preschool provision affected how trust was attained: inasmuch as these properties are shared with other welfare services, analytic insights here may have wider relevance. Welfare services such as education and health, for instance, are typically characterised by multiple dimensions of quality: the discovery of a significant and nuanced impact upon trust of such multidimensionality of quality may therefore have applicability beyond the preschool context. Similarly, the study has described how parents might assess not simply providers' trustworthiness, but also the trustworthiness of potential fellow users: such a finding is relevant to situations where provision is a shared experience, such as schools, care homes and some health settings. Most powerfully, discovery of the significant impact of parents' understandings of 'care' and caring work upon their approaches to trust has applicability to other welfare contexts where a notion of care is central to provision.

Nonetheless this study also emphasises the importance of the specific transaction context – and its perception by users - in framing the dynamics of trust. How trust is constructed, and what bases of trust have prominence, may depend upon various dimensions within a specific welfare field, such as the opportunity for iterative interactions which may support familiarity, the nature of and responses to regulatory systems, whether decisions are made by third parties or by end-users, and the extent to which users (or third parties acting on their behalf) perceive the technical process of provision to be observable and interpretable. The significance of the particular

technology and context of provision indicates that specific welfare services will require discrete and focused programmes of empirical research into how trust is constructed.

## **Appendix 1: Topic guide for parent interviews**

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### **Introductory questions regarding personal variables**

Son or daughter?

Child's age?

Full-time or part-time place?

First child? Have other children been in preschool provision or childcare?

Have you used other preschool childcare in the past?

Do you use any other preschool childcare at the moment?

How long has your child attended [name of setting]?

Who makes decisions about childcare or preschool in your family?

### **Choice of childcare or preschool**

Can you tell me how you came to choose [name of setting]?

- Feelings at the time?
- Was it a difficult time?
- Barriers to choice?
- Did you make a decision not to use any types of childcare or preschool?
- Did you speak to friends or family?
- Inspection reports?
- Visits to the nursery or other places?  
What questions did you ask?
- Prospectus or leaflet? - were these important?

### Quality

Going back to the time when you were making the decision about which preschool childcare provider to use, can you tell me what you wanted from the childcare?

- Prompts – safety, love, education as appropriate

### Information gap

When you were making your choice of preschool, was it easy to tell whether the preschool was providing the things you were looking for?

### Bases of trust

[name of setting] promised to provide certain services. Did you feel confident they would provide those services?

- Something you heard about the nursery?
- The people you met there?
- Or other characteristics of the centre?
- Or you just had to use the service?

### **Ongoing relationship with preschool setting**

Relationship with the preschool provision at the present time. How do you feel about the nursery provision now? How do you feel about leaving your child at the setting?

### Information gap

Do you think it is easy for you to know how good the nursery provision is? (or what is going on?)

### Assessment of quality

Do you think the nursery setting is doing a good job in looking after your child?

### Ongoing bases of trust

Is there anything in particular that shows you that the nursery is offering a good quality service?

- Is it what you hear about the nursery setting?
- Do you have contact with other parents who use the provision?
- Is it the staff?
- Is it policies and procedures, or other characteristics of the centre?
- Something else?

Have you considered moving [child's name] to another preschool provider?

Have you had anything you weren't happy about? What did you do?

### Parent / provider interactions

Do you try and find out what is going on at the nursery setting?

- Do you try to see what is going in person? Is that easy for you to do?
- Do you talk to the staff?
- Does the nursery tell you what is going on?
- Do you get involved in the activities of the centre or nursery?
- Are there any formal committees or anything of that kind?

How do you get on with the staff?

- How well do you think the staff do their job? What shows you that?
- Has your relationship with staff changed over time? (social relations; personalisation of relationship)

Do you and [name of provider] work together to help [name of child] – for instance, to support your child’s development or resolve any problems he / she might have?

**Miscellaneous items (if do not arise before)**

Do you know what sort of organisation this is (state / forprofit / voluntary)? Does this matter?

Do you think the government has a role in watching over childcare and preschool?

How do you feel about it?

- Curriculum / standards and inspection
- Do you expect the government to ensure that preschool is good quality?

Were the qualifications or training of the staff important to you? Did you ask about the turnover of staff?

Are you aware of: police checks? Are these important?

Was the size of the organisation important?

Did it matter to you which families use the provision?

Preschool provision used in the past

- What other sorts of preschool provision have you used in the past?
- Were you happy with the provision they offered?
- Have you ever taken your child out of a preschool? Why was that?

- Has your past experience of childcare and preschool been useful?

### Use of multiple settings

- Characteristics of other preschool
- Are you happier with [name of setting] or with the other preschool?
- Why?
- Do you look for similar things at these two settings?

### **Trust**

When you'd made your choice to come here, but before you started, at that moment did you feel that you trusted the nursery? Why? What did you trust [name of setting] to do?

Now that your child has been at [name of setting] for some time, do you feel that you trust [name of setting]? Why? On what basis?

Has trust changed over time since [child's name] joined [name of setting]?

Is it important for you to trust the provider?

Is there anything that could be done to make you trust preschool childcare more?

Looking back - was there anything that could have helped you trust [name of setting] more when you were choosing the preschool?

### **Personal details**

Finally, I'd just like to ask some questions about you and your partner to create some context.

- Job
- Ethnic group
- Highest educational qualifications.
- Household composition

Would you mind if I took your telephone number or email in case I have any queries?

### **Closure**

## **Appendix 2: Topic guide for preschool manager interviews**

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### **Nature of local preschool market**

Can you tell me about the preschool and childcare market in this area?

- Is there competition between preschool providers for parents and children?
- Do you think parents have much choice?

### **Quality and ethos**

How would you describe the purpose and ethos of this nursery?

### **Representation of nursery at moment of choice**

I'd like to talk about how parents come to choose your nursery. How would you describe that process?

*Prompts as necessary:*

- How do parents hear about this nursery?
- What is the admissions process for the nursery?
- What information is available to parents?
- Are there opportunities for parents to visit the nursery when they are deciding about preschool? What happens?
- What do you think parents are looking for when they are choosing childcare or preschool provision?
  - *Prompts as appropriate – safety, love, education*
- How do you show parents that you can provide those things? What do you emphasise? What happens in the nursery's first interactions with the parent?
- Is it easy for parents to know what the nursery is like at this stage?

### **Representation of nursery**

How do you communicate with prospective parents?

Do you provide written publicity materials? What is the purpose of these?

- Could I see them?
- Is there a website?

How do you describe the nursery to prospective parents?

- What aspects of the nursery do you emphasise? Why is that?
- Chain?
- Ofsted and CRB? Qualifications?

When you are describing your nursery to prospective parents, do you adapt what you say according to the characteristics of the parents you are talking to?

### **Ongoing relationship with parents**

I'd like to move away now from the moment of choice, and think about the ongoing relationship which you have with parents who use the nursery.

#### Information gap

Do you think it's easy for parents to know what goes on at the nursery once their child is here? How?

#### Provider behaviour

How do you show parents that you are doing a good job?

- Prompts – safety, love, education as appropriate

Do you provide feedback to parents? How do you do that?

- One-to-one formal meetings?
- Portfolio / folder?
- Summary of day's events?
- Communication: beginning and end of day?

*Supplementary questions if necessary:*

Is the appearance of the nursery important?

Is the appearance / behaviour / manner of the staff important?

Are procedures and policies important?

#### Relationship with parents

How would you describe the relationship between the nursery and the parents?

What opportunities are there for contact between parents and staff?

Does the relationship change over time?

*Probes as necessary:*

- Can parents visit at any time?
- Do you work together with parents to help the children – for instance, to support children’s development? How well does that work?
- What happens if there is a problem?
- Do you encourage parents to participate in the life of the nursery? In what way?
- Settling in process?

### Parent behaviour

Do parents try to see what is going on? How?

- Do they ask questions?
- Do parents try to see what is going in person?

### **Miscellaneous if not previously covered**

What do you think about government regulation and Ofsted inspections?

- are they meaningful or of interest to parents?

Do parents ever ask about...

- quality assurance
- staff qualifications
- staff turnover
- police checks

### **Trust**

I am interested in how parents trust the nursery provision.

- Do you think parents trust your provision? (start / ongoing?)
- On what basis?
- Is this important to you?
- Is there anything that could be done to strengthen parents’ trust in your provision?

## Structured questions about the setting

Finally I'd like to get some details about the characteristics of your nursery.

What are the characteristics of the parents and children who use this nursery?

- Ethnicity
- Socio-economic
- Jobs
- Household composition

### Type of organisation

- Private nursery
- Private nursery (part of chain)
- Nursery class
- Nursery school
- Children's centre
- Other local authority
- Preschool/Playgroup

### Sector of organisation

Would you classify your setting as..

- Private sector?
- Voluntary or nonprofit sector?
- State sector?

How many years old is the setting?

How many children does the setting look after in these age groups?	FT	PT
▪ Under 2 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
▪ 2 years – under 3 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
▪ 3 years – under 4 years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
▪ 4 years and over	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Are there different rooms for these age groups? What is the structure?

What are the costs of...

- Full week place under 2
- Full week place over 2
- A half-day session for a 3 year-old?

Does your setting offer free part-time places for 3 and 4 year-olds?

Some families get help with their childcare expenses through government tax credits.

Can you estimate how many children at your setting benefit in this way?

What are your opening hours?

How many full-time equivalent staff are there at your setting?

How many of the setting's permanent staff have left in the last 12 months?

What qualifications or training do your staff have?

## **Closure**

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# Trust and Early Years Childcare: Parents' Relationships with Private, State and Third Sector Providers in England

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## Abstract

Relationships of trust are central to the provision of public services. There are, however, concerns that public service reform may disrupt established trust relations. One such reform is the provision of services by a mix of organisations from state, for-profit and third sectors. This paper reports upon an empirical study of the trust relationships between parents and diverse organisations providing early years childcare. It considers whether organisational form or sector is perceived to be a significant indicator of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness, and examines organisational behaviours which may support or hinder trusting relationships. The paper reports that *a priori* signals, such as sector, have little effect on decisions to trust. Instead, parents actively construct trust through observation of and interactions with providers. Attention therefore shifts to trust-producing organisational behaviours, such as transparency, and to trust-reducing behaviours, such as staff turnover. The paper identifies some benefit in provision through an integrated centre, where parents develop trust over time prior to preschool childcare use. Such a process may be particularly helpful to parents who face disadvantage.

## Introduction

Relationships of trust are both important and complex in the provision of public services, such as health, education or childcare. In such fields, quality can be difficult to monitor or measure, thus creating information asymmetries between service providers and users (Arrow, 1963). The vulnerability of users is also high, since the costs of poor provision may be severe. In such a context, assessment of the trustworthiness of a provider is a central dilemma. There are, however, concerns that institutional change in the delivery of public services in England – for instance, market-based approaches or the growth of top-down audit and inspection – may disrupt embedded trust relations (O'Neill, 2002; Marquand, 2004). Such concerns are situated within a wider societal context of uncertainty in which trust in professionals, expert systems and government is seen to be declining (Taylor-Gooby, 2006).

Research into the impact of public service reforms on trust has been located at, on the one hand, the institutional level and, on the other, the interpersonal level. Thus there has been consideration of public trust in the pensions system or the National Health Service (Hyde *et al.*, 2007; Taylor-Gooby, 2007), and of individual transactions between professionals and users (Alaszewski, 2003). Empirical research has not adequately addressed the intermediary level between institutional and interpersonal trust – namely, users’ trust in organisations. This is a significant omission for two reasons. First, organisations have been an important focus of public sector reform. A cross-sectoral mix of state, for-profit and third sector organisations has been encouraged to provide services across fields such as social care and health. Second, organisational form is theoretically relevant to trust; there are in particular diverse propositions about the perceived trustworthiness of state, for-profit and third sector organisations.

This paper reports findings from an empirical study which has explored users’ trust in organisations which provide preschool childcare. Preschool childcare is a rich arena in which to explore such relationships. In common with other public services, the evaluation of quality by the purchaser is held to be difficult (Krashinsky, 1986); further, there are few transactions in which vulnerability is so pronounced as in the entrusting of a child to the care of a stranger. In such circumstances, trust, as a positive expectation of others’ reliability, is likely to be both fundamental and challenging. In addition policy initiatives in England have favoured provision by a variety of organisations. The first section of the paper describes this mixed economy of childcare; it is followed by an overview of theoretical propositions about the relationship between users’ trust and organisational form. The paper then presents findings from the empirical study. It considers to what extent organisational form or sector is perceived to be a significant indicator of trustworthiness, examines the role of for-profit firms’ organisational reputation as a basis for trust, and investigates organisational behaviours which may support or hinder a trusting relationship. A discussion explores these findings and considers policy implications.

### **The mixed economy of childcare**

There has been sustained policy interest and substantial investment in preschool childcare in England since 1997, founded upon twin objectives: improved early learning opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged children; and increased labour market participation by mothers to improve children’s material wellbeing (Lewis, 2003). Notwithstanding this interest, the level of state funding and the availability of affordable, high-quality early years provision have remained low in the UK compared to many EU countries (West *et al.*, 2010).

Recent policy initiatives in this area have been characteristic of contemporary public sector reform. There has been a strengthening of top-down regulation through a detailed curriculum (Childcare Act, 2006) and through inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). The dominant institutional mechanism for the delivery of childcare has been the market and parental choice of preschool provider within a mixed economy of organisations (Lewis, 2003; DCSE, 2009a). The government's early years education programme, for instance, offers free part-time places for children aged three and four years: it is enacted through a quasi-voucher system whereby parents select between providers from state, third or for-profit sectors (West, 2006). Local authorities must ensure a 'diverse range of providers in line with parental choice' (SureStart, 2006: 16). Thus, in 2009 over half the three-year old population attended private, voluntary or independent (PVI) organisations; other provision was offered by state nursery schools or state nursery classes attached to primary or infant schools (DCSE, 2009b). A second key initiative, the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit, is again market-based: demand-side subsidies are used by low-income parents to make their choice of provider in the childcare market. Even within policies that are not explicitly market-based, there is emphasis on PVI provision. The government's high profile Sure Start children's centres initiative is an example. Children's centres bring together health, social services and other support for parents and young children; in the 30 per cent most disadvantaged communities, such centres must offer full day childcare (although not for free). Where supply of childcare is insufficient, local authorities are again required to favour PVI providers (DfES, 2006).

The mixed economy of organisations, however, does not imply direct competition: despite the rhetoric of choice, there may be few possibilities for parents to choose between sectors. There is little state provision for children younger than three years, and state provision for three- and four-year-old children is generally limited to term time only, thus often compelling parents to use PVI provision. Further, choice of PVI providers may itself be constrained because the level of fees can be unaffordable (West, 2006); thus users of private daycare have a higher socio-economic profile than users at other settings (Bryson *et al.*, 2006).

The delivery of childcare through a market-based mixed economy has been challenged. There is concern that the parent/provider relationship has been reduced to financial exchange (Ball and Vincent, 2005). The quality of provision, the level of qualifications and the extent of funding in PVI settings have also been questioned (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; West, 2006; West *et al.*, 2010). Particular challenges face low-income parents, who may be forced to interact with formalised childcare with which they are uncomfortable (Dean, 2007), and who simultaneously experience constraints on choice because of a lack of affordable care (Ball and Vincent, 2005). There has, however, been little consideration of the dynamics of trust within this mixed economy of organisations.

### Trust and organisational form

There are diverse theoretical propositions about the trust advantages of organisational forms or sectors; cutting across these propositions are contrasting understandings of the nature of trust. This brief overview identifies two groups of propositions: first, rational actor approaches to trust, and, second, normative and institutional perspectives. Both share a view of trust as, fundamentally, an *a priori* construction: a decision to trust rests upon pre-existing organisational signals, rather than upon users' first-hand observation of organisational behaviours.

#### Rational actor perspectives

Rational actor accounts focus on reputation, which is held to be especially central to consumers' decision-making when the characteristics of a good are hard to measure (Ortmann, 1996). It is 'reputational enforcement' within a market which underpins the perceived trustworthiness of for-profit firms (Ortmann, 1996: 475). If a profit-making firm is discovered to be skimping on quality or otherwise profiteering, its reputation will be damaged: consumers will be less likely to enter into future transactions, and profits will be diminished. There is, then, an incentive for firms to protect their reputation by acting in a trustworthy manner; a good reputation therefore becomes, for the consumer, an indicator of likely trustworthiness. Protection of reputation may be especially urgent for profit-making chains, since damage to a chain's reputation could be extremely costly (Hansmann, 1996). For Hardin (2006: 19), the incentive to protect reputation through trustworthy action is an example of trust as 'encapsulated interest' – the interests of provider and consumer are aligned. Such trust is fundamentally calculative, being a probability estimate of the constraints and incentives which will influence the future action of the organisation in which trust may be invested.

Alternatively, it is argued that, where quality is hard to measure, organisations which do not seek profit may seem more trustworthy: it is, after all, the goal of profit-maximisation which creates incentives to skimp on promised quality. Thus non-profit organisations, on account of a legal constraint on the distribution of profits, may seem to have less incentive to act opportunistically (Hansmann, 1996). There are doubts, however, whether such legal constraints are either meaningful to users or perceived to be effectively enforced by the state (Anheier and Kendall, 2002). Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1993) instead focus upon control of the non-profit organisation by stakeholders who themselves use the organisation's services. Such user control becomes a signal of trustworthiness, since any reduction in quality harms the controlling stakeholders as well as other consumers; it is not simply a protection against exploitation, but also a powerful incentive to supply high-quality provision.

In conditions of information asymmetry, state providers should share the same advantages as non-profit organisations, except where the latter boast

meaningful user control (Rose-Ackerman, 1996). Again, government providers have no profit-maximising incentive to exploit information asymmetries. On the other hand, in the absence of competitive forces, there may appear to be little incentive for state services to be effective or responsive.

### Social and institutional perspectives

A second group of approaches regards perceptions of organisational trustworthiness not as a calculation of constraints and incentives, but as attributions which are situated within a social and institutional environment of norms, taken-for-granted meanings and rules. Such approaches broadly fit with the understanding of trust presented by Möllering (2005). Organisational characteristics may act as signals of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness through their resonance or dissonance with normative or taken-for-granted beliefs.

The profit motive, for instance, may be considered normatively untrustworthy. Such a response, characterised by feelings of discomfort or suspicion, is conceptually distinct from a calculative assessment of the risk of exploitation. Thus Arrow (1963: 950) proposes that profit-making in medical services may cause patients to experience 'suspicion and antagonism'. As a corollary, organisations which appear motivated by non-pecuniary values may seem *a priori* trustworthy. Non-profit organisations may have a particular advantage: for Jeavons (1994: 186) 'trustworthiness goes to the core of the reason for the existence of these organizations'. Value-based orientations can be conveyed through ethical or religious missions, rootedness in the community or a generalised notion that non-profit organisations exist to fulfil caring functions or as an institutional expression of altruism (James, 1987; Jeavons, 1994). Policy documents indeed argue that third sector providers are well-positioned to build trust, particularly with vulnerable or hard-to-reach users (HM Treasury/Cabinet Office, 2007; HM Treasury/DCSF 2007). In Mauser's (1998) US study of childcare, only 14 per cent of parents identified organisational form as an important determinant in choosing a provider – but of these parents almost all favoured non-profit provision. The state too may be perceived to embody values of altruism or benevolence. Marquand (2004: 135) proposes that 'the public domain is . . . the domain of trust'; it is the state's 'service ethic' which guarantees quality and which is seen to contrast with the processes and language of the market.

### Research questions

Given these propositions, this paper explores three research questions:

- Is sector or organisational form perceived to be a significant *a priori* signal of trustworthiness? Research must not only record users' opinions, but also reveal whether such opinions influence behaviour (Malani and David, 2008).

- Is reputation important as an *a priori* indication of the incentives and constraints which will regulate future organisational behaviour – particularly the behaviour of for-profit chains?
- Are there other behaviours or characteristics of organisations which support trust?

### The study

An empirical study explored how and to what extent parents trusted preschool childcare provision. Research was undertaken across five organisations in inner London (Table 1): a state nursery class attached to an infant school; a large for-profit daycare chain; a parent-run third sector preschool; a non-profit social enterprise daycare chain, which was not parent-run; and a state integrated centre in which early education was offered through a state nursery school. The selection

Table 1. Selection of organisations

Organisational type	Description	Theoretical trust dimension
State nursery class	A nursery provided by local government at a state-owned infant school.	Absence of profit-making Normative beliefs about 'public sector ethos'
For-profit daycare chain	A private daycare chain which distributes profits to the owners of capital.	Maintenance of market reputation constrains cheating Normative beliefs about profit-making
Parent-run preschool	A non-profit nursery governed by parents which has evolved from the community-based playgroup movement.	Constraints on profit-making User/stakeholder control Third sector values
Social enterprise daycare chain	A local daycare chain which reinvests profits back into the service. The organisation is not governed by parents.	Constraints on profit-making Third sector values Formalised/professionalised non-profit: not parent-run
State integrated centre (children's centre lead setting)	A centre provided by local government which offers a range of services to children and families. Within the centre preschool education and care is offered by a state-owned nursery school provided by local government.	As nursery class

of organisations was informed by propositions about trust and organisational form (as listed in Table 1), and also by organisations' policy relevance. Daycare nurseries, preschools, nursery classes and nursery schools lie at the heart of the childcare mixed economy: excluding state reception classes,<sup>1</sup> these are the forms of preschool group childcare most commonly used by parents (Bryson *et al.*, 2006). In addition, the state integrated centre was the lead setting of a children's centre, which enabled the study to consider this policy initiative.

Twenty-seven semi-structured in-depth interviews were undertaken with parents whose children were attending the settings. Approaches to parents were made with the assistance of nursery managers. Five or six parents were interviewed at each organisation. Where possible, parents of children aged three or four years were selected: at this age parents have, in principle, the fullest choice of organisational forms. The study sought to include parents from a variety of backgrounds. Using household occupational status, twelve parents were categorised as working class (the majority of whom were from Black or Minority Ethnic backgrounds); within this group, five households did not have employment. Fifteen parents were categorised as middle class, of whom one was unemployed (the majority of this group were from white backgrounds).<sup>2</sup> Eight participants were lone parents, of whom three had been allocated childcare by state social services, and therefore had no effective choice of provision. Twenty-two mothers and five fathers participated: this imbalance was not unexpected, given evidence that it is overwhelmingly mothers who arrange childcare (see, for instance, Vincent and Ball, 2001).

The selection of parents, finally, was not consistent across organisations. Parents at the parent-run preschool and the for-profit chain had a generally high socio-economic profile; by contrast a number of parents at the state integrated centre and at the social enterprise daycare chain faced disadvantage. Such a contrast was also not unexpected, given socio-economic segregation in the childcare market (Ball and Vincent, 2005; Bryson *et al.*, 2006).

Interviews explored parents' trust in providers, both at the moment of choice and as the relationship developed. Bases of trust were considered broadly and not limited to organisational form and behaviour; such an approach permitted understanding of the relative importance of organisations. The interview process also enabled investigation of the association between parents' opinions of organisational form and their actual behaviours.

## Findings

Findings are presented in two sections. First, *a priori* beliefs about the trustworthiness of sectors, ownership forms and organisational reputation are discussed; such beliefs are found to have little relevance to parents' decision-making about the trustworthiness of childcare. Instead, as described in the second

section, evaluations of trustworthiness were actively constructed by parents; from an organisational perspective, attention therefore switches from *a priori* consideration of structures to observed organisational behaviours which were perceived to be more or less trustworthy. Such active construction of trust had a distinctive dynamic for a number of parents who used the integrated centre; these parents, through experience of services at the centre *prior* to childcare use, developed trust through familiarity over time, rather than within a brief choice process.

Before considering these findings, it is worth noting that the very concept of an 'organisation' was a fundamental basis of trust for some parents. This is a relevant finding in the context of childcare in England, in which provision is often offered in a domestic setting through individual actors, such as childminders and nannies. An organised group setting was considered to be a public space in which wrongdoing or incompetence was difficult to conceal:

a nursery is a public place . . . there is more control . . . people who have problems or they're sick or they do nasty things, they tend to do it in private rather than in public. (preschool parent 5)

There were perceived to be multiple actors who supervised behaviours, and an organisational structure which controlled and monitored:

The big choice . . . was whether to use a childminder or a nursery . . . I felt I trusted a nursery more, trusted . . . the organisation more . . . You've got the nursery nurses and you've got the supervisory nurses and you've got a structure that's checking and you've got other parents . . . (private chain parent 2)

The public space of the nursery was contrasted with the uncontrollable and unsupervised domestic setting, which created the opportunity to skimp on quality or to commit abuse:

I wouldn't use a nanny in my home . . . having two girls . . . I'm very untrusting of people I don't know looking after my kids . . . the opportunity's not there for nasty things to happen [in a group setting], whereas, one on one in a home . . . the opportunity is there. (preschool parent 3)

Previous research has found that working-class parents are particularly likely to disapprove of childminding (Vincent *et al.*, 2008); here, however, fears of individual childcarers were equally reported by working-class and middle-class parents.

Such views were not universal. Several parents had successfully used childminding in the past. Some had rejected childminding, not on the grounds of trust, but because a group setting would be beneficial for children's social development. Nonetheless the organisation, as public space, was a pertinent basis of trust for a number of parents.

### **Sectors and organisational form as signals of trustworthiness**

The study found little evidence that organisational form or sector was a significant basis of parents' decisions to trust. For a number of working-class parents in particular, the concept of sector or ownership was meaningless or confusing. There was incomprehension of third sector provision among parents from all backgrounds – even some parents who were using such provision mistakenly believed that the setting was state-owned. For other parents, sector was simply not relevant:

Taking my child to a private school doesn't necessarily make me more trusting . . . you can get a mad teacher in a private school that will . . . stress your child out. And you can have the same in the state school. (private chain 5)

didn't really worry us whether it was private or public. (preschool parent 3)

A minority of parents, however, did hold opinions about the predicted reliability of state and for-profit organisations. Yet there was little evidence that such beliefs played a central role in parents' perceptions of trustworthiness. These findings are considered in turn.

### **Opinions and beliefs**

A number of parents held strong, often contrasting beliefs about the trustworthiness of different organisations. There were, for instance, opposing views of state provision. For one working-class parent who used the state integrated centre, state provision brought 'peace of mind':

I thought, well, there mustn't be anything dodgy going on here because this is a council nursery. It's not a private nursery where it might be more difficult to keep an eye on what . . . [it is] doing. (integrated centre parent 4)

By contrast a middle-class parent at the private chain believed that state employees would be poorly motivated because of low salaries and a certain ethos – 'government employees set in a certain way'. Similar views were expressed by a working-class parent who used the social enterprise daycare chain and who, perhaps because her child had been allocated a place through social services, mistook the organisation for a government agency. Strong negative opinions were therefore applied by her to the social enterprise as if it were a state provider. State provision was perceived to be inadequately funded; as a result staff:child ratios would be poor and children would receive insufficient attention. This parent's expectations were low:

I knew it from day one that . . . I'm not going to expect the highest, the best quality . . . it's not that they don't want to do it, they can't because there's not enough staff . . . (social enterprise parent 1)

There were similarly contrasting views on the reliability of for-profit provision. Some parents expressed concern that profit-seeking might affect behaviours, and that providers would renege on promised quality behind closed doors:

there are some problems with ... the profit-related drive ... where they are cutting costs to maintain a profit and ... they're employing cheap labour ... I'll ... be watching out for it. (private chain parent 5)

you pay money in some nursery ... when you ... visit them, they say, 'oh we do this, we do this ...', but when you leave them and go home, they don't do nothing. (integrated centre parent 2)

A parent's disturbing previous experience at a large profit-making chain was also attributed to the profit motive:

you have all these entrepreneurs think, 'let's make the money' ... opening these awful ... unfriendly, unloved child-caring places. (nursery class parent 3)

Alternatively some parents who used the for-profit chain believed that the interests of a profit-making provider were aligned with parents' desire for high quality. These beliefs in principle were consistent with preservation of reputation as an incentive for trustworthy behaviour among for-profit firms:

it is about satisfying ... parents ... [If] a parent is unhappy with the nursery, the child is obviously not getting on ... ultimately the nursery will go out of business. (private chain parent 5)

A flourishing for-profit chain was generally considered, by the parents who used it, to be a reassuring signal that the organisation had historically met parent demand.

There was, however, little support for the proposition that a chain's behaviour is in practice constrained by the need to protect its reputation. Poor performance in one nursery was unlikely to contaminate other settings in the chain: information about such poor performance would probably not reach parents elsewhere; even if information did filter through, nurseries were stand-alone entities, each of which must be judged on its own merits:

the people are different ... not because it's a [name of chain] nursery you have to blame all of them ... You cannot put the blame one nursery to another one. (private chain parent 1)

There was, finally, little comment about third sector organisations. A middle-class parent at the for-profit chain was 'a great believer in the voluntary sector doing stuff like this': nonetheless he did not believe that the third sector was more trustworthy than the private. By contrast, for a working-class parent who used the nursery class, non-profit provision carried a stigma: she would not choose for

her child a 'charity place'. None of the parents who used the parent-run preschool identified parent control as a meaningful signal of trustworthiness.

### Beliefs and behaviours

There were thus diverse opinions about the quality and reliability implied by different sectors. The study sought to understand how far such beliefs were enacted. Significantly, parents' opinions about sectors, no matter how strong, had little influence upon behaviours. Thus two parents at the for-profit provider supported the idea of a chain – but for neither was it a significant part of their choice process. Another parent was enthusiastic about third sector provision, but made no attempt to seek it out – he was, indeed, unaware that such provision was available locally. Such patterns were repeated by other parents. Beliefs in this context became *post facto* sources of reassurance: knowledge that a nursery was part of a profit-making chain, or conversely that it was state-owned, was a further comfort that choices had been correct rather than an intrinsic dimension within a decision to trust.

To an extent, parents' choices were constrained by availability and affordability of provision. Only four middle-class parents had a genuine choice across all three sectors; another four parents limited their own choice set by seeking only provision attached to state schools. Nonetheless, while such barriers to choice were of concern to parents, there was generally no expressed resentment about an inability to access any organisational sector. There was one clear exception. Social enterprise parent 1, because she received her child's place through social services, had no choice of organisation. Her preference was strongly for private provision, and her mistaken belief that the social enterprise was state-run informed her lack of trust in the quality of care which her children would receive.

There were no other cases in which *a priori* beliefs about sector or organisational form were a primary or essential reason for trusting or distrusting a nursery – whether because the majority of parents did not hold such beliefs, or because such beliefs were not central to decisions around trust. Instead, parents overwhelmingly focused on the characteristics of individual nurseries and their staff:

I didn't really worry about whether they're a chain or not. I was worried about this nursery and ... the care my child's going to get here. (private chain parent 3)

### Active construction of trust and organisational behaviours

Thus propositions that organisational form or sector are an essential *a priori* signal of trustworthiness are not supported here. Therefore we move to the third research question – do organisational characteristics or behaviour otherwise contribute to trust? It is necessary first to consider how parents approached the

issue of trust. Instead of relying on *a priori* signals, parents gave prominence to their own critical assessments of the quality of provision. Such assessments were underpinned by confidence that information asymmetries were not insurmountable:

if you're relatively astute, you can... work out for yourself if it's a good one or a bad one. (preschool parent 4)

Critical assessment took place across numerous dimensions. First, parents directly observed task performance – for instance, the interaction between staff and children. Such observations were possible even during an initial visit to a nursery. As the relationship developed, iterative interactions created frequent opportunities for parents to assess the nursery's performance and reliability. Second, the motivations and dispositions of staff were assessed. Settings were rejected because staff were 'gloomy'; staff impressed because 'you can see when someone really enjoys their job and actually takes care in what they're doing' (preschool parent 4). Third, recommendation from acquaintances was combined with parents' own observations to paint a picture of the nursery:

I came here, I talked to my friends, and I had a feel for the place ... and at the beginning the mums are allowed to stay with the children. So I knew ... what they are doing, what kind of place it is. (preschool parent 2)

Fourth, children's feedback was a valued resource. Whether through report, stories or simple willingness or unwillingness to attend, children communicated the extent of their happiness, a key aspect of quality for all parents. Parents were confident too in their ability to monitor child development, and to attribute such development (whether good or bad) to attendance at preschool.

The focus and extent of such critical assessments varied within parents' accounts. Some parents were significantly more active in observing and assessing staff: such parents were predominantly, but not exclusively, middle class. Nonetheless for all participants trust in preschool provision was not a passive process, based on *a priori* assumptions. It was instead an active construction, drawing upon parents' observations and interpretations of providers' behaviours and children's responses. The objects of such observations were typically individual staff members. However, the process was also situated within the context of the organisation. A number of organisational behaviours can be identified which contributed to or confounded the active construction of trust.

### **The problem of money and business**

Several parents reported that organisations exhibited a certain emphasis on business behaviours and money-making. Such behaviour might be sufficient reason not to use a provider. One middle-class parent, during an initial visit, was taken aback by the immediate and detailed reference to payment:

you had to pay way ahead . . . it was almost like a money-making machine . . . you had to give . . . a whole term notice otherwise they wouldn't give you anything back. I felt that they were really keen on making as much money as they could. (nursery class parent 4)

Such a focus on money undermined trust:

I felt it . . . had a certain purpose . . . I don't want to say that I thought that maybe I would be taken advantage of, but I didn't like it.

More subtly, a parent rejected a nursery in the social enterprise chain because she was treated as a customer in a business transaction. The private chain nursery was different: here she 'was treated like a mum who was looking for a place for her child'. In this case the success of the private chain (and failure of the social enterprise) indicates that it is not profit-making *per se* that is problematic; rather, parents are disturbed by observed behaviours or representations which imply the prioritisation of money within the childcare relationship.

### Transparency

Organisational transparency supported parents' trust in two ways. First, it enabled direct observation of the preschool's task performance and a child's contentment:

I came from time to time to sit . . . to see what's going on, to see how she's playing . . . how the staff look at her. (integrated centre parent 1)

[I] visited . . . without warning . . . to see what was going on. I was able to look through the window . . . he seemed to be absolutely having a whale of a time. (private chain parent 5)

Such observation was facilitated by 'settling-in' periods, offered across all settings, during which a parent stayed at a nursery while the child became familiar with the environment. On an ongoing basis, parents observed the nursery when they dropped off or picked up their children.

Of course, trust would not flourish if parents observed poor performance. One decision to exit a nursery was informed by what parents saw when they sat in on sessions:

the way they reacted with the children wasn't terribly good. They did tend to shout. There was a couple of situations where they were ignoring children who were distressed . . . that's always worrying . . . (preschool parent 4)

Second, transparency indicated that an organisation was confident in its own competence. For one parent, the for-profit chain's willingness for him to visit without warning 'made me feel reassured'. For another:

it gives you trust because you know what they're doing and they're not afraid of anything and they don't want to hide anything. (preschool parent 5)

All organisations sought to be transparent: the private chain and social enterprise used the same terminology of an ‘open-door policy’, by which parents, in principle, might visit the nursery at any time. The nursery class and social enterprise preferred parents to give warning of a visit, in order to prevent disruption. But transparency was especially meaningful if warning was not given, so that the possibility of manufactured performance was excluded.

The significance of transparency was emphasised by situations in which it was absent. One parent had used a nursery in Spain where ‘they wouldn’t open the door for you’. She felt compelled to undertake covert monitoring, a behaviour which implied strong distrust:

I had to do some spying . . . I found a little hole in the wall . . . I did my best to check any time I could. (preschool parent 5)

For one parent, the structure of the private chain inherently lacked transparency. Parents were not kept informed during a period of managerial instability:

the fact that there’s a chain . . . things . . . go on obviously we don’t know about, that mean that the turnover of managers has been too high. (private chain parent 2)

### Communication

All organisations sought to communicate with parents through mechanisms such as parent visits, record books of children’s achievements, or conversations at the beginning and end of sessions. Frequent communication created a sense of openness, and also gave parents confidence that problems would be resolved:

[the manager’s] communication impressed me . . . she was very open . . . and told me what’s what, which I liked. (private chain parent 3)

[I] have almost a day-to-day catch-up . . . if I’ve got a concern, it . . . gets dealt with immediately. (ibid.)

Frequent communicative interactions developed the relationships between parents and staff:

There’s always the words for you, not like strangers bringing your child up . . . I feel like I’m coming in to see my friends. (private chain parent 1)

I’ve got to know some of the people who work here and chat to them when I come to pick up my son . . . I feel I’ve got an understanding of the place just through my knowledge of them. (private chain parent 5)

Two factors appeared key to effective communication. First, the accessibility of staff was important – for some parents communication was ideally a daily process. Second, formal reporting – such as parents’ evenings or record books – did not have strong significance. It was the rich information provided through

informal interactions at the beginning and end of sessions which was valued. The meaningfulness and benefit of these interactions contrasts with findings in previous studies (Vincent *et al.*, 2008). Middle-class parents in particular were developing strategies to facilitate such informal interactions; in turn, organisations were seeking to enable frequent communicative opportunities.

### **Turnover of staff**

Turnover of staff was unsettling for parents of all backgrounds. It was particularly problematic at the private chain, where management instability and staff turnover had occurred simultaneously. Such turnover disrupted relationships and the familiarity which had built over time:

you are entrusting your child to a group of people . . . once you get to know the people who are looking after your child, it's unsettling if they then go. (private chain parent 5)

For another parent, the departure of the manager had still more impact. The strong emotional bond, established by the manager's support when the parent first left her child at the nursery, was irreplaceable.

Turnover also brought new staff into the setting. If such staff were not appropriately introduced to parents, the appearance of strangers was threatening:

every day there was a new person . . . my point was whether that carer was in my child's class or not, that person is in this nursery and I don't know him. (private chain 3)

Two parents at the private chain were explicit: the combination of staff and management turnover, poor communication and lack of transparency substantially reduced their trust.

### **Trust through familiarity: the integrated centre**

Often the active construction of trust implied swift assessments of trustworthiness, based on observation during a single visit. A different dynamic was apparent among those who used the state integrated centre. Parents, through experience of other services provided by the centre at the same physical site, built up knowledge and trust over a period *prior* to use of childcare. Relationships with the centre were typically initiated through use of the drop-in (a play session at which parents stay with their children), before extending to services, such as toy library, adult learning and crèche.

The extended use of services had several effects. First, parents became familiar with the centre and its competence. Second, they were specifically able to observe the nursery over time, making multiple in-depth visits before choosing to use it:

You could . . . bring your child downstairs and have a feel for the nursery . . . it wasn't just the once because obviously we were using the facility . . . you could come down . . . and speak to the staff . . . (integrated centre parent 4)

Third, parents became familiar with nursery staff. Such familiarity was facilitated by the centre's rotation of staff between drop-in, crèche and nursery:

I get used to staff in the crèche . . . some of the staff . . . now . . . work in the nursery. So that's easier to help me settle her in. (integrated centre parent 2)

Finally, parents became familiar with each other. Such interaction brought access to information and recommendation from existing users. Because parents were familiar with the centre, the decision to use the nursery was untroubled:

I didn't really want him to go to another nursery . . . I had built up a rapport . . . it was a comfort to know that I knew where I was going to leave him. (integrated centre parent 4)

Such straightforward decision-making implies a level of trust in the provision. Parents indeed identified as a basis for trust their familiarity with the centre and its staff:

I used to do the computer course – the crèche worker who was looking after my daughter . . . they brought her downstairs in the nursery and she's . . . my daughter's keyworker. That's more for me to trust her. (integrated centre parent 2)

## Discussion

The generalisability of findings from an exploratory study of this kind is necessarily limited. With this caveat, the study uncovered a range of perspectives and perceptions which carry implications for theory and practice. The concept of a childcare 'organisation' was a source of trust for some parents. It was a public space in which the presence of multiple actors and organisational structures was perceived to protect against opportunism or abuse. However, the form or sector of such organisation received limited consideration as a signal of trustworthiness. For many parents these dimensions were not relevant or even comprehensible. Others expressed a miscellany of opinions, ranging from suspicion of the profit motive and trust in public sector processes to belief in the market and critiques of state sector motivations. The study highlights, however, that these perceptions did not constitute the basis of parents' behaviour or, except in a single case, a primary foundation of attributions of trustworthiness. Nor was there support for rational actor propositions that organisational reputation is perceived as a significant incentive which encourages trustworthy behaviour. A small number of parents expressed views consistent with this position – but again there was no evidence that such beliefs informed behaviour. Further, parents' approaches to the for-profit chain confounded theoretical propositions: evidence of poor quality at one nursery was not seen to affect trust in other settings in the chain. The absence of association between opinion and action may be partly attributable to limited opportunities for parents to choose between organisational sectors. It may also be that, just as *a priori* trust in professional status is predicted to

decline in an age of scepticism, so too does trust in certain organisational forms. Alternatively, the childcare market may be of sufficient maturity to enable crude *a priori* signals to be discarded (Anheier and Ben-Ner, 1997).

Parents instead assessed organisations' trustworthiness through their own observations and judgements. Trust was actively constructed (or undermined) within the interactions between parents and nurseries, a finding consistent with Giddens' (1994) notion of 'active trust'. Such dynamic trust construction creates practical challenges for organisations, since, as Giddens (1994: 186) suggests, such trust must be 'energetically treated and sustained'. There appear to be isomorphic pressures which push providers to respond to this challenge in similar ways. Such isomorphism is partly imposed: the state has introduced compulsory mechanisms in an attempt to ensure quality, such as a curriculum, staff:child ratios and safety regulations. Organisations in the study also exhibited similar non-coerced behaviours, such as transparency, regular communication and settling-in periods. Additionally, PVI providers face a specific representational challenge in order to gain trust. In contrast to state provision, which is free at the point of delivery, PVI providers, as trading organisations, must manage the collection of fees. In common with the findings of Vincent and Ball (2001), parents were disturbed when an organisation placed apparent emphasis on business and money. Such an emphasis implied inappropriate motivations.

The notion of familiarity infused parents' accounts of trust. There is resonance here with the proposition of 'knowledge-based trust' (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996: 121; Möllering, 2005), whereby trust develops with the knowledge created through experience. Trust is again actively constructed, but over time – a process which Luhmann (1979: 41) describes as the 'principle of gradualness'. Staff turnover undermined trust precisely because it disrupted familiar relationships, the known staff member being replaced by a stranger. Here the structure of the state integrated centre offered a specific advantage. Through parents' various interactions with staff, with the centre's other services and with the nursery itself, trust was developed through experience even before the nursery was used. In contrast to the abrupt leap into childcare characteristic of market choice, parents progressed to nursery use through a series of unthreatening steps. Parents at the centre were generally disadvantaged; some had previously been reluctant to engage with services or were nervous about childcare. A gradual process of trust construction may be particularly beneficial in such contexts. Disadvantaged parents can also be isolated from 'hot knowledge' about childcare which flows through middle-class networks (Vincent and Ball, 2001): the community of parents at the centre's drop-in provided a partial remedy to such isolation by enabling access to 'hot' information about childcare at the nursery.

A number of policy challenges arise from these findings. Given the political emphasis on the benefits of third sector organisations, there is a striking lack of awareness among parents of both the idea and the availability of such provision.

To an extent, this finding may be attributable to the research selection. The parent-run preschool provided services to a mobile group of parents, many of whom were from overseas. It is therefore not necessarily an exemplar of a parent-run community-based service; propositions that third sector organisations may incubate trust through community involvement in the co-production of services remain tenable (Laville and Nyssens, 2001). Nonetheless the idea of third sector childcare provision seems to have little institutional embeddedness. Third sector organisations' contractual relationships with the state may also be problematic. In the current study, the social enterprise provided places for vulnerable children under contract to state social services. This relationship confused the boundaries of state and third sector; for one parent who received such a place, some kind of distrust was created – a certain barrier in the relationship between parent and setting – which potentially undermined any trust advantage which the social enterprise might possess. Such a dynamic recalls warnings about the dangers for third sector organisations if they become close to the state (Dahrendorf, 2000).

There is some support for the policy emphasis on market-based processes. Many parents appeared comfortable in the role of proactive consumer: they were sufficiently confident to make their own assessments of trustworthiness within a mixed economy of childcare providers. Discomfort, however, was created by explicit money-making behaviours; given policy focus on demand-side subsidy and PVI provision rather than on a free universal service, such tensions seem inevitable. There is also confusion among parents about the reach of regulation, so that there is distrust of apparently under-regulated private providers.

Most importantly, the understanding that trust is constructed through familiarity creates two significant challenges. First, there is the issue of staff turnover, which disrupts familiarity and therefore trust. Daycare settings exhibit markedly higher turnover rates than state schools and nursery classes (Phillips *et al.*, 2009); in the current study, it was indeed the for-profit daycare nursery which experienced disruptive turnover. High staff turnover thus becomes – in common with quality, levels of qualifications and levels of funding – a matter of concern in relation to provision through market-based daycare settings. Second, those characteristics of the integrated centre which encouraged the gradual acquisition of trust – namely, provision of multiple services at a single site by a single organisation, so that staff and setting become familiar prior to childcare use – are not prioritised in current policy. They are unlikely to be produced within a fragmented market, nor are they inevitably achieved through the Sure Start children's centres programme. This initiative favours PVI childcare provision, with the result that childcare may be disconnected from other services within a centre; in addition, services in children's centres, especially in urban areas, are not necessarily contained at a single site, but may be dispersed across a local area. Such 'virtual' integration of services is unlikely to support trust production.

In conclusion, this exploratory study finds little evidence that organisational ownership or sector strongly inform parents' decisions to trust childcare providers. Instead, trust is actively constructed within interactions between parents and providers. For organisations, the necessary response is transparency, communication and exhibited expertise. Trust, moreover, is constructed with less trauma where familiarity can grow over time. The incorporation of such a 'principle of gradualness' into childcare policy implies – especially where parents are unconfident consumers – a move away from fragmented market-based mechanisms to more holistic service provision. In particular, there may be some benefit in the provision of integrated services at a single site by a cohesive organisation, by which means trust may be constructed even before childcare is used.

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### Notes

- 1 Reception classes offer provision to four-year olds at maintained primary and infant schools. They are, from the perspective of trust theories, conceptually similar to nursery classes and therefore not considered here.
- 2 Occupational status was derived through the NS-SEC classification (ONS, 2008). Within the working-class group were parents with routine and manual occupations, and those who were long-term unemployed. The middle-class group primarily comprised parents with professional or managerial occupations; it also included two households with intermediate occupations.

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