Selecting a preschool: A discursive-affective analysis of parental choice in South Australia

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List of Acronyms and Useful Terms

ASGS	Australian Statistical Geography Standard
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CCB	Child Care Benefit
CCC	Child Care Centre
CCR	Child Care Rebate
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELC	Early Learning Centre
FPS	Feminist Poststructuralism
IRSD	Index of Socio-economic Disadvantage
LDC	Long-day Care Centre
LGA	Local Government Area
NPA	National Partnership Agreement
SA	South Australia
SES	Socio Economic Status
SLA	Statistical Local Area
YBS	(The) Year Before School

Preschool In line with the definition used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, this thesis defines a preschool as a structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree-qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year before they commence full-time schooling.

Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative investigation of parental choice-making in South Australia's preschool education sector. 'Choice' is a keystone of neoliberal education reforms. While much research has focused on the consequences of neoliberal reforms in childcare and in the higher sectors of education, insufficient attention has been paid to how marketisation is 'creeping' into preschool education. With dominant neoliberal discourses promoting the notion that choosing the 'right' early learning pathway is critical for a child's future success and stressing the moral duty of parent-consumers to facilitate and promote 'early brain development', the preschool sector is especially important given its situatedness in the 'year before school'. These dynamics make preschool a fertile ground for neoliberal discourses of choice, school readiness and life-long learning.

By exploring how South Australian parents/caregivers of pre-schoolers are influenced to make choices, the thesis explores the social construction of choice in which parents are differentially located, and the classed and gendered inequalities assumed in choice discourses. Research has shown that not only the responsibility to choose, falls almost exclusively to women but the power to do so falls to middle-class women. By bringing a class and gender lens to the discussion, the thesis considers the social consequences of a preschool market in which only some mothers are structurally 'able to choose'.

Informed by feminist poststructuralism and bringing together the concepts of discourse and affect, the research specifically explores how the identities of mothers as 'consumers of education' are constructed and reproduced through social and cultural discourses, whilst also investigating how mothers are agents of choice. Neoliberal discourses of choice work through advertising regimes for early education, thus the research draws on a combination of qualitative methods for the collection of materials, and uses affective, discursive and semiotic analysis for their interpretation. By interpreting preschool choice as an 'affective environment', and using discursive-affective tools for analysis, the research generates new insights into how parents/caregivers are 'moved and influenced' as education decision-makers. By viewing affect not as individually located, but rather as a force or wave that moves through the parental body, the thesis examines the relationship between discursive subjectivities, social practices, power relations, and the gendered implications of choice. The study argues that discourses of neoliberalism favour some mothers, whilst taking choice away from others. It provides a critical contribution to the field by offering a language for describing what is being 'done to' and 'by whom' in the name of 'quality' preschool education, highlighting a social justice issue that demands public attention.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published written by another person except where due reference is made in the text

Date: 11.6.2022 Signed:

Valentina Bertotti

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

I remember driving to work with my then two-year old daughter in the back of the car, and hearing an advertisement on the radio saying: "*because preschool is about being ready for school, and beyond*". That statement struck me because I had always thought of early childhood education as a space where children could explore, socialise, and develop through play. I come from Italy, a country which, despite all its political turmoil, has always managed to maintain a focus on education, especially early childhood education, as a social and inviolable right of people, regardless of their ethnic background, class, or religion. There is no private schooling in my home country, and the education of children is seen almost as a community responsibility. It was, therefore, with great surprise that, after some research, I learned that in most Anglo-Saxon countries, early childhood education is seen as a site for future economic investment. As a single parent, working only part-time, I felt considerable pressure to make the right choice, and rather than feeling excited and hopeful about my child 'going to kindy', I became overwhelmed with fear and anxiety about her future, as well as with my abilities as a mother.

This thesis is principally concerned with the neoliberal project as it extends to the Australian preschool sector. In Australia, the term 'preschool' generally refers to settings that cater for the education of children in the year before compulsory schooling. While much research has focused on the implications of neoliberal reforms in the primary through tertiary and childcare sectors, particularly the divisive social consequences of these shifts, insufficient attention has been paid to the 'neoliberal creep' – to co-opt Viggiano's (2019) term – into the lives of Australian children and their parents/caregivers.[1] Specifically, the study explores the relations through which parents of South Australian pre-schoolers are facilitated, impeded and/or coerced in their capacities to exercise choice, and the broader social consequences of these developments, by bringing together the concepts of discourse and affect. The preschool sector is considered especially important given its situatedness in the 'year before school', hence making it a pivotal site for neoliberal discourses that seek to frame preschoolers as requiring 'school readiness'.

In the last 40 years, governments worldwide have favoured neoliberal policies and practices that privilege market mechanisms. In neoliberal discourses, children, their development and the

[1] For simplicity, I use the term parents while mindful that this does not capture the reality of everyone's circumstances.

'prevention of risks' become priorities since children are considered as "the future citizens of tomorrow" (Tisdall, 2006, p. 115), being "typically constructed in instrumentalist terms as profitable investments" (Lister, 2007, p. 697). In the paradigm of social investment, childhood is considered as the period in which children grow towards autonomy as self-providing and responsible individuals who can and must participate in society (Moran-Ellis & Sunker, 2008). Further, with dominant neoliberal discourses stressing the importance of early brain development, while highlighting the role of education in preparing children for employment, neoliberalism places children's learning as an investment in the labour market of the future, rather than as a site where learning occurs naturally, through play. This rationale operates in stark contrast to the long-established early childhood practice of operating from children's strengths (Brown, 2015).

Successive Australian governments have enthusiastically embraced neoliberalism, increasingly shifting the task of education into the private sector, resulting in a sharp rise in the numbers of private education institutions (Watkins, 2007, p. 320). A neoliberal rationality of individual responsibility and consumer choice positions parents (or rather, as this thesis will show, mothers) as free choice-makers, encouraging them to choose private education (Barcan, 1993, 2010; Campbell et al., 2009; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Wilkins, 2012). In this context, neoliberal policy has fabricated 'choice' as a major driver of educational provision, absenting the state from a longstanding democratic obligation based on a commitment to providing quality education for all Australians (Rowe & Windle, 2012). Exercising choice is therefore considered the act of a 'responsible' citizen (Gillies, 2005), and being selective in the choice of educational setting is almost mandatory as it signifies 'good parenting' (Karlsson et al., 2013).

1.1.1 Neoliberal education and choice

The definition of neoliberalism can change, depending on the research focus. For the context of this thesis, neoliberalism is defined as an "agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market" (Connell, 2013, p. 100). As a policy, neoliberalism proposes that "all aspects of human well-being can best be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework, characterised by strong property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). According to Martinez and Garcia (2000), one of the main tenets of neoliberalism is the replacement of the concept of public good with that of individual responsibility. This understanding is reinforced by Smith et al. (2016) who argue that neoliberalism connects individual freedom, success, and well-being to the accumulation of wealth.

Neoliberal practices include the increasing participation of private providers in the delivery of public services, such as healthcare and education, that have historically been the responsibility of the state (Brennan et al., 2012; Connell, 2013). Within the neoliberal paradigm, social needs that had formerly been met by public agencies, based on the principle of citizens' rights, are now treated as economic commodities, to be marketed and traded by companies operating for profit, a phenomenon much criticised within existing research (for example, see Angus, 2015; Connell, 2013; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Drew et al., 2016; Press & Woodward, 2005).

Some scholars refer to the marketisation of education as *educapitalism* (Blackmore, 2014; Smith et al., 2016), a form of governance in which education policy has been refashioned as a "sub-sector of the economy" (McLaren, 2005, p. 74). In this context, public institutions that were previously responsible for collective well-being, are now reconstituted as private players in the market (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254), and are actively advertising themselves to attract clients and limited government resources (Watkins, 2007, p. 320). Parents, in turn, are expected to be 'entrepreneurial individual[s]', who are 'responsible' for helping their children develop as 'good' citizens (Jensen, 2010). Critiquing this phenomenon, Peters (1999) noted that "there is nothing distinctive or special about services like health and education: they are just services and products like any other, to be traded in the marketplace" (p. 2).

As the education system expands to reflect the neoliberal market ideal, a growing emphasis on the individual (Brett, 2003; Pusey, 2003), and a resultant competitive behaviour between individuals emerges (Reay, 2008). This focus is expressed and experienced most sharply through the concept of school choice (Windle, 2009). Not everyone, however, can access these services equally. The next section discusses who the real players are in the field of choice.

1.1.2 Whose choice? The role of middle-class mothers

A growing body of literature attests to the fact that only some parents – specifically, *middle-class parents* — have 'real' access to choice (Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Rowe, 2015; Rowe, 2017). In a famous study, Campbell et al. (2009) argued that, in today's market-economy, Australia is experiencing an important historical movement, with increasing middle-class participation in private education, signifying a shift away from reliance on government services and towards a greater acceptance of education as a consumer product. Under such pressure, relatively wealthy parents increasingly view choice as a necessary safeguard or insurance policy against the risks or dangers of life (Ball, 2002, 2004).

In addition, a growing body of literature now attests to the fact that when advertising materials or parenting advice materials speak to the gender-neutral parent, they are in fact referring to mothers, and especially *middle-class mothers*, who have gradually assumed the subjectivity of entrepreneurial agents in their children's education (see Campbell, 2005; Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor, 2008; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Reay, 2005a; Reay, 2005b; Wilkins, 2011a). For example, while observing that middle-class parents are pioneers of school choice, Helen Proctor (2008) explains that it is actually mothers who perform much of the work of selecting the institution within middle class families, "bringing together their traditional twentieth century roles as managers of family consumption and performers of emotional labour" (Proctor, 2008, p. 124). Similarly, in her seminal work with Campbell and Sherington (2009) on choice and middle-class parents, Proctor argued that the decisions and pressures of choosing 'the right school' fall almost exclusively *on* "female family members" (p. 90).

The education market, therefore, is not only classed, but also strongly gendered, and through the privatisation and marketisation of the Early Childhood Sector (ECE) in Australia, existing disparities — both social and economic — are being exacerbated through the misguided notion of choice. This is an issue which should be addressed by those emphasising equity and believing in the power of education.

1.1.3 ECE in Australia – Issues within a diverse field

The scarcity of research focusing specifically on the effects of neoliberalism on the preschool sector is possibly related to the complex position that preschool occupies within the Australian *early childhood education* (ECE) system. This complexity relates to the relationship between the pre-compulsory education years (birth to five) and the compulsory years (the junior primary years of school). In Australia, the field of 'early childhood' entails the period from birth to age eight (0-8); therefore the ECE sector comprises both compulsory and non-compulsory education (Hunkin, 2016). Preschool is situated at the nexus of these policy junctures, with the result that curriculum and pedagogy are highly contested.

Most literature dealing with neoliberalism and preschool is included in the larger field of ECE. Therefore, the few studies dealing with 'preschool' encompass a variety of prior-to-school settings, including services that provide 'childcare', such as many long day care centres (LDCs) that also incorporate a preschool program or room (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 61). Separating out

the preschool year in the diverse range of ECE services thus becomes complex, but this thesis focuses attention on the effects of neoliberalism in centre-based, stand-alone preschools, which are integral to providing learning and education in an identifiable year within the birth-eight period of education.

Preschools are situated in many different settings. Some are integrated into ECE services that provide functions relating to health, such as long day care centres that conduct testing for hearing problems and also provide community facilities, for example, maternal and child health services and family support services. Some preschools have links to the formal school system, and are co-located and therefore integrated into schools (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 62). The ECE sector is thus large and diverse, and the lines between what constitutes care, early childhood education, formal schooling and other child-related community services have become increasingly blurred (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 61).

Whilst there have been recent attempts to align the purposes and pedagogy of care and education (e.g. the development of a national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), many distinctions still exist, particularly within the literature, and scholars agree that the distinction has roots that are socio-historical (Ailwood et al., 2016; Elliott, 2006; Krieg & Whitehead, 2015; Press & Hayes, 2000). These scholars have provided evidence that the pre-compulsory and compulsory and childcare/education sectors are underpinned by very different theoretical bases, which are directly related to different constructs of the child and knowledge (Krieg & Whitehead, 2015, p. 321). Such constructs lead to different perceived purposes of ECE, which, in turn, are reflected in significant institutional divides within this age range (Moss, 2013a, 2013b; Moss, 2013c).

This dichotomy between education and care is addressed in Chapter One. At this point, it is important to note that, when reviewing the body of research dealing with neoliberalism and ECE, it becomes evident that the terminology for preschool varies significantly in different jurisdictions across Australia (e.g. kindergarten, prep). Furthermore, there exists an imbalance between the literature dealing with childcare centres (CCCs) or long-day care centres (LDCs), compared to research focusing on solely on preschool settings. This discrepancy identifies a gap in current knowledge and thus establishes the potential contribution of this research. Preschool is an important area of inquiry because it provides an opportunity to draw attention to the way in which ECE is being fundamentally transformed by neoliberal beliefs and practices. The neoliberal focus of

preparing children for school and then employment operates in stark contrast to the long-established early childhood practice of operating from children's strengths (Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism frames children's learning as an investment in the labour market of the future, rather than as a site where learning occurs.

The challenges connected to nomenclature (which in turn is related to the increase in integrated ECE services and different state legislation regarding age of compulsion) when carrying out research in the context of preschool have been discussed by scholars such as Dowling and O'Malley (2009), McEwin and Ryan (2009) and Elliott (2006), who have highlighted the need for urgent, more detailed research about the shape of the preschool sector in Australia. Part of the difficulty is that age is the primary factor affecting the type of formal ECE services children attend (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 89), which has led scholars to point out that: "double-counting of children is endemic to this sector" (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009 p. 2). Indeed, "the lack of a common starting age across Australia complicates the picture, as children commence or finish preschool at different ages" (Elliott, 2006, pp. 8-9).

Alongside the need for further research regarding the 'shape' of the preschool Australian preschool sector is the imperative to examine the relationship between access to preschool and socio-economic circumstances. This is discussed below. The point that this thesis makes is that, nomenclature and age issues aside, there is insufficient attention currently paid to the ways in which children in very different social circumstances are being co-opted, starting from the year before school, into the neoliberal "cascade" (Connell, 2013). The research is thus concerned with how parents are drawn into neoliberal relations in ways that, the thesis will argue, pose further threats to social cohesion in a world that is significantly fractured.

1.1.3.1 The Year Before Schooling (YBFS)

In educational research, the Year Before Schooling (YBFS) is a concept used to describe the preschool cohort of children who are in the year before starting compulsory, full-time formal education (McEwin & Ryan, 2009). In the contemporary Australian context, children are entitled to free access to a preschool program delivered by a degree-qualified teacher, 15 hours per week, for 40 weeks of the year (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009). This policy may be implemented differently across the various states of Australia, resulting in a situation where the YBFS cohort may include children aged three, four, five and sometimes even six years old, depending on their eligibility for early or late entry (due to developmental delay), or on state determined school starting age exemptions.

However, the statistical data in this study are obtained from collection counts by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). To be included in the ABS Collection, children in the YBFS cohort must be aged four, with a minority of five-year-old exceptions, who must be attending a preschool program for the first time in their life (ABS, 2017).

1.2 The problem: The neoliberalisation of early childhood education (ECE)

In a famous paper, Connell (2013) argued that, following the establishment of a neoliberal policy regime, a "cascade of reforms" followed, which brought every institutional sector in Australia under the sway of market logic (p. 102). This cascade has reached the ECE sector too, and scholars around the world have researched the changes associated with the 'corporisation' of early childhood. For example, Sims (2017) and Brown (2015) argue that the increasing privatisation and marketisation resulting from neoliberalism have had devastating effects on ECE, as they have fundamentally changed its role, purpose and practice (Moss et al., 2016). Hunkin (2016) argues that there is now a new type of globalised policy paradigm, due to the "spread and motives of neo-liberal globalisation, characterised by the sponsorship of powerful international organisations and an increasing number of non-government agents participating in ECE policymaking" (p. 36).

Other scholars argue that neoliberalism has resulted in an educational context where equality, freedom and social justice are no longer paramount (Chomsky, 2013; Giroux, 2013, 2015), and where knowledge and meaning have become standardised and homogenised from a very early age (Sims, 2017). The changes associated with the involvement of publicly listed corporations in ECE has been the focus of much research (see for instance Brennan, 2007; Dalton & Wilson, 2009). Such studies have examined how the introduction of for-profit providers has "withdrawn all value from the social good" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254), with scholars claiming that private investment and marketisation are overshadowing the deeper goals of equity, social justice, and high-quality education for all (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Hunkin, 2016, 2018, 2019). In particular, it has been argued that the marketisation of ECE can place profit above the child (Smith et al., 2016) and that an over-emphasis on standardisation, accountability and expediency can undermine the child's right to explore and express (Sims, 2017), thus excluding holistic and balanced approaches to child development (Haslip & Gullo, 2018), and operating "in total contrast to the long-established early childhood practice of operating from the child's strengths and interests" (Sims, 2017, p. 4).

Importantly, this reliance on market forces also ignores the realities of the diverse socio-economic circumstances in which families find themselves. This is demonstrated by the abundant literature

dealing with the limitations of current neoliberal educational policies that aim to provide universal 'high-quality' ECE (Brennan et al., 2012; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Dalton & Wilson, 2009; Doherty, 2009; Hunkin, 2016; Press & Woodward, 2005, 2006; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009).

Whilst there is ample evidence of the impact of neoliberalism on childcare, much less research focuses specifically on the effects of marketisation on *preschools*. There is a gap between research into childcare and investigations into those settings specifically catering for the education of children in the year before formal schooling. To date, while some studies deal specifically with preschool education in Australia – such as Rodd's study (1996), which examined practical factors influencing parental choice of preschool in Victoria, and Noble's work (2007), consisting of interviews with mothers of children utilising preschool services in Queensland, few have paid attention to socio-economic factors influencing parental choice. However, at the time of writing, there is no evidence that systemic or recent studies have been conducted into how neoliberal mechanisms interact with socio-economic and affective forces to influence parental choice in South Australian preschools.

1.3 Context of the research: Preschool in South Australia

In South Australia, since the introduction of the Same First Day policy in 2014, children commence preschool (or school) on one entry day per year. Accordingly, children turning four before 1 May can start preschool on the first day of term 1 of that year, whilst children turning four on or after 1 May, must wait for Term One of the following year. This intent of this policy was that all children would complete at least four terms of preschool and four terms of reception by the time they turn six, the age of compulsion for formal schooling (Government of South Australia, 2019) (Government of South Australia, 2019).

South Australian preschool programs can be delivered in a variety of settings by a variety of providers and can have various management arrangements. They can be state-owned and operated, when these programs take place either in stand-alone centres (often referred to as kindergartens) or in a preschool located in an SA Department school. Alternatively, they can be privately owned and operated. This increasingly happens in the case of preschools co-located within private Independent and/or Catholic schools or colleges – often called Early Learning Centres (ELCs). Last, they can be delivered in long-day care centres (LDCs), which are centre-based childcare services providing all-day or part-time care for children. LDCs primarily provide care services for children under five, however, some may also provide preschool programs for school children (aged

between four and six), where government regulations allow. The service may operate from stand-alone or shared premises, including those on school grounds (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 76).

Given the variety of settings and definitions utilised in the literature, for the purposes of this thesis, a preschool program is defined as a "play-based, early childhood education program, delivered by a degree-qualified teacher, aimed primarily at children in the year before they commence full time schooling" (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 76). This is irrespective of the type of institution that delivers the program, or whether it is government funded and/or privately provided (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009).

Preschool services in Australia are funded from four key sources: Australian Government funding through the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, fee subsidies provided by the Australian Government Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Rebate (CCR) schemes, state and territory government funding and parent fees (Productivity Commission, 2015, p. 497). Of particular interest for this research is the fact that, whilst preschools in South Australia have had a predominantly charitable history, the provision of these services is increasingly reliant on market-based mechanisms and for-profit providers (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Brennan, 2014). An example of this is the growth of private settings offering a Montessori approach to ECE.

Such increase is worth examining as it could be reflective of the intensified marketisation of preschool. Investigating the way in which marketisation is affecting the preschool sector is important for illuminating how younger children are being drawn into the neoliberal maelstrom, and how early childhood is being transformed. Historically, ECE programs have provided an environment where learning occurs mainly through play and social exchanges; however, with its focus on individual performance and achievement, neoliberalism is transforming ECE programs into a business. Further, identifying what role discursive and affective practices play in such a marketised context can potentially enhance current understanding of the implications of choice policy on issues of social justice. This study aims to do that.

1.4 Research Questions

Connell (2013) has argued that with consumerist and competitive ways of thinking becoming dominant in school policy and practice, educational institutions have been transformed into "firms competing for students, marks and money" (p. 103), while parents are "expected to exercise free

choice between different firms" (p. 103). Choice, however, is never truly free, autonomous, or individual. As this thesis suggests, choosing is a complex, multi-layered process, which occurs within the broader political, economic and social structures that surround us. The practice of choice, therefore, takes place within an environment which is influenced by a myriad of factors, including dominant discursive norms, the subjectivities available within such discourses, parents' emotional experiences, and advertising regimes.

Within such a complex environment, preschools, like all educational institutions, must rely heavily on marketing techniques to attract potential 'customers'. Frequently, this is done through the reproduction of dominant discourses and mentalities, designed to speak directly to parents, and through messages created to tap into mothers' emotions. Not all mothers, however, are able to enter this 'choice market' on equal terms, with some lacking the knowledge or resources to participate on a par with others, due to their positionality in society and deep-rooted systemic inequalities. This research is interested in exploring how gender and class intertwine in today's highly marketised field of preschool choice. In particular, using six Montessori preschools in Adelaide as a case-study, the thesis asks the following questions: how are preschool parents influenced in their choice-making processes? How are mothers, as 'target-consumers' constructed and positioned through discourses of preschool choice? And what are the social implications of choice in preschool?

Whilst there exists a great body of literature discussing the implications of neoliberalism on higher education (see for instance Chapleo, 2004, 2005; Chapleo et al., 2011; Smyth, 2017), to date very few studies have focused on the social consequences of marketisation and choice policy on the Australian preschool sector, with this gap in current research itself constituting a feminist issue (Duncan et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 1996; Hutchinson, 2011; Reay, 1998a; Wilkins, 2011a). In particular, scarce research exists on how mothers feel about their decisions, and how they rationalise their choice-making practices. These are themes that have received little attention so far; yet, understanding the role of the identity and symbolic domains of choice, can ultimately highlight the social justice implications of neoliberal economic policies on the preschool sector.

Combining the concepts of discourse and affect, the thesis proposes a social-relational analytical approach to the study of preschool choice.[2] This is underpinned by the notion that affect is like a

[2] The term social-relational is used in the literature on affect to differentiate the orientation taken here from more psychologically informed approaches. A social-relational approach understands affect as a relational force that passes

wave, or an intensive force that passes through and within bodies, and moves them to do certain things, and noting that the *body* is conceived broadly and thus intended not only as the physical entity, but rather as a broad entity, comprising also collective body of people (a collectivity or assemblage),as well as discursive bodies. Framed within feminist post-structural and social constructionist paradigms, the research is an examination of the discursive and affective practices which inform some mothers' understanding of preschool education, and of how these practices and discourses are reproduced and sustained through parents' accounts of their choices.

1.5 Aims and Objectives

In attempting to answer the questions above, the research uses a combination of discursive-affective analysis and social semiotic techniques to explore parents' emotions and rationalisations in South Australia's complex educational market. This is therefore a qualitative study, which uses a combination of geographic mapping, website analysis, qualitative questionnaires and interviews with preschool centre directors to produce new knowledge about the influence of emotions and affective practices in shaping parental decision-making in the context of neoliberal discourse.

The study has the following objectives. To investigate, the demographic, socio-economic contexts of Montessori preschools in South Australia. Secondly, to conduct a website analysis, exploring how the marketing and promotion techniques adopted by some preschools shape parental discursive identities and relationships, and the entanglement of these dynamics in broader structures. These techniques are situated in a context where image is paramount and educational branding is emerging as a crucial feature of impression-management (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001). Thirdly the study aims to explore, through the lens of affect theory, the rationalisations and decision-making practices of parents who engage with, and participate in, educational 'choice'. Analysing the questionnaire responses with an affective-discursive lens is designed to advance current understandings of the relationships between the macro-level affective environment, cultural and economic forces and micro-level choice-making in the contemporary preschool market.

1.6 Research significance and contribution

The thesis explores the evolving governance of early childhood education in Australia, and specifically, how neoliberal market imperatives have gives rise to discourses of 'choice' and

through but does not exist within individual bodies. Affect, from this viewpoint, is pre-linguistic but not pre-discursive, as explained in upcoming sections.

competition. Its significance lies in the fact that, by doing so through an affective lens, it should generate new insights not only into the subjective experiences of mothers, but also into how we are all 'moved and influenced' by the ways in which education is operationalised. By looking at how affect is not located just 'in' the individual mother, but rather operates as a wave through a collective/assemblage of parents (Ott, 2017; Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2020), the research should highlight how discourses of neoliberalism can favour some mothers, whilst taking choice away from others, creating dynamics of in/exclusion.

In this sense, the research promises to break new ground by offering a language for describing what is being 'done to' and 'by' us in the name of 'quality' education, and as such, it highlights a social justice and inequality issue that demands public attention. Its contribution to knowledge, therefore, rests in its effort to broaden our understandings of choice, by adding affect to what otherwise might be 'only a discursive analysis'. Through an affective-discursive approach, the research highlights how language, discourse and imagery are powerful tools that engage peoples' feelings and emotions within a broader classed, raced, and gendered social environment

Drawing on the social-relational approach of affect theorists such as Zembylas (2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020) and Wetherell (2012), whose work is indebted to the theorising of Spinoza (1632-1677, see Spinoza, 1992), Deleuze (2003), and Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the thesis interprets affect as *an intensity* (or *force*) which is both individual — in the sense that affects and emotions are experienced by individual people — but also socially, politically, discursively, materially and historically constituted, and thus irreducible only to individual bodies. As Zembylas (2019a) explains, "affect can generally be understood as relational and embodied intensities that circulate as 'forces of encounter'" (p. 2). In this sense, affect encompasses and exceeds more individualised conceptions of emotions (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). In this paradigm, the study of affect is interpreted as the study of relations, and affect theory is interested in the ways in which affect is mobilised by cultural, political and economic forces and mark the ways in which things become significant and relations are lived (Zembylas, 2019a).

Therefore, the thesis seeks to illuminate not just how some parents are positioned differentially in the neoliberal market, but also how they exercise the power available to them through every day acts such as choice-making practices. As such, the study explores how these parents are moved to choose in two distinct yet interrelated ways: first, through either resisting or reproducing neoliberal discourses that seek to shape them into the consuming individuals the market wants and needs

(Zembylas, 2020, p. 496), and second, through their affective relations and practices. Borrowing from Zembylas (2019a), the thesis argues that exploring the affective dimension of everyday acts, like choosing a preschool, is particularly important in a context where neoliberal policies in education are creating what he defines as affective communities, or assemblages (Zembylas, 2019a).

Affect, therefore, does not entail just psychological or mental processes; it constitutes an integral part of the practical activities with which bodies relate to other subjects and objects (Zembylas, 2019a, p. 6). Importantly, affect "slides over the human and non-human, animate and inanimate" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 3), and "throws attention onto the potential, the virtual and the becoming" (p. 3). Therefore, in the analysis, parents are interpreted as constituting a 'body'; existing and acting not merely as individuals, but rather as a collective, whose choice-making is understood, in part, as the outcomes of certain manipulated and engineered affects and emotions [that] create a particular 'type of body', the (classed, raced and gendered) neoliberal subject.

According to Wetherell (2012, p. 10), affect operates through *affective practices*, namely, the patterned forms of activity that articulate, mobilise and organise affect and discourse as a central part of practice. The concept of 'affective-discursive practices' is thus utilised in this study as a useful tool to analyse a complex and multi-layered event such as parental choice-making. Wetherell (2012) explains that the concept of practices focuses on the emotional and discursive aspects of social relations, and helps to better understand "people's allegiances and investments, as well as their activities of categorising, narrating, othering, differentiating and positioning" (p. 8).

As Zembylas (2019a) argues "neoliberalism itself, becomes an *affective event*, as collective affects emerging from neoliberal policies and practices (e.g. fear and anxiety) are inextricable aspects of the sites, networks and flows of neoliberalism in societies" (emphasis added, p. 2). We could argue, therefore, that – in this light – neoliberal policies and practices have an impact on "how the affective textures and activities of everyday life are shaped" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). The research thus attempts to shed some light on what parents of preschoolers in South Australia feel about the choices they are arguably coerced to make, by investigating how their affective textures and activities are shaped by marketisation.

The research is grounded in a poststructuralist paradigm. As such, it views agency as the "capacity to recognise the constitution of ourself, and to resist, subvert and change the discourse themselves through which one is constituted" (adapted from Davies, 1991, p. 51). According to Wilkins (2011a),

opening up a space where the reasoning of all parents can be analysed can enlighten how speakers act agentically: "refusing, contesting, negotiating and reworking the discursive resources available to them" (p. 6). Whilst recognising the importance of discourses on individuals' agentic capacity, this study suggests that agency is also mediated by specific affective flows which 'move' people to act in specific ways through a sort of 'emotional governance' that is being co-opted by neoliberal forces.

1.6.1 Combining affect and discourse

Importantly, some proponents of the Deleuzian view of affect (Colman, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2006), tend to separate — or even set up — affect in opposition to discourse (see particularly Massumi, 1995; Thrift, 2008). However, the approach to affect adopted in this thesis refutes this, as the latter ignores the entanglement of the affective and discursive. Rather, drawing from the work of Wetherell (2012), Zembylas (2019a, 2019c, 2020) and Berg et al. (2019), it is argued here that, simply because affect can be categorised as pre-linguistic, it does not mean it is also non-discursive (Zembylas, 2020), as bodies, emotions and affects "depend on, and are informed by, socially constructed boundaries and norms" (McMorrow as cited in Zembylas, 2020, p. 7).

As Wetherell (2012) argues, the body is always mediated by discourse, if we interpret discourse as meaning-making practices, not just the formal structures of language (p. 54). For critical studies to be useful and relevant, Wetherell claims that we must avoid the division of affect and discourse, and understand instead that affect is inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic and the discursive (Wetherell, 2012, p. 16). In this view, therefore, the separation of affective orders from discursive practices – as suggested by some – becomes deleterious and counter-productive (p. 52), as it is actually the discursive that makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel and circulate (Wetherell, 2012, p. 15). As Butler (2015) says, "there is no discourse without the basis of affectivity as 'I' am already affected before I can say 'I' and I have to be affected to say 'I' at all'" (cited in Berg et al, 2019, p. 48).

In sum, the research involves analyses of the extent to which concepts such as individualism, autonomy, agency and responsibility work to produce the entrepreneurial subjects best fitted for a neoliberal society, by exploring how some preschoolers' parents (mainly mothers) are entangled in the *doing* of neoliberalism. The thesis examines how cultural and economic forces mobilise affect. In this sense, it explores the functions of both affective routines and discourses as "performances that are entered into and negotiated by subjects, thereby highlighting the transmutability of

discourses and the intersecting positions framing the meaning and practice of choice" (Wilkins, 2011, p. 13).

1.7 Thesis structure

Chapter One has introduced the thesis, justified the research, discussed its aims and objectives, and described its contribution. It also offers a summary of each chapter by illustrating the structure of the thesis. **Chapter Two** sets the context of the study and highlights the main themes discussed in the existing literature on neoliberalism and education. Starting with a general overview, it narrows to three features of neoliberalism which are of particular importance to the thesis; marketisation, choice and educational branding. It discusses how these structures of neoliberalism interweave with parental identities and selection mechanisms.

Chapter Three offers a justification for the theoretical approach and methodologies underlying this thesis, while **Chapter Four** discusses the research phases and methods utilised to generate information, and describes the analytical approach utilised to examine the data. **Chapter Five** is the first of the focal chapters and represents the initial phase of the research process. It begins with a brief historical summary the marketisation of Australian ECE services, to then focus on the rise of Montessori preschools in South Australia as a case study. Through a geographic mapping and a socio-economic examination of all the Montessori preschools in SA and their geographic locations, it provides a socio-spatial analysis of the demographic context for Montessori preschools in South Australia. The chapter discusses the relation between factors that impact on the creation of specific identities, and how such identities affect choice.

Chapter Six focuses on the discursive and semiotic analysis of six Montessori preschools' websites to show how specific meanings and imagery are used to reinforce the social and affective environment within which choice is presented to some mothers as consumers. The central aim of the chapter is to explore the ways in which parents are encouraged to inhabit certain identities and navigate the field of choice. This is important in order to better understand the kinds of representational, affective and symbolic work that goes into creating the conditions necessary to imagine and activate the parent as responsible consumer (Wilkins, 2009).

Chapter Seven explores the ways in which parents engage through their roles as consumers with the dominant concepts and practices evoked by discourses of choice. Through parents' responses to the questionnaires, it explores choice as a complex phenomenon that whilst exercised

individually, is in fact irreducible to the individual parent. By highlighting the role of affective practices as a crucial element framing parental choice, the chapter thus considers how ostensibly subjective feelings are entangled with broader structures. **Chapter Eight** is the discussion chapter; by drawing on the social, economic, political and gendered materials obtained in the previous chapters it uses the research questions to discuss the findings.

Finally, **Chapter Nine** proposes the main argument of the thesis, namely that neoliberal policies have resulted in the emergence and circulation of specific affective forces, which compel some mothers (often middle-class mothers) to engage in the 'affective economy of choice', and that through such engagement these mothers are moved to act in ways that have profound social justice implications for our society. The last section of the chapter provides some concluding thoughts about the repercussions of the affective entanglements in choice policy, particularly in terms of the social divisions that are being reproduced.

1.8 Summary

This chapter has introduced the research, its aims and its significance. It has argued that, in a country which promised to "ensure equity in the economic, social and political life of the nation" as well as "quality education for all" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), our education systems could, and should, contribute toward social fairness and stability. However, in the current climate of competition and choice rhetoric, many parents and their children are left behind due to their socio-economically disadvantaged positions. These gaps and segmentations start as early as preschool. Therefore, a thesis exploring the neoliberal phenomenon of school choice, as it extends to the ECE sector can contribute to a better understanding of how neoliberal imperatives continue to intensify divisions between our society's most and least enfranchised, and the few who are 'allowed to choose'. The next chapter situates the research within the existing literature.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relating to neoliberalism and education, with the aim of grounding the research and highlighting existing gaps. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first sets the background and defines the main concepts that populate existing work on the relation between neoliberalism and education. It discusses the emergence of educapitalism both in the compulsory schooling sector and in some sectors of ECE, and discusses the main features and implications of educapitalism, from which surfaces the first gap in the existing literature, namely, the lack of systemic studies of the social consequences of marketisation on the Australian preschool sector.

However, to understand fully how educapitalism and marketisation have managed to flourish, it is necessary to appreciate the way in which neoliberalism has repositioned individuals, their agency and their responsibilities. This is done in the second part of the chapter, where the dominant identity constructions within neoliberal discourses of education and choice are reviewed through an exploration of the figure of the 'parent-consumer'. This leads to the final part of the chapter, which addresses an important methodological gap, by challenging the *rational model* of parental choice, and proposing a new theoretical framework for exploring the way in which parents make their selection, when we interpret neoliberalism and choice as "affective environments" (Zembylas, 2019a).

2.2 Section one: Educapitalism – features and implications

Under neoliberal policy, all aspects of social behaviour are rethought along economic lines (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249), and it is argued that market competition will produce positive economic outcomes through mechanisms such as deregulation, marketisation and privatisation. That is, neoliberalism emphasises the cutting of public expenditure for social services, and the delivery and provision of such goods and services by the private sector (Smith et al., 2016). Neoliberal discourses and the policies that accompany them have deeply transformed many parts of societal structures, by proposing the argument that individual productivity, performance, accumulation of wealth and profit are the key features of 'success' (Smith et al., 2016).

However, these arguments have been critiqued by many, particularly for their negative impact on social policy areas, where services previously considered as public entitlements or rights have been

transformed into economic goods (Angus, 2015; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Doherty, 2007; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Further, scholars have pointed out that the emphasis placed by neoliberalism on the functioning of individuals has led to a general reconfiguration of constituent subjectivities and their relationships with the state, with the state abrogating its duties and responsibilities, whilst expecting individual citizens (consumers) to fulfil these through economic mechanisms and freedom of choice (Doherty, 2015, p. 395). For example, Rose (1999) argues that neoliberalism produces citizens who, whilst defining themselves as free, are in fact tightly governed, while Saul (2005) highlights the heavy costs to individuals caused by the transfer of responsibility from the state.

In the context of education, research has shown that such transfer of responsibility has greatly intensified parenting labour, and that this has led to new kinds of parental attitudes and strategies (Proctor & Weaver, 2020). It is argued that parents, especially middle-class parents, have become entrepreneurial agents in their children's education, and that this activity is a direct consequence of global neoliberal policy reform (see, for example, Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2020).

Importantly, some scholars have also pointed out that such increase in labour and responsibility tends to fall disproportionately on mothers (Andrews et al.; Fuller et al., 1996; Proctor, 2008; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Reay, 1998a, 1998b, 2005a; Wilkins, 2011a), who, through assumptions, social norms and expectations, are those who feel most of the pressures associated with choosing their children's education, due to circulating parenting discourses about being 'good mothers' (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 158).

The impacts of neoliberal policies on education have been so significant that they have led to the coining of a new term to describe the current educational landscape, namely: *educapitalism* (Blackmore, 2014). The expression refers to the "performance of the commodification of education" (Smith et al., 2016, p. 128), whereby neoliberal education policy has become irrevocably entwined with principles of Human Capital Theory, and has re-interpreted education as a site for economic investment for future outcomes (Blackmore, 2014; McDonald et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2016). Blackmore described educapitalism as "when managerialism aligns teachers and researchers with the corporate logic of economism and entrepreneurialism" (Blackmore, 2014, p. 500). The two features of educapitalism most relevant for this thesis are privatisation and marketisation (Angus, 2015; Apple, 2006; Klees, 2010). The next section maps out their implications by showing how

themes of consumerism, advertising, educational branding and choice policy have transformed education into a commodity.

2.2.1 Privatisation, marketisation and the educational marketing professional

> Australia is at an extreme among developed countries, in terms of the impact of the neo-liberal market agenda on public institutions, with privatisation being imported ready-made into education through the international strategy of social reconstruction through the market (Connell, 2006, pp. 143-144).

According to Connell (2006), the process of privatisation in Australia involved two concurrent steps: making public education increasingly dependent on private funds, while also encouraging the development of private education by supporting it with public (government) funds. This lowering of relative costs by heavy subsidies to private schools, coupled with an ideology of responsible parental choice, has been vigorously promoted. Aimed at producing the effect that "parents who care will choose private schools" (Connell, 2006, p. 146), this process has resulted in a significant and gradual shift of enrolments into the private sector, which in turn was used by media to reinforce the greater desirability of private schooling (Connell, 2006, p. 146).

Such an increasingly privatised and competitive context has meant that neoliberal logics and managerial techniques have become naturalised as 'common sense' across schooling systems (Doherty, 2015, p. 395) and schools have been forced to promote themselves by concentrating on things such as market competition, economic responsibilisation and advertising (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254). As Angus (2015) pointed out, institutions are now "expected to adopt an enterprising approach by anticipating and satisfying the expectations of their clients", (p. 369), in order to be chosen by their targeted customers.

There is a large body of research investigating the increasing use of marketing techniques as an important feature of school management (Dimartino & Jessen-Butler, 2016; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Lubienski, 2007; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). One of the most important studies, by Alison Smith, explored the way in which primary and secondary institutions engage in a complex process of "image-building as a strategy to promote their own survival in an increasingly competitive environment, through such activities as advertising and producing pamphlets and publications" (Smith, 2007, p. 66). School mottos, state-of-the-art buildings and facilities become emblems of a specific image, and therefore take on an increased significance in a market environment, where schools are concerned with presenting and selling their vision in a specific or particular way.

In Australia, studies have exposed the way in which education has been heavily affected by this trend, with scholars discussing the "glossification" of the schooling system, and arguing that some institutions tend to focus more on what is visible, rather than on what is truly important (Connell, 2012, 2013; Doherty, 2009, 2015; Drew, 2013; Drew et al., 2016; Forsberg, 2018; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Lundahl et al., 2013). As McDonald et al. (2019) state, "undeniably, the marketisation of education is a defining feature of neoliberal education" (p. 883), and research shows that in today's highly marketised environment, the survival of any institution has become dependent on its capacity to maintain and/or increase its market share of pupils, turning marketing and promotion into crucial and inevitable functions of school management (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). In the words of Yaman (2000), marketing has become an "economic imperative and no school is immune from it"; everyone needs to "promote themselves, allocate a marketing budget… pay attention to appearance, and develop promotional materials" (p. 1).

Since the advent of educapitalism, most educational settings — including those focusing on early childhood — have thus been 'forced' to employ specific (advertising) language to shape the extent and nature of their marketisation and promotional tactics. Research has demonstrated that institutions are increasingly outsourcing to professionals or specialists (i.e. webpage design specialists, graphic arts and marketing companies, communication, and public relations companies etc) in order to give a "professional and corporate feel" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 891).

The increasingly professional and intensified approach to educational marketing has led institutions to employ specialist marketing professionals to "promote and corporatize the school brand" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 889), in the same manner as a business would (Lundahl et al., 2013). Some researchers are exploring the emergence of a new professional figure, the *school marketing professional*, an "individual, often with business and/or marketing skills and experience, whose main job is to oversee and organise all marketing function" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 884), whose main contribution to the school is "to foster a business ethos" (McDonald et al., 2019, p. 892) and "to educate and inform educational staff about the value and importance of marketing" (p. 894).

Further, their study highlighted how academic institutions were also framing positive media exposure and *identity promotion* in terms of risk management, as they were very conscious of losing potential or existing student numbers, and that managing this risk was one of the main areas of responsibility of the new marketing departments. This element emerged also in other works, with scholars recognising the importance (for institutions) of creating and managing a clear and distinct

identity, not only to attract but also to retain clients and stakeholders (Hwang & Powell, 2009; Maguire et al., 2001).

As discussed in the next chapter, the role of identity will become increasingly important through this thesis, as it closely relates to the interpretation of choice as an affective environment. This is because not only is identity directly linked to affects, intended as forces that move us to make certain choices, but also because it is strongly influenced by other elements of choice, such as geography, gender, class, and socio-cultural background. And marketing-related activities have grown so significantly in scope and significance that some institutions have started to rely on the use of specific educational programs and/or their logos in order to "signal their distinctiveness" (Maguire et al., 2011), as these carry specific emotional connotations which are likely to appeal to specific subjectivities and identities.

2.2.2 Marketing practices: education logos and branding

> When parents choose curricula, they are not necessarily dealing with detailed knowledge about how the curriculum might be enacted, but rather they may well be dealing with affect and [social] connotations associated with a particular brand (Doherty, 2009, p. 11).

One of the most powerful promotional materials that marketing professionals use is branding (Chapleo, 2004, 2005; Chapleo et al., 2011; Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001). In the education context, branding includes clothing and all manner of merchandise sold by the school, as well as the use of specific logos and symbols connected to a specific learning approach, or educational brand (Dimartino & Jessen-Butler, 2016; Maguire et al., 1999; Maguire et al., 2011). This is important, as discourses of marketing and branding complement the idea that freedom of choice will increase competition and quality in education (Maguire et al., 1999).

The use of alternative curricula and educational logos and brands as a means to shape parental decision and sell "positional advantage in society" (Symes, 1998, p. 138)has been the subject of academic research for the last two decades (Davies & Ellison, 1997). For example, Doherty (2009), noted that "any consumer choice — such as those executed by parents choosing a school in an educational context influenced by neoliberal policy — carries with it symbolic meanings and a certain *social standing*" (p. 83). Similarly, Symes (1998) referred to school advertisements as "the official art of educational capitalism" (p. 138), while Smith (2007) noted that logos took on "an increased significance in a market environment where schools are concerned to communicate their image in particular ways" (p. 66). In today's competitive market, therefore, research has shown that logos and educational branding have become such vital promotional tools that, in many instances,

some institutions have undergone a complete transformation in terms of ethos to operate more as a logo, than an educational organisation (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 39).

In addition, Dimartino and Jessen-Butler (2016) have also claimed that "branding is a powerful tool within the marketing world that schools are beginning to leverage" (p. 450), which can be used to either include or exclude particular prospective families and/or clients. Further studies have supported this argument, with scholars noting that neoliberal markets have allowed schools to use specific marketing stratagems to actively "target a chosen customer" (Silk, 2006, p. 3), thereby recruiting or deterring specific types of families (Ball, 2004, p. 11).

In particular, as Campbell et al. (2009) point out, the chosen consumers tend to be middle-class families, who have been "actively caught up in the new regime of school choice" (p. 10). Within such a classed system, the potential for marketing to be used as a gate-keeping mechanism to shape enrolments and deter less desirable applicants (Jabbar, 2016; Lubienski, 2005, 2013; Lubienski et al., 2009), and the social justice implications of this, including the segmentation of ECE education, have been critically analysed by many (for example, see Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001; Newberry & Brennan, 2013; Press & Hayes, 2000; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

Even not-for-profit organisations with social justice agendas have been caught up in this competitive and managerialist turn, as they seek to create unique identities to attract stakeholders and resources, while trying to balance their central rationale (McDonald et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant for this research, as a great percentage of early childhood education has historically been — and continues to be — in the hands of not-for-profit organisations.

In sum, the weight given to marketisation and branding by many compulsory institutions and childcare settings confirms the importance placed on neoliberal practices within the education sector and corroborates the transformation of education into an increasingly corporatised and commodified industry. However, the way in which marketisation shapes overall distribution of educational options in ECE have focused almost exclusively on childcare (Ball & Vincent, 2005; Brennan, 2007; Brennan, 2014; Brennan & Adamson, 2014; Gallagher, 2018; Moss, 2009; Newberry & Brennan, 2013; Press & Woodward, 2005; Press & Woodward, 2009; Sumsion, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2001).

Whilst the findings in the context of childcare are similar to those in compulsory schooling, there is little evidence of research into this theme at the preschool level. The rapid increase in the establishment of Montessori preschools in South Australia could potentially be part of a larger process of educational branding in preschool, which could have grave implications for the equitable and just provision of preschool programs in Australia. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this research is to fill this gap by examining how marketing practices may have evolved to influence this sector, with particular focus on the role of affective and discursive practices embraced by parents during their decision-making. First, a review of some discursive constructions that have emerged in the neoliberal literature on education is necessary to appreciate how parents operate when making choices in the preschool sector.

2.3 Section two: neoliberal discourses in education

Gee (2001) explains that identities are social processes of identification in which "human beings interpret themselves or are interpreted by others as acting as certain kinds of people in certain contexts" (p. 108). Further, according to Berger (2013), "one identifies oneself as one is identified by others, by being located in a common world" (p. 120). This constructed meaning represents the lived reality that will influence the actions, behaviours and identities of parents, because the way in which they identify themselves is negotiated as a result of social norms, interactions and narratives which are situated in social and cultural discourses, rather than being individually fixed (Karlsson et al., 2013).

The following sections illuminate some of the discourses, narratives and subjectivities that populate the literature on neoliberalism, education and choice, and discusses how these relate to notions of parental identity and choice. Exploring these is important as it provides the backdrop against which notions of identity, discourse and affect are interpreted and brought together throughout the thesis. I propose here that choice is never really completely autonomous and/or individual; rather, it is always linked to the broader social structures within which individual identities are produced, and social and emotional relations are formed. Importantly, emotions here are conceptualised more broadly as affects, intended as forces that may pass through individual bodies and may be named as subjective 'emotions', but that in fact, move collectivities to act or think in certain ways.

So, understanding choice as something that occurs at the nexus of the individual and the social, should help to illuminate that those seemingly individual emotions, at the macro level, are in fact attached to the political relations, marketing frameworks, other people's opinions, patterned

behaviours, discourses, etc., which all coalesce to create the conditions for those emotions to materialise and act as forces which move people to do certain things. Choice, therefore, is seen here as mediated by the social and emotional relations that occur within and among people, as well as by the ways in which subjectivities are constructed by both the individual and the social and cultural context within which we exist.

For example, the discursive figure of the parent as 'consumer of education' is examined here in order to map the way in which parents are "invited to deploy meanings and vocabularies that register a consumerist orientation to school choice" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 5). This discussion is necessary to illustrate what Wilkins (2009) defines as "the sets of contrasting and sometimes contradictory discourses enacted by parents in their interpretations and understandings of their role as choosers" (p. 5), as it forms the basis for the last part of the chapter, where the importance of affect theories in parental choice-making mechanisms is discussed.

2.3.1 Discourses of governance: Individualism, consumerism, and choice policy

Foucault (1999) explained that the term *government* does not only refer to the political management of states, but also to "the way in which individuals or group might be directed" (p. 341). In this sense, he had argued, "to govern is to structure the possible field of action of other people" (p. 341). One way to make this possible is through the introduction/imposition of new *discourses*, new mentalities through which human subjects take themselves up as the newly appropriate and appropriated subjects of a new social order (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

As Foucault (1977) has pointed out, the heightened individualism, so typical of neoliberal governments, is registered in terms of individual freedom, autonomy, and choice. Within this discursive framing the individualised subject of choice is persuaded to take over responsibilities for areas of care that were previously the concern of the government (Forsberg, 2018). In this context, the individual finds it difficult to imagine those choices as being shaped by anything other than their own naturalised desire or their own rational calculations (Forsberg, 2018). Hidden in discursive practices, then, "the visibility of the workings of government is able to be significantly reduced" (Foucault, 1977, p. 193), which makes the notion of choice so strongly associated with individualism, actually dictated by others, but hidden under the veil of freedom (Foucault, 1999).

However, neoliberal discourses impact not only the way in which subjects are governed, but also the way in which they understand themselves, their lives, their opportunities, and their options (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 251). As Fairclough (2003) explains, this process produces new ways of

acting and interacting by people (whether they do so consciously or subconsciously) and results in social actors interpreting and reinterpreting themselves in new ways, whilst being interpreted and represented by others in new ways (or new discourse). Discourses, then, can be constituted as much as they are constitutive, and they can include representations, as well as imaginaries, which eventually become enacted within social actions (Fairclough, 2003, p. 207).

Contemporary Australian educational discourse is primarily dictated by neoliberal agendas promoting the idea that "public services are more responsive, flexible and better managed when citizens engage with them as discriminating users, or consumers" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 5). Notably, a particular feature of neoliberal subjects is that their desires, hopes, and fears have been discursively designed in such a way that they long to be morally worthy, responsibilised individuals, who, as successful 'entrepreneurs of their lives', can produce the best for themselves and their families (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 251). As Wilkins (2009) noted, neoliberalism has induced the active enlistment of citizens as "self-responsible and self-directing subjects" (p. 7).

In this new paradigm, preschool parents are positioned as autonomous individuals who have the power and responsibility, through their *freedom of choice*, to "further their own interest and well-being, as well as that of their families" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). And they have been tacitly encouraged to achieve this as responsible and autonomous consumers (Barcan, 2010), vested with the right and the duty to "inhabit and perform the role of the empowered, discriminating and autonomous chooser" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 7). Schools and colleges are re-defined as places where highly "autonomous, responsibilised, entrepreneurial actors" are moulded and produced (Brown, 2003, cited in Davies and Bansel, 2007, p. 250).

Through neoliberal policies, then, parents and preschools are situated through relations of consumers and producers, and discourses of responsible parenting have become legitimised (Wilkins, 2010). For these economic relationships to be maximised, two fundamental conditions are necessary. First is the idea that "choice will automatically improve the quality of products" (Wilkins, 2010, p. 171). Second, is the notion that such choice needs to be rendered visible and accessible through marketisation. It is argued that engaging parents as consumers will undoubtedly force providers to be attentive to market concepts of supply and demand, and to utilise marketing strategies in order to gain a competitive advantage (Wilkins, 2011b, p. 4).

This new education system, with its appeal to the expectations of a consumer culture or consumer society, is not only depicted as more efficacious, but also as more just, due to its emphasis on

'consumer voice'. As Ball (2008) describes it, a rhetorical space opens up through these assumptions, aimed at reinforcing claims about the new equitable system, with its emphasis on fairness, responsiveness, flexibility and choice for all. Choice is considered and constructed one of the most important neoliberal mechanisms to guarantee citizens their right and autonomy to "secure improvements in the social and public services in their communities" (Tony Blair, quoted in Wilkins, 2010, p. 172). The rationale is that introducing user choice in public services will support the superiority of market mechanisms by transforming 'passive welfare citizens' into active, autonomous and independent consumers of public services, into citizen-consumers (Clarke & Newman, 2005).

The role of the citizen-consumer has become so significant in socially circulating discourses of choice (Wilkins, 2010, p. 173) that educational institutions and families have begun to appropriate the vocabulary of economics and choice (Gewirtz et al., 1995) and a new discursive identity has emerged, positioning parents as good and responsible citizens, as well as "active consumers who may or must choose a school for their child from a number of options" (Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015, p. 325). In turn, this has meant that parents/caregivers have started to feel bound by strong connotations of responsibilised and moralised agency, making choice a site for anxiety (Angus, 2015; Campbell et al., 2009; Wilkins, 2009, 2010, 2011b, 2012). In this context, Wilkins (2010, 2011b) explains, the discursive identity of chooser can also entail certain duties and responsibilities which require parents to articulate and combine meanings and practices of choice that can register contrasting and contradictory notions of being an active and responsible consumer on one side, and a loving and caring parent on the other (Wilkins, 2010, 2011).

Identity and agency tend to evolve within specific settings (Potter & Whetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Wilkins, 2011a), and within neoliberalised education, "parental agency is explicitly validated and encouraged" (Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015, p. 325). Parents' choice-making, however, must be read "in all its complexities as context-fashioned" (Wilkins, 2011b, p. 6) and such reading must emphasise how the take-up or refusal of certain discursive positions is shaped by motivations of accountability and the action-orientation of peoples' talk (Wilkins, 2011b, p. 6). This is particularly true for mothers who often have to comply to socially and culturally constructed gendered expectations, which result, in 'affect terms', in some emotions sticking to some bodies more than others. For example, understanding of the 'loving and caring role' of mothers as an affective practice shows how gendered relations between bodies are so frequently reproduced, not because of any 'essential identity' in these relations, but because of the ways in

which certain moral imperatives, expectations and emotions (e.g. the role of loving, caring mother, responsible for schooling and education etc) 'stick' to certain bodies, at specific times, fixating mothers into subject categories. As Proctor (2015) points out, the rise of the "educated, engaged (middle class) mother" (p. 203) is an example of this stickiness within a specific historical, cultural and emotional environment.

At the same time, these categories are also strongly influenced by class, which means that some mothers simply do not have the 'benefit of choosing' in what is supposedly the new equitable system, characterised by choice for all. They may thus experience other emotions, such as guilt for purportedly not caring, condemnation aimed at them because they do not take up the responsibility for caring, and so on (Ahmed, 2004b). In turn, these emotions can be read as affects which pass through the collective body of wealthier, middle-class, choosing mothers, moving this group to act in ways that exacerbate already existing systemic injustices.

2.3.2 The neoliberal parent as an enterprising, choosing subject

The emergence of the neoliberal state has reconfigured people as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives. In this context, individuals have been constructed as autonomous, responsible, self-actualising citizens, whose successes and failure are all attributable to their choices (Ball, 2008). At the same time, institutions have also been reconfigured to produce such highly individualised, responsible subjects, who have become "entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives" (Brown, 2003, p. 38).

Research has shown that people have welcomed the increasing level of individualism as a sign of their freedom and autonomy, perhaps unaware of the fact that institutions have progressively transferred most risk to the individual and relinquished a lot of their responsibilities (Saul, 2005). This represents an important discursive shift between individual citizens and the wider society, whereby individuals are not only conceived, but actively imagine themselves, as entrepreneurs. According to Meadmore and McWilliam (2001), this new discourse of being enterprising calls for a positive, flexible, adaptable disposition towards change (p. 24).

Meeting this challenge demands both self-confidence and risk-taking, so that the capacity to carry through creative ideas individually, or in collaboration with others, is developed. An enterprising individual, therefore, needs and desires to be "active, confident, purposeful and autonomous, not passive, uncertain and dependent" (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 34). As Davies and Bansel (2007) noted, in this new paradigm, the concept of the 'passive' citizen is thus replaced by an

autonomous 'active' citizen with rights, duties, obligations and expectations (p. 252). The neoliberal citizen now sees him/herself as active entrepreneur of the self, and as morally superior (p. 252). A feature of neoliberal subjects is that their desires, hopes, ideals and fears "have been shaped in such a way that they desire to be morally worthy, autonomous individuals, who, as successful entrepreneurs, can produce the best for themselves and their families through their choices" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252).

In the context of educational choice, parents (usually middle-class mothers) thus need to be prepared to take both risks and responsibility to achieve their bold and ambitious goals with regards to their children's education and future success. This willingness to take on risks and responsibilities is to be regarded as "human virtues" (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 32). However, not everyone can be the 'good' neoliberal citizen. In a highly marketised preschool context, for example, these constructions linked to neoliberal individualism ignore the ways in which the capacities and choice to take certain risks and responsibilities are heavily contingent on class and gender, as well as on the emotions, norms and patterns of expectations attached to the latter.

As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) point out, the dominant discourse through which the change to neoliberal market-societies is managed is not just moralistic, but also competitive and at times fear-driven, in that individuals with the knowledge and powers to choose, must act to take care of themselves and their families, in order to provide them with the best opportunity for future success. As will be discussed below, this is particularly important in the context of parental identity, as it positions parents and caregivers, rather than social institutions, as the sole focus of responsibility for their children's future success, creating abundant opportunities for worries and fears to thrive, as well as contributing toward the reproduction of certain classed and gendered social divisions.

Scholars have noted that these expectations of parental accountability and responsibility have intensified greatly since the 1990s, "the decade of the brain" (Smyth, 2014, p. 10), and that this has, in turn, increased parents' uncertainty and anxiety (Campbell et al., 2009; Wilkins, 2010, 2011a). Recommendations about maximising a child's educational opportunities now pervade most neoliberal literature and, whether through purchasing power or through social interaction, the key identity for the contemporary parent is that of "responsible consumer and guarantor of the child's future educational success" (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 66).

In sum, discourses about responsible, enterprising subjects have impacted on individuals significantly, as the 'citizen', generally associated with politics and rights, has been overshadowed

by the 'consumer' (Clark, 2013; Connell, 2013; Doherty, 2015; Doherty, 2007; Klees, 2010; Peters, 1999; Sims, 2017). More specifically, parents have been positioned as informed decision-makers (Angus, 2015; Karlsson et al., 2013) and "pedagogic subjects" (Smyth, 2014, p. 10), and have taken on the role of responsible consumers of education.

2.3.3 The gendered and classed domain of choice: Meet the middle-class mother consumer

As Rose (1999) stated, in neoliberal societies the citizen is to become the enthusiastic consumer of goods and investment, whereby "his/her activity is to be understood in terms of the activation of rights of the consumer in the market place" (p. 165). In this context, individuals are linked to society and institutions by acts of consumption, enterprise and entitled choice (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252). In turn, these market rationalities have made way for competition between schools and other educational organisations and created the conditions necessary for activating the "parent as a consumer in the field of education choice" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 7).

It is now the right and responsibility of parents to decide what school or early childhood education setting their children attend, to carry out all the research necessary to evaluate available options and, importantly, to carry out the role of the empowered, discriminating and autonomous chooser (Wilkins, 2009, p. 7). Such representations are directly related to existing neoliberal discourses of parental choice, with some scholars arguing that parental choices have been so heavily affected by neoliberalism and marketisation that these processes have left parents with "no choice but to choose" (Karlsson et al., 2013, p. 209).

Specific constructions of parents are often invoked in both discussions and texts created to enlist parents in a series of practices which often require a range of auxiliary activities, such as selecting appropriate learning materials and suitable educational centres (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 66). For example, through such discursive practices, parents are urged to accept that it is their responsibility as good caregivers to participate in their child's education right from the start of that child's life. In this sense, the parent's position is that of informed and educated consumer of education services on behalf of the child (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 69). The parent is offered, through exposure to a variety of discursive and advertising texts, a seemingly objective and informed basis upon which to make their decisions (Angus, 2015, p. 396). In this competitive market, parents (as consumers) are supposed make rational, objective, self-interested choices between competing providers (schools) who offer goods (education) (Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015, p. 325).

However, a growing group of scholars has argued that these dominant discursive regimes on parenting advice and support, whilst using the class- and gender-neutral definition of parent, are in fact strongly classed and gendered. In particular, numerous scholars around the world have pointed out that it is usually middle-class parents who play the most significant role in any level of the education market (Ball, 2004; Ball & Nikita, 2014; Ball & Vincent, 2001; Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Forsberg, 2018; Healy, 2021; Lareau et al., 2016; Oría et al., 2007; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Reay et al., 2011; Reay et al., 2008; Rowe, 2017; Rowe & Windle, 2012; Vincent & Ball, 2006).

In Australia, the significant position of middle-class families in the field of choice has been highlighted by scholars such as Helen Proctor, Craig Campbell, Geoffrey Sherington (see for instance Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor, 2015; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013), Kay Whitehead (2006), Emma Rowe (2014; 2017; 2017; 2012) and Claire Aitchison (2006, 2010). These scholars have illuminated — either through independent or joint research projects — that, within the current marketised education context, it is really middle-class families that have the skills and means necessary to access choice mechanisms and maximise their chances of being accepted into their preferred institutions.

In one of the most influential Australian studies on choice, Proctor and colleagues (2009) found that choosing a schooling institution has become an important step in how Australian middle-class families raise their children, and that middle-class parents are significant players in Australia's developing schooling arrangements (p. 50). The study revealed that these parents are often so involved in the process of choosing that they experience feelings such as anxiety about being able to access the desirable school, and use a variety of strategies, such as moving house or changing their job, in order to gain entry into their preferred institution (Campbell et al., 2009). Similarly, Emma Rowe (2014), both alone and in conjunction with other scholars, explored the vital role of middle-class parents in the field of choice, investigating both the way in which such families actively mobilise social and economic resources to maximise outcomes for their families, and the close connection between geographical location and parental choice (see Rowe, 2015; Rowe, 2017; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

Further, choice discourses are not only (in)directly aimed at the middle-class; research has shown that they are specifically at middle-class *women and/or mothers* (Duncan et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 1996; Geinger et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2011; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Reay, 1998a; Wilkins, 2011a).

The most important contributions to the literature on the crucial role of mothers in educational choice are made by Proctor (2008); Proctor et al. (2015), Reay (1998b, 2005a, 2005b), Campbell and Proctor (2014); Campbell et al. (2009) and Wilkins (2009, 2010, 2011a, 2012).

For example, in an analysis of the magazine *Australian Women's Weekly*, Helen Proctor and Heather Weaver (2017) found that schooling is positioned as "an important field of responsibility for mothers" (Proctor & Weaver, 2017, p. 50). Proctor explored school choice in Australia and argued that middle-class mothers are usually the best resourced and most actively engaged participants in it (see Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor, 2008; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2020). In a separate study with Claire Aitchison, Proctor argues that Australian parents have increasingly been positioned as active consumers, and explores the way in which some mothers activate different types of social and cultural capitals while participating in the school market (Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015, p. 327). More recently, Proctor and her colleague analysed parenting advice in a women's magazine and found that the pressures and responsibilities on mothers are particularly emphasised in the educational advice about early childhood education (Proctor & Weaver, 2020, p. 46)

Similarly, Aitchison (2006, 2010) examined school choice in Australia and found that it is usually mothers who manage most aspects of the school choice process, while recognising patterns of consumer behaviour, such as information gathering, exploring ways to maximise access, and considering their options and listing their preferences. She further concluded that, at times, mothers found the emotional work-load involved in negotiating with other family members' expectations and aspirations quite challenging.

Arguably, the efficacy of such discursive regimes to legitimise certain positionings, and to render them desirable is exactly what makes those very discourses so emotionally and ideologically powerful. However, when studying how social actors engage with the meanings and discourses made available to them through dominant policy discourses, one needs to also consider the extent to which these engagements are affected not only by individual conceptions of subjectivity and agency, but also by class and gender constraints, and that therefore, different subjects might either embrace or resist the performative capacity of discourses to constitute them.

The role of the 'mother-consumer' represents one of these positionings (Wilkins, 2009, p. 10). Identities are not only discursively constructed; it is often subjects themselves who gradually start to identify and position themselves as a result of the social and moral pressures produced by

discourses (Karlsson et al., 2013, p. 214). So, whether consciously or not, mothers also gradually activate their own identity as "informed and knowledgeable consumers" and "'good and responsible choosing subjects", who heartily partake in the process of school choice (Angus, 2015; Karlsson et al., 2013).

As Wilkins (2009) found, by becoming a parent, one becomes subject to discourses which construct parenting identities, and as these discourses change, parents take on different positionings as they bring into being and sustain specific identities or subjectivities. Mothers are constructed in the government policy and the media as needing to take on authoritarian and entrepreneurial subjectivities in relation to early learning, to ensure the future educational success of their preschool children (Karlsson et al., 2013). Such discursive regimes on parenting have been criticized for producing "idealized and mythic parenting requirements" (Blackford, 2004, p. 239), an "ideology of motherhood (Choi et al., 2005, p. 173) "a symbolic world of parents" (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 72) and "dominant mothering ideologies" (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, p. 510).

These notions of 'good parenting' are the same that flood the choice policy in education literature**,** and which are inextricably linked to the notions of excellence and quality that are pervasive in marketing and promotional materials in all levels and sectors of education (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 33). Commercial entities do not wish parents to believe that "just being there can ever be enough" (Nichols et al., 2009). They want parents to believe that "providing children with the best possible educational and social outcomes" (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 65) is a responsibility they can accomplish through choice. Research has shown that these political and marketing discourses are working, as the efforts of favourably-positioned parents to pass on their social advantage to their children "is supported and facilitated by public policy" (Proctor, 2015, p. 203).

Therefore, it is necessary to examine narratives of "good and responsible parent" as well as of "informed and autonomous consumer". These narratives play a significant role in this study, given the pressures they put on mothers to adapt themselves to fit into these constructed identities. Inevitably, as (Wilkins, 2009) noted, "the parental right to choose carries a heavy weight of responsibility and obligation with it" (p. 7), and this responsibility often brings with it moral aspects of good and bad parenting, which can lead to "warped expectations and decision-making" (p.7).

Wilkins (2011a) argues that because choice connects with ethical injunctions around behaviour, "it is sometimes enacted in ways that transcend economic rationality" (p.5). Choice reveals the cross-

cutting impulses that inform parents' decision-making, as it is "negotiated at the intersection of multiple discourses**"** (Wilkins, 2011a, p. 5). It is argued here that this intersection of multiple discourses is particularly important in the context of choosing a preschool, where mothers' anxieties, worries and other emotions interconnect particularly strongly with their desire to provide optimal educational outcomes for their very young children.

In the next chapter, the importance of affect theories in investigating parents' choice-making mechanisms is discussed. In particular, the potential contribution of affect theory is proposed as a useful theoretical framework for analysing preschool choice, as it is based on two important tenets: first, subjectivity is always embedded in socio-political and historic contexts; and second, affect is always embedded in our everyday acts and practices, and are such, they are mobilised by cultural, social, political and economic forces (Zembylas, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Choice is the result of the complex interaction of these two, and other structures.

The influence of identity-formation processes is another important element that has been ignored in much literature on parents' educational choices. Yet, with choice policy being such a fundamental part of the educational landscape, it is necessary to move towards a more robust and comprehensive conception of choice, one that places as much weight on its representational and affective nature as it does on practical aspects of selection (Wilkins, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). In the last part of this section, I draw from sociological research on consumption to explore the relationship between discursive identities, marketisation and parental choice.

2.3.4 Consumption theories and parental identity: moving towards affect

In a study investigating the emergence of the parent consumer in Britain, Clarke et al. (2007) observed that "the role of the consumer is marked by the 'practice of consumption' and thus the defining feature of the consumer is the act of purchase: commodified goods, services or experiences are the means to consummating needs, wants and desires" (p. 128). According to consumption theory, products and objects are consumed not only for what they do but also for what they communicate and mean to individuals and their surroundings, and hence they become part of consumers' identities (Therkelsen & Gram, 2008, p. 270).

The vital role of consumption in identity formation is well documented, with various scholars including Cova and Cova (2002) claiming that, when making choices in the market place, individuals are less interested in the objects of consumption, than in the social links and identities that come with them. As Zukin and Maguire (2004) explain, identity is a reflexive, ongoing, individual process

shaped by appearance and performance, and individuals experience the act of consumption as central to crafting, forming, and expressing their identity (p. 173).

Consumption and identity, therefore, are closely intertwined. Research has shown that the dynamics of the brand community operate in very similar ways to those of the 'consumption tribe'. For example, Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) observed that, within a brand community, people feel the same deep sense of connection that groups of individuals experience with others who share the same decisions. So, it seems fair to argue that similar 'consumption dynamics' might be at work when mothers are choosing a preschool for their children, particularly when this associates itself with a specific educational approach, or 'brand', like in the case of Montessori.

Some scholars have highlighted that, to some degree, consumption can bridge cultural and social institutions and structures, to the extent that, from a symbolic perspective, commodities and products have been conceived as "vessels of meaning that signify similarly" across all types of consumers (Holt, 1995, p. 2). The practice of consumption therefore has the potential to unite individuals from diverse backgrounds through a common, symbolic and affective identity, irrespective of culture or status (Cova & Cova, 2002).

Studies reveal that people like to gather together in consumption tribes, and that such social, proximate communities carry a highly affective component, and strongly influence people's behaviour, discourses of the self, and choices (Therkelsen & Gram, 2008). As discussed earlier, however, choices are always mediated by the broader structures within which they occur, and individuals' positions within class and gender relations impact significantly on their purchasing power. Not all mothers, for example, can afford to make purchases (like a Montessori education), which are constructed as exclusive by virtue of the fact that mothers in less privileged class positions cannot make the same choice. In this sense, even though practices of consumption can potentially unite individuals from different socio-economic and cultural circumstances, the ability to make choices — or lack thereof — reproduces particular social divisions and groupings.

In affective terms, consumption choices therefore play important roles during social interactions, and in drawing social boundaries (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). For example, Therkelsen and Gram (2008) found that individuals "use consumption objects to negotiate their own identity through processes of affiliating themselves with, and differentiating themselves from, other consumers" (p. 275). That is because consumption is as much about identifying with some individuals, as it is about

distinguishing ourselves from others. It is "as much about rejecting a specific identity, as it is about expressing one" (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014, p. 500).

In sum, the shifting and malleable nature of identity-formation means that "emotions factor heavily in the consumption process" (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014, p. 491). As Therkelsen and Gram (2008) put it, the mother-consumer is not "just a rational but very much an emotional and social being, who engages in the acquisition, consumption and disposal of products and commodities to construct a meaningful life" (p. 271). An effective way to target audiences' emotions is educational branding, as specific educational approaches tend to carry symbolic and emotional messages, and tap into prospective clients' affective spheres (Lubienski, 2007).

Research has shown that this makes such emotive messages very effective marketing tools, adding extra layers to individuals' choice processes, and leading institutions to increasingly rely on them (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 38). As argued below a new approach to research is needed that incorporates the symbolic role of branding with the power of dominant discourses on the emotional aspects of choice. This thesis argues that using affect theory as a research framework can provide a much more robust picture of the social implications of the marketisation of preschools, particularly in relation to parental choice.

2.4 Section three: affect as a more nuanced framework for analysis

This section introduces the concept of affect and argues that paying attention to parents' emotional and embodied experiences can provide a richer and more nuanced picture of how choice happens, especially in the context of preschool, and what these choices *do* in terms of reproducing particular social divisions. These are themes that have received little attention in the research; yet understanding the role of the affective and symbolic domains of choice can further illuminate the social justice implications of the neoliberalisation of early childhood education.

2.4.1 The rational choice model

Assumptions about the benefits of choice policy in education are often rooted in what is known as rational choice theory (Bast & Walberg, 2004). Underpinning this theory are two main notions: first is the idea that choice inevitably leads to excellence, quality and improved educational outcomes (Meadmore & McWilliam, 2001, p. 33). Second is the conviction that, as consumers, parents are *rational beings*, who make logical and responsible decisions, based on practical factors (i.e. location,

cost, quality, etc.) aimed at advancing their children's best interests (Burgess et al., 2015; Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014).

This rational view of parents, however, has been challenged by researchers and theorists working within the sociology of education who argue for a more complex view of parental choice, suggesting that greater attention needs to be paid to elements such as gender, race and social class (Byrne & De Tona, 2019; Goyette, 2008; Hill, 2016; Wilkins, 2011a; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). For example, highlighting the importance of emotions in the field of childcare choice, Gallagher (2017) argues:

> There is an emotional 'stickiness' to childcare provisioning […] the very idea of a parent–consumer and the agency they are understood to now have, as imagined in policy, is fundamentally flawed (adapted from Gallagher, 2017, p. 21)

While the quote refers specifically to childcare, the same could be argued for preschool choice. By integrating questions of social class, gender and race into analyses of choice policy, scholars have pointed out the processes and practices that lead to inequalities and the fragmentation of education systems around the world. In Connell's words, neoliberal transformations have resulted in "a major shift between older forms of inequality based on institutional segregation, and new forms of inequality based on market mechanisms" (Connell, 2012, p. 681). Not everybody has the same buying and selling powers in today's market, so some parents do not have a choice at all. Following this argument, I claim that by examining choice through a socio-relational lens and highlighting the role of affect, this research provides a much richer and more nuanced understanding of how some parents choose.

2.4.2 Choice as an affective environment

The exclusion and segmentation that derive from the rational model are only some of the aspects of neoliberal education which have received criticism in the literature. For example, Maguire et al. (1999) found that exploring parents' choice in education is problematic because parents' decision-making mechanisms are influenced by a multitude of factors, some of which diverge significantly from rational reasons to enter much more emotional, symbolic and moral domains. Further, a study by Duncan et al. (2004) found that when parents select where to educate their children, they also face sensitive and moral considerations. Karlsson et al. (2013) found that "when parents were asked to talk about how they came to select a specific setting for their child, the mere act of narrating and accounting for past actions and experiences brought moral aspects of 'right and wrong' ways of parenting to the fore" (p. 210). Vincent and Ball (2001) noted that "choice narratives require the

mother to navigate their way through some very potent and very emotional normatives of 'good mothering'" (p. 649 emphasis added).

The relationship between discursive practices, identity and emotions as they relate to parental choice of school has started to become the topic of international studies. For example, in America Lubienski (2007) explored the role played by emotional themes and images used in marketing strategies in parental choice-making processes, and found that the information made available to parents "through competitively driven, commercial-style materials, does little to support the idealised model of rational parents choosing schools based on institutional effectiveness" (p. 120).

Similarly, Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) observed that school choice is a highly social process, heavily weighted with meanings for its participants, and frequently characterised by tensions and negotiations between competing goals, academic and otherwise. The authors emphasised the emotional implications of such negotiations and determined that the decisions parents make "become heavily laden with meaning and emotion" (p. 490). Similarly, Wilkins (2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) explored mothers' interpretations of 'responsible parenting' during their choice practices, concluding that little attention has been given to "what emotion is doing in the context of school choice" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 123).

In sum, school choice is not a neutral act; it is socially, emotionally, culturally and politically constituted (Ball et al., 1995; Burgess et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2009; Crozier et al., 2011; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Lubienski, 2007). Whilst most literature on choice positions the process as a rational one, in which parents simply gather information, compare their options, and then make 'the best' decision for their children solely based on empirical and practical data, more recent studies have repositioned choice as "a more complex subject, mediated by a variety of factors" (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014, p. 506) .

This is especially relevant for this study, which proposes that a new theoretical framework is needed, to better understand the dynamics of parental choice. This research proposes that parents need to be understood as a collective, a body which operates within the boundaries of affective communities, within which the 'choice' to participate in dominant discursive and affective practices is never exclusively individual and is mediated and mobilised by socio-economic factors. Using an affective lens, this study aims to provide a more robust picture of choice, accounting not only for the discursive practices embraced by parents during their identity-construction, but also (and especially), the way in which language, affect and emotion move some parents to make particular

choices, when they are activated in today's complex market. These factors impact on which options become more legitimate compared to others, thus contributing to the reproduction of classed and gendered (as well as raced) social divisions, particularly as some mothers look to others as a reference group when deciding how to act (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014).

2.5 Summary

The Australian education landscape has been powerfully affected by the rise of a neoliberal political, economic and cultural agenda which has changed the structures and roles of the education system. This reshaping has also been possible, in part, because of the circulation of specific neoliberal discourses, predicated on individualism, responsibility and competition. These discourses posit that improvements and advances will result from the implementation of choice policy, and rest on the assumption that individuals will utilise their rationality to take advantage of a competitive, choice-driven market.

However, this chapter has argued that choice is a much more complex field of action, which, alongside practical considerations, involves symbolic, representational and emotional aspects. As such, I suggested that a new theoretical approach is required to better understand mothers' decision-making processes, particularly when these take place in an early childhood context. This chapter has introduced the notion of choice as an 'affective and emotional environment'. Chapter 3 discusses in detail how affect theory can serve as an appropriate and useful analytical approach to better understand parental choice of preschool.

CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL RESOURCES

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, it was argued that studies that only use theories based on a 'rational' or pragmatic model of choice have ignored other important factors, including the affective sphere. This chapter sets out the theoretical orientation for the empirical work that takes place in later chapters, where I analyse the discursive and affective practices of mothers who are engaged in the process of choosing a preschool within a field of choice that is currently structured through dominant neoliberal discourses. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section draws primarily from social constructionist and feminist poststructuralist perspectives to justify the argument that, since gender and class play a crucial role in the preschool market, a thesis examining the relations between discourse, choice, social institutions and identity must be founded in theoretical approaches which recognise the importance of the power dynamics embedded in the social construction of knowledge and subjectivity. This is particularly true in the context of mothers and their responsibility for early childhood education (Proctor & Weaver, 2020, p. 46).

The second section considers the concepts of discourse and affect, and discusses the important ways in which they are interconnected. This is because notions of race, gender and class are particularly fertile ground for considering the forces of affect, due to the ways in which "they are both located in and beyond the body" (Byrne & De Tona, 2019, p. 6). This section, therefore, provides a framework on which to build when examining how these forces mobilise affect, particularly gender, class and socio-economic situations. Here I draw on conceptual notions proposed by Foucault to explore concepts of power, knowledge and subjectivity to discuss the advantages and implications of utilising a social-relational orientation to affect with reference to the research question and aim.

3.2 Theoretical framework

3.2.1 Social constructionism

The research is grounded in a social constructionist theoretical perspective, thus assuming that we are born into a world of meaning—a mélange of discourses, signs, symbols, cultures or sub-cultures, where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the individuals in that culture already exist (Crotty, 1998). These concepts and categories are acquired by each person as they develop the use of language, and are then reproduced every day, by everyone who shares and participates in

that language, its culture, and the institutions associated with it (Burr, 2015). For social constructionists, language is not just a way to express ourselves; rather it has a *performative function* – it can be thought of as a form of action – giving us the primary means by which we construct our reality, our knowledge and our social worlds (Burr, 2015). Knowledge, then, is something that people create and enact through their social relations, rather than a kind of universal truth to be discovered (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionism invites us to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observations of the world (Burr, 2015), proposing instead that "all knowledge, and all meaningful realities, are contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interactions between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Human experiences and actions are, therefore, dependent on society and on culture, which constructionists see as "a set of control mechanisms — plans, recipes, rules and instructions — for the governing of behaviour (Geertz, 1973, p. 44). In this context, human thought emerges as a series of significant symbols, both social and public, and objects become disengaged from their mere actuality, being used, instead, to impose meanings upon our experiences (Geertz, 1973). In Geertz' words, this process of enculturation, "establishes a tight grip on us and, by and large, shapes our thinking and behaviors throughout our lives" (Geertz, 1973, p. 79).

3.2.1.1 Constructivism VS constructionism

The emphasis of social constructionism on social interactions, social dynamics and processes is reflected in the important distinction between the theories of constructivism and constructionism (Burr, 2015). As Crotty (1998) explains, constructivism serves for "epistemological considerations focusing exclusively on the meaning making activity of the individual mind" (p. 58), whilst the notion of constructionism is best used "where the focus includes the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (p. 58). This is because, as a philosophy, constructionism is rooted in postmodernism, thus emphasising the co-existence of a multiplicity and variety of situation-dependent ways of life (Burr, 2015, p. 14). Moreover, social constructionism allows researchers to move beyond the liberal individual to embrace discursive understandings of subjectivity where subjects are constructed within and through discourse and mediate the process of becoming (see Foucault, 1977). In other words, social constructionism posits that subjects do not exist pre-discursively, but that our lives, identities and the reach of our agency are limited and enabled by and norms (McMorrow, 2019).

Mentioning this distinction is necessary in a thesis which explores how parents think, feel and act, once they are activated as consumers in the field of choice – and hence limited and enabled by socially constructed boundaries and norms that constitute the field. By recognising the place of culture and society in the construction of meaning (Prendiville, 2007), a social constructionist approach helps to illuminate the positionality of subjects within a classed, gendered and neoliberal context, while breaking down overly simplistic divisions between structure (society and cultures) and agent (individuals). In particular, social constructionism provides a useful framework to investigate how mothers' social and affective practices are structured and moderated through neoliberal discourses of freedom, responsibility and choice. As other scholars have argued, "choice networks are strongly gendered" (Ball, 2002, p. 105), with schooling becoming the main responsibility of the mother (Ball, 2002; Reay, 1998a; Reay, 1998c; Reay, 2005b).

Throughout the thesis, the connections between these macro and micro dimensions of the research are also examined through the lens of affect theory, because attention to emotions allows critical researchers to better address questions of how individual subjects become invested in particular structures and institutions in which those choices and emotions are entangled (Ahmed, 2004a). First, however, it is important to briefly discuss the contribution of feminist theories in explaining how gender and social class are conceptualised in this research.

3.2.2 Feminist poststructuralism (FPS)

The evolving education market has generated new attitudes towards schools and schooling in which parents are encouraged to view education as a commodity in relation to which they have choices (Reay, 1998b, p. 201). However, as scholars have pointed out for decades now, despite the undifferentiated notion of *parent* in the majority of the literature about parental involvement in education, when examining the day-to-day participation of 'parents' in their children's schooling, it is primarily *mothers* who take on the main responsibility for, and undertake the great majority of, the work of parental involvement (see, for example, Andrews et al.; Duncan et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 1996; Hutchinson, 2011; Reay, 1998a; Reay, 1998c; Reay et al., 2011; Wilkins, 2011b).

Further, when examining the social implications of prevailing consumerist discourses of 'parents as consumers', research has highlighted that, due to their involvement and participation in their children's education, these discourses tend to affect mostly parents (mothers) of the *middle class* (Campbell et al., 2009; Crozier et al., 2011; James et al., 2010; Reay, 1998b; Reay, 1998c; Reay, 2005a, 2005b; Reay, 2007b). Educational choice, in a sense, has always been the "province of the

middle classes" (Reay, 1998b, p. 207) and. as such, a site for social reproduction of inequalities. For example, Reay (1998b) found that "middle-class children's activities, and mothers' work in support of them, constituted a systematic laying down of educational and cultural advantage; a sedimentation of privilege" (p. 201)

Therefore, since this research explores the gendered nature of parental involvement, by investigating how mothers' identities as 'consumers of education' are constructed and reproduced through dominant discourses, it is also aligned with feminist poststructuralism (FPS), "a theory of how subjectivity is socially constructed and constituted within discourse" (Ferfolja et al., 2018, p. 48). By challenging the inequities of the power relations embedded in the process of knowledge construction, feminist poststructuralism can offer a significant contribution to an investigation of the relation between affective-discursive practices, socio-economic status and the deeply gendered and classed implications of choice, because, as a theory, "it explores how language, power and discourse intersect, and how they impact, in particular, on gendered subjects" (Ferfolja et al., 2018, p. 48). By contesting the structures themselves (such as class and gender), and providing me with conceptual tools that enable me to view identities and knowledge, it allows for a more nuanced exploration of the interconnections between discourse, power, affect and gender in the context of mothers' choice of preschool.

This is critical because dominant norms and discourses about the importance and role of preschool are seen here as socially and economically constructed (Blood, 2005). Similarly, gender is interpreted, broadly speaking, as the socio-economic expectations, behaviours, beliefs and 'rules' that are attributed to the different biological sexes, and which tend to manifest themselves in the relations between bodies. In particular, women's relegation to the social roles of wife and mother (Orbach, 1986) contributes to fixating them into specific subject categories, making them most susceptible to dominant discourses that are habitually reproduced, as a result of the way in which certain moral imperatives, expectations and emotions (e.g. caring for all aspects of children's lives) 'stick' to certain bodies.

Analysing such discourses and subjectivities through a feminist poststructuralist lens permits me to clarify that whenever 'parents' are called upon in a 'neutral or undifferentiated' manner in discourses of choice, it is often mothers who are being interpellated or summoned, particularly *middle-class mothers*, who by 'virtue' of their subject positionalities in broader social relations (as

well as their race[3]), are 'allocated' quotidian chores, including the process of choosing their children's education. These broader social patterns, through which the 'caring' role of mothers is extended to the expectation that they take responsibility for all education-related matters ,have already been discussed by other researchers (Ball & Vincent, 2001; Bruckman & Blanton, 2003; Campbell et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 1996; Hutchinson, 2011; Reay, 1998a, 1998b; Reay, 1998c; Reay, 2005b; Vincent & Ball, 2001, 2006; Vincent et al., 2010; Wilkins, 2011a).

Importantly, the same social patterns were also identified in this study. As discussed in Chapter Six, the materials generated in this research through qualitative questionnaires reinforced the prevailing role of mothers in the context of educational choice. The small sample in this study comprised 24 participants; out of these, 20 were mothers. Therefore, aligning the research with feminist poststructuralism allows me to emphasise the political and gendered nature of women's experiences, or as Blood (2005) says, "the inseparability of the personal from the political, where the political is not only intended as governance-based politics, but includes also the politics of everyday life, derived from the organisation of social relations, and the way in which these are infused with power (p. 47).

As a social category, however, gender intersects with other categories of social identity, including social class and position, and geographical location (Lazar, 2007, p. 141). Therefore, by pointing to the inequities of the power relations embedded in the social construction of knowledge, FPS also helps me to explain how economic class is construed in this thesis, namely as another social construction. Class is thus interpreted as a power structure, which, as a concept, is heavily influenced by and reliant on dominant discourses, and which intersects with other hierarchies of oppression, becoming intimately entangled with gender relations. This is especially significant for a study centred on the neoliberalised (classed) educational environment, because of the ways in which neoliberal relations (of power) result in specific affective practices of in/exclusion, thus intensifying divisions between those parents who can 'pay' for private education, and those who cannot.

As introduced in the next section, a focus on emotions and embodied responses (or how people are moved to make some choices and not others), as well as a discussion of the affective assemblages that derive from neoliberal discourses, also helps to illuminate the way in which social norms and

[3] While this research is bringing gender and class to the surface, the significant role of race in the power-relation dynamics of choice is very much acknowledged by the researcher. However, due to limitations of space, it is not the central focus in this thesis.

expectations attached to specific social class or gender regulate and/or mediate parental (maternal) choice of preschool.

3.3 Discourse and affect

3.3.1 Discourse

From a social constructionist viewpoint, humans are understood and described as engaging with their world and making sense of it in a genuinely historical and social perspective, through the institutions and discourses within which they are embedded. Foucault (1969) describes discourses as "practices which systematically form the object of which they speak" (p. 49). Discourses are intimately linked to social structures and social practices and, as such, they expand beyond just the use of language (Burr, 2015).

Discourses are different ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the immaterial world of thoughts, meanings, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world of stories, images, and statements (Fairclough, 2003, p. 129). They offer multiple, competing, and potentially contradictory ways of giving meaning to the world, with each discourse bringing different aspects into focus, raising different issues for consideration, and having different implications for what actions should be taken/considered (Burr, 2015, p. 78).

Once a discourse becomes available culturally, it is then possible for it to be appropriated in the interest of a specific cause (Burr, 2015, p. 91). For example, dominant discourses about neoliberal education which position preschool as 'the crucial start to a successful life', and that represent selective mothers as responsible and caring, have been taken up by advertising experts, and have contributed to the creation of an affective *environment* which shapes and moves the beliefs and practices of mothers and care-givers. Within this environment, different levels of power are available for exercise by different individuals, based on their subject positionalities.

Each discourse is associated with the different relationships people have, which, in turn, depend on their positionality in the world, that is to say, their personal and social identities, and the social interaction they have with other people (Fairclough, 2003; Rose, 2012; St. Pierre, 2000). Discourses, then, produce a range of possible subject positions which people live out or live through. In this sense, they are closely related to the notion of 'identity construction' discussed in Chapter Two. In this context, identities and subjectivises are constructed through the things people do and say, and they are manifestations of discourses, representations of events within the social and historical

context within which they occur. They do not originate within the person's private experience only (like their individuality), but rather in the discursive culture that those subjects inhabit. As Burr (2015) explains:

> discourses show up in the things that people say and write, and the things we say and write, in turn, are dependant for their meaning upon the discursive context in which they appear. (Burr, 2015, p. 78)

In sum, discourses, through what is said, written or otherwise represented, serve to construct the phenomena of our worlds for us. Different discourses construct these things in different ways, with each discourse portraying the objects how it 'really' is, that is, claiming to be the truth. These claims of truth and knowledge are crucial issues for constructionist research as they lie at the heart of issues of identity, change, and power (Burr, 2015, p. 78). This is because, in a Foucauldian view, discourses not only govern the way in which a topic can be meaningfully talked about; they also influence how ideas are used to regulate the conduct of others (Burr, 2015, p. 80). As discussed below, the effect of discourses on other people's field of action has implications in terms of agency and power relations.

3.3.1.1 Discursive norms, agency and structure

The humanist tradition theorises agency as synonymous with simply being a person (Davies, 1991, p. 42). Rational selves will make decisions 'for themselves', albeit choices that accord with dominant discourse (Benson, 1990 quoted in Davies, 1991, p. 44). Within the humanist tradition, agency is therefore rational, independent and autonomous (Davies, 1991, p. 44), a vision which accords with dominant discourses of neoliberalism.

In contrast, in (feminist) poststructuralist theory, the subject is itself "the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity" (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 113). And, whilst it is accepted that the appropriation of discourses may happen at the unconscious level, poststructuralists argue that, by being aware of the existence of multiple competing discourses, we strengthen our agency through choosing from the discursive resources available to us. As Davies (1991) explains, an awareness of our positioning is what gives us agency (p. 46).

This research draws from poststructuralism, but also borrows from Elder-Vass' (2012) notion of norm circles. In the scholar's words:

> The normative pressures we experience are produced by individuals, often in speech acts, but also in other kinds of physical acts, but they achieve the kind of consistency that leads us to understand we face a specific normative environment because there are groups of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing specific norms: norm circles. Those norm circles, acting through the individuals who are their members, have the causal power to influence our beliefs about our normative environment. It is these norm circles, and not norms or conventions in some sort of idealised form, that are the 'enabling source' of our tendency to conform to the corresponding norms. (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 201)

Our norms are simultaneously influenced by social and economic forces. As Elder-Vass (2012) suggests, people are agentic subjects: "people with autonomy, who are socially situated, whose decisions are not the work of free-floating pure rational Cartesian minds, but rather the product of an embodied history of relating to the world" (p. 201). Agency, therefore, is not *only* contingent upon awareness. If people were completely self-aware subjects, it would still be possible for them to be thoroughly socially determined in their actions (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 185). The positionality of subjects within structural arrangements both limits and enables our capacity to choose.

In addition, this research also highlights the role that affect plays in our capacity to act 'agentically', by interpreting affect as an intensive force, as the affective flows that circulate between bodies during social encounters (Berg et al., 2019; Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2019a). In this sense, affect moves us to make certain choices, or to consider certain actions which, in turn, affect the world. So, it is not only through discursive means, but also through affective flows, that we can that can increase our agency and produce effects on the world at will.

Accordingly, whenever individuals occupy one of the multiple subjectivities available to them, they must also refer to the specificities of the broader structures, as well as the different social and affective practices which are played out in them (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 113). Through this approach, individuals' behaviours, desires, and attitudes — but also their capabilities, power and opportunities — are strongly influenced by their positioning within a culture, race, socio-economic class and so on, as well as by the discursive norms available within it. Arguably, then, the subjectivity or discursive identity of 'good mother-consumer', so fundamental to the neoliberal narratives, is almost inevitably classed and/or raced. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) explain that our patterns of desires (such as the desire to make the right choice for our children) "signify little more than the discourses, and the subject positionings made available within them, to which we may access"(Davies, 1991, p. 42).

For some Australian mothers, the capacity to choose early education is non-existent. These mothers are part of a different social collective, separate from many with the power to choose, for example,

Montessori. They constitute a different body, and at the same time, are constituted by the discursive practices of the collectives of which they are a member. Importantly, these mothers may not be recognised as "authorised subjects" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 186). This means that they may not 'be heard' as having authority, not in the sense of enforcing knowledge, but rather not having the capacity/ability to mobilise discourses and/or break old patterns (Davies, 1991, p. 51). In this sense, agency and authority are intertwined. Elder-Vass (2012) critiques the 'overly simplistic' conflation of the agentic subject with the authorised subject, when he writes: "having the agentic capacity to think, choose and act is entirely distinct from having the authorised capacity to make decisions with significant social implications. We may be agents and yet prevented from exercising social power" (p. 193).

In sum, structures constrain and enable agents, whilst also being transformed or reproduced by the interactions of those agents (Giddens, 1984). Within neoliberal discourses of choice, agency is an easily achievable positioning for some, but "an almost inaccessible positioning for others" (Davies, 1991, p. 52). In a country which promised, nearly two decades ago, "equitable access to high quality ECE for all" (Elliott, 2006) this is arguably a considerable public failure, which not only reinforces structures of economic inequality, but also contributes to exacerbating existing social and cultural divisions.

3.3.1.2 Subjectivity, knowledge and power in a neoliberal context

In poststructuralism and social constructionist frameworks, subjectivity is not the reflection of an innate or essential individual consciousness but is theorised as being produced *through language* in ways that are socially and culturally specific. Language, or in its broadest sense, discourse is therefore central to the production and transmission of knowledge, intended as the particular common-sense view of the world prevailing in a culture at any one time and deriving from dominant discourses (Blood, 2005, p. 48).

Fairclough (2015) argues that language can serve to produce and perpetuate injustices embedded in specific constructions of knowledge, by for example, emphasising the roles of race, class and gender within existing social structures. Through agency, individuals operate within the socio-cultural structures within which they are born and exist (Archer et al., 1998), and by engaging in such social activity, they produce specific knowledge. In turn, knowledge and power directly imply one another (Foucault, 1969, 1977, 1999).

Foucault (1977) explains: “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitutes at the same time power relations” (p. 27). Accordingly, the discursive practices that circulate within specific collectivities can be seen to regulate the behaviour of the people in those collectivities by constituting knowledge in particular ways and positioning individuals in specific locations. As Burr (2015) explains, if discourses regulate our knowledge of the world, our common understanding of things and events, and if these shared understandings inform our social practices, then it becomes clear that “there is an intimate relationship between discourse, knowledge and power” (p. 80).

Power, then, is a direct effect of discourse because, by drawing on a particular discourse (i.e. by describing or representing an event or person in a particular way), we are producing and disseminating a particular form of knowledge or truth. This may or may not become prevailing within a given society, and thus has implications in terms of who can or cannot have influence and authority. For example, discourses of neoliberalism, which now shape the experience of some mothers’ daily lives as agentic subjects, impact on how mothers understand the world, how they imagine and represent themselves and others, and, accordingly, how they relate to such others in terms of power.

Neoliberalism constructs “a regime of truth” that “offers the terms that make self-recognition possible” (Butler, 2005, p. 22); or as Foucault puts it, neoliberalism is a “principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relations” (Foucault, 2010, p. 243). Prado (2006) explains that neoliberalism has become our “discursive currency” (p. 80) in that it frames and produces the possibilities for how we might make sense of ourselves and what is important, how we make decisions about what to do, and how to act and behave. We are produced by it, animated, activated, made up (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xv).

In affective terms, neoliberalism provides, for some, a sense of worth, purpose, success and improvement, thereby empowering them. For others, it is a distortion, a source of abjection — positioning them as of little worth, as unproductive, in need for rectification (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xv). These positionings give rise to specific emotional collectivities — affective assemblages — composed of people sharing social, cultural, discursive and/or economic positionings, which determine how people think, feel and act within a given social or cultural context. Specific discursive norms which may appear as common-sense or ‘natural’ knowledge to some people (such as those discourses associated with responsibility, school readiness and future

success), and which can be accessed easily by a specific collective of mothers, may not be as available to more marginalised collectives.

This difference in access can reproduce existing power relations and dynamics. For example, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, a study by Rowe and Windle (2012) found that middle-class mothers spend much more time choosing a school and tend to demonstrate highly advanced methods and strategies of locating a school and achieving enrolment, when compared to parents of lower classes. I argue that this difference in the possibility of accessing certain subjectivities/positionalities reflects and supports existing structures in a way that masks the power relations operating in society (Burr, 2015, p. 87), not only by reinforcing economic and social inequalities, but also by creating 'affective groups' (assemblages) of ex/inclusion within parents' communities.

In sum, discourses and discursive norms offer a structure against which people may interpret their own reality, knowledge and experience. They also offer an edifice within which they can construct and explain other collectives' choices, behaviours and social practices. This research explores how some mothers' choices are facilitated and/or negotiated through specific discourses and the positionalities associated with them, by adopting an underlying constructionist/feminist poststructuralist analytical lens. However, it enriches such analysis with a social-relational view of affect, underpinned by the interpretation of affects as the relational dynamics that unfold during social interactions among people or collectives. Critical affect theorists have recently critiqued poststructuralists' research for its heavy reliance on language/discourse, arguing that such discursive examinations have paid insufficient attention to the body and its materiality, and the ways in which social relations are not only influenced by language/discourse, but also by emotions and affects (see Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Anderson, 2014; Berg et al., 2019; Thrift, 2004; Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2020).

As explained below, adopting this approach allows me to investigate how some 'assigned relations' between bodies are so frequently reproduced, not because of any essential identity, but because of the ways in which certain moral imperatives, social norms and expectations, or specific emotions (e.g. caring, guilt, condemnation aimed at those who cannot afford to choose a private model of education, and so on) tend to 'stick' to certain bodies, fixating some women and mothers into specific subjectivities, which are not only gendered, but also classed, and as such, susceptible to power dynamics.

3.3.2 Affect

Some of the most relevant literature to the analytical approach used in this thesis (Anderson, 2016; Berg et al., 2019; Ott, 2017; Rice, 2008; Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2019b) attests to the fact that the affective and the discursive are constantly intertwined in everyday life. The research builds on this notion by including affect theories in the analysis of how language, discourse, emotion and social practices intertwine in the field of choice. In particular, the research draws heavily from the works of Margaret Wetherell (2012) and Berg et al. (2019), by employing their theoretical and analytical frameworks for the close interpretation of texts (Berg et al., 2019, p. 46). Therefore, it borrows the concepts of "discourse bodies" and "reading for affect" developed by Berg et al. (2019) to investigate what Wetherell (2012) defines as the "affective-discursive practices" (p. 18) in which parents engage when making their decisions about preschool. What unites these three concepts is the underlying understanding that affect is fundamentally different from emotion. This is discussed below.

3.3.2.1 Affect and emotions

Within the affective framework utilised in this thesis, and while emotions are conceived as belonging to the realm of a person's subjective phenomenal experience (and thus being partly dictated by culture), affect is intended as a force, an intensity "appearing between bodies and neither belonging to one certain body nor being reducible to a fixed set of attributes" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 49). In this sense, affect is a "dynamic encounter between entities which appear as bodies through this encounter" (Berg et al., 2019). As McMorrow (2019) explains:

> bodies are not mere receptacles within which emotions are housed, they are (inter)active and influential through their relation(s) with affect. Even when or where bodies are subjected to and must (re)perform set affects, there is always counter-conduct or deviance at play, which points to different affective resonances and the possibilities of different physical experiences. (p. 21)

According to Zembylas (2020), while affect may be theorised as pre-linguistic, "this does not imply that it is also pre-discursive", as bodies, emotions and affect are "depended on, and informed by, socially constructed boundaries and norms" (McMorrow, 2019, p. 20). This means that affective flows and emotions both exist in a discursive world, but affect as a force is only transformed or categorised into what we recognise as emotion, when we, as human subjects, render it as such. During this process of bodily dynamics, certain 'relational' transformations in social life occur, including the emergence of subjectivity (i.e. the *happy, sad, proud, ashamed etc.* me' is born at the intersections between affect, emotion, discourse, power, materiality).

Concentrating on these bodily and relational dynamics, and imagining affect as a force or intensity that results from encounters between bodies of various sorts, allows us to study how discourses and emotions are linked (Berg et al., 2019, p. 49). In this light, emotion is the physical (re)performance of affect (McMorrow, 2019, p. 22). This recognition, then helps to theorise the importance of emotions and how, as the physical (re)performance of affect, they can help identify the flow of affect from and through bodies. Exploring affect and discourse, Berg et al. (2019) say:

> While discourse itself does make use of the conceptual vocabulary of discrete emotions (e.g., anger, fear, shame, happiness) and the ascription of feelings to individuals or social groups, the lens of affect enables us to focus on the relational dynamics and bodily aspects related to these discursive phenomena – without the need to make vague and empirically hard-to-establish assumptions regarding the consequences of these ascriptions for individuals' subjective experiences. (p. 49)

3.3.2.2 Affect as a social and intensive force

According to Seigworth and Gregg (2010), there are at least eight main orientations towards affect (pp. 6-8), which vary from affect as an elemental state (as intended in psychology) to affect as an intensive force. Drawing on French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, this research views affect as an "intensive force", which entails the change, or variation, that occurs when 'bodies' collide, or come into contact (Ott, 2017, p. 8). Affect is conceptualised here as a non-representational category that encompasses affect, emotion and feeling and "includes impulses, desires and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 4).

This social-relational understanding of affect exceeds the individual/subjective construct favoured in some psychology studies, which locates affect strictly outside the realm of language. It also surpasses the focus on language, by concentrating on the 'bodily experience' of subjects, a concept proposed by scholars such as Ahmed (2004a), Butler (2015), Wetherell (2012) and Zembylas (2019a, 2019c, 2020). This interpretation of affect shifts the focus of textual analysis on to the "bodily aspects of language and discourse" (Berg et al., 2019). Within this perspective, affect justifies discourse; it sets boundaries and limits, and creates or reinforces groups of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, a focus on affect is akin to a focus on dynamics of power, when we acknowledge affect as a "body's capacity to affect and be affected" (Blackman, 2012, p. x), as this study does.

This understanding of affect is based on the notion that, while emotions and affect can be conceptualised as two separate events, what is felt is "neither internally produced nor simply imposed on us from external ideological structures" (Rice, 2008, p. 205), but is rather the combination of both subjective and social elements. As Zembylas (2019c) explains "affects and

emotions are theorised as intersections of language, desire, power, bodies, social structures, subjectivity, materiality and trauma" (Zembylas, 2019c, p. 63). Consequently, affect and emotions are imagined here as entangled with power, history, political formations, body and discourse (Athanasiou et al., 2008).

In sum, affect theory is interested in the way in which affects are mobilised by cultural, political and economic flows, or forces, and mark ways in which things become significant and relations are lived (Anderson, 2014). Understanding choice in terms of affective-discursive practices allows researchers like me to explore affective flows at a specific time, in a specific site/event (Henderson, 2017).

3.3.2.3 Affect and discourse bodies

Affect also relies on embracing an entirely different conception of the body. Here, the body is no longer conceived as flesh and blood, and as the sole carrier of social processes. Rather, within affect studies the concept of body is extended to "species bodies, psychic bodies, machinic bodies, vitalist bodies and other-worldly bodies" (Blackman, 2012). Bodies, therefore, do not have clear boundaries anymore.

As Latour (2005) explains, this is an understanding of body that does not distinguish between registers of biology, physiology and discursive representations, but rather reflects a flat ontology. Therefore, within the context of this research, all the various transpersonal entities within discourse, that are defined by their relations to other entities – whether material or ideational/representational — are called *"discourse bodies"* (Berg et al., 2019, p. 50). So, entities such as the marketisation of ECE, neoliberalism, discourses of choice, the socially constructed identity of the "responsible, proud parent", and the idea of "maximising your child's potential" are some examples of discourse bodies.

From this standpoint, affect constitutes the structure of relations between feelings, while discourse constitutes the structure of relations between words. In turn, the study of affect is the study of relations – relations between affects (as intensities or forces), relations between bodies (broadly conceived), relations between affect and discourse, and relations between socio-political formations such as gender, race, and class. Interpreted this way, affect is part of an assemblage comprising all the aforementioned, which come into and fall out of transitory relationships, and which serve to *move* or *immobilise* bodies in certain ways.

This understanding of affect and its inclusion in the thesis allows for a deeper and more nuanced examination of what affects do (by moving people into action, which results in the reproduction of social divisions) and of how social relations (between parents) reinforce existing structures of power and injustice. For example, the way in which parents of preschoolers in particular postcodes encounter neoliberal discourses, refracted through website advertising (as well as through word of mouth), might make them feel *anxious* or *excited* or *determined* to 'choose' a Montessori preschool. And while these 'fears' or 'inspirations' (named as such at the level of the individual) might be experienced by, and pass through, the individual body like waves, they do not belong to the individual and are irreducible to individuality.

In sum, affect is a flowing, dynamic, recursive, social, cultural and profoundly contextual (Wetherell et al., 2018). As such, it is deeply bound up in power relations (Wetherell et al., 2018, p. 2). Paying attention to affect therefore can deepen our understanding of how people develop attachments and commitments to specific beliefs, traditions, discourses and institutions at particular times and within particular contexts (Wetherell et al., 2018). As discussed next, using Wetherell's (2012) notion of affective-discursive practices can be very useful when investigating parental engagements, commitments, rationalities and attachments to certain discursive identities.

3.3.2.4 Affective-discursive practices

I have argued that affect is a combination of individual meaning-making activities, social structures, discourse bodies and dynamic encounters, which entail specific behavioural patterns, which are socially and economically consequential and which are bound up with ongoing social relations (Wetherell, 2012). These patterns can be explored through the concept of "affective-discursive practices" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4), a concept which exemplifies the dual capacity that bodies have to simultaneously produce affect and also to be affected.

Affective practices fold or compose together bodies and meaning making. They "recruit material objects, institutions, beliefs, pasts and anticipated futures" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 16), and produce difficult-to-shift social formations, hierarchies, epistemic regimes, and patterns of distinction (Wetherell, 2012, p. 4). Discussing the relationship between affect and discourse, Wetherell et al. (2018) writes:

> discourse activities that are the unavoidable and inevitable focus of most qualitative research offer a way in to important features of affective practices such as retrospective sense-making, the cultural resources available to mediate affect and the subject and identity positioning

> processes as well as to the stitching together of embodied states and meaning-making in flows of affect. (Wetherell et al., 2018, p. 8)

The individual is a site in which multiple sources of activation and information about body states, situation, past experiences, linguistic forms, flowing thoughts become woven together (Wetherell, 2012, p. 9). Incorporating the notion of affective-discursive practices in research exploring affective flows during the process of choice can increase understanding of how the processes of developmental sedimentation, routines of emotional regulation, relational patterns and settling occur.

In order to successfully utilise discursive-affective practices as a framework, three main - understandings must be embraced in order to be successful in our analysis: first, affect is a flowing activity, often characterised by patterns: habits, assemblages, communities, landscapes (Wetherell, 2012, pp. 10-11). Second, affective practices involve other contributing patterns: discursive, social, economic. Thirdly, together, these give rise to particular emotional subjects and citizens (Ahmed, 2004a), which, in turn, start to materialise conventional socio-economic patterns of feelings, thoughts, desires and positions (Wetherell, 2012, p. 12). The neoliberal parent-consumer is one of these and, in particular, mothers.

Affective practices can also vary in scale in that they can be born in the solitary subject but also become stabilised within families, groups and communities. When this stabilisation takes place, affective practices begin to scale up significantly, and through this scaling up, questions of power, value and capital begin to emerge (Wetherell, 2012, pp. 13-14). As Wetherell (2012) writes: "power works through affect, and affect emerges in power". This is in line with Sara Ahmed's concept of "affective economies", whereby affective value or emotional capital comes to be assigned to some figures, rather than others, and to some emotional displays (Ahmed, 2004a).

In this sense, affect powers and intertwines with cultural circuits of value, as some behaviours/attitudes/people become exemplified as virtuous and others as undesirable. This will become evident in the analysis carried out in Chapter Six, where an affective analysis of parents' responses to the research questionnaire demonstrates how certain characteristics and choices are given more value than others and result in the creation of groups of exclusion.

3.3.3 A social-relational orientation to affect: combining discourse with affect

For many scholars, discourse is seen as a taming affect, codifying its generative force (Wetherell, 2012, p. 15). However, it is argued here that separating affect from discourses is deleterious, as it is

actually the discursive that makes affect powerful, makes it radical, and provides the means for affect to travel and circulate (Wetherell, 2012, p. 15). The body is always mediated by discourse, where discourse is intended as meaning-making practices, not just the formal structures of language (Wetherell, 2012, p. 16). Human affect is inextricably linked with the discursive (Wetherell, 2012, p. 16), and splitting them ignores the entanglement of the affective and socio-semantic process, as bodies, emotions and affects are always intertwining within socially constructed boundaries and rules (Zembylas, 2020).

By concentrating on affective dynamics in the realm of discourse, we can "concentrate on the relational couplings between bodies of various sorts, which are constituted through and within discourse" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 49), without the need to study the effects of these ascriptions on individual subjects' emotional experiences. I refer to this approach as a social-relational orientation to affect.

In sum, affect, in this thesis, is interpreted as the complex product of the interaction between individual and social elements, an interaction based on the notion that subjectivity is always embedded in socio-political and historic contexts. Cvetkovich (2012) explains that affects "include impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways" (p. 4). This means that affect is part of sites, networks, bodies and flows of discourses and structures (Anderson, 2014). Within this framework, neoliberalism itself is an affective event, as collective affects and emotions emerge from neoliberal policies and practices (fear, anxiety, anger or pride and satisfaction) and they are inextricable aspects of the networks and flows of neoliberalism in society (Anderson, 2014).

Those who identify with neoliberal representations of consumers and position themselves within these networks share collective affects and emotions, and become part of what is defined as an "emotional community" (Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2019c). In this context, emotional routines and practices act as a powerful discursive resource and as a strategy for navigating the complex act of choosing 'the right early learning pathway'. As the remaining chapters of the thesis shows, these theoretical notions are applied to an investigation of how marketing techniques and neoliberal discourses influence parents' affective-discursive practices.

3.4 Summary

By introducing the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis, and by discussing the relationships between discourse and affect, as well as their contribution to the research, this

chapter has justified the use of a social-relational orientation to affect for the purposes of the research. Importantly, the chapter has also set out the foundational basis for the empirical work I undertake in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, where a discursive-affective analytical approach is used to explore how some mothers' subjectivities are formed through specific discourses and affective flows that currently shape the field of choice. First, however, the methodologies and methods used in the thesis for data generation and analysis must be illustrated. I do that in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the theoretical foundations laid in Chapter Three by outlining the research design of the thesis. It is divided into two main parts. The first section introduces Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the main methodology for the study and justifies the choice to enrich the discursive analysis through a feminist poststructuralist analytical lens. This section also explains the contribution of other methodologies, such as a socio-spatial analysis, social semiotics, and a 'reading for affect' approach (Berg et al., 2019) to the collection and examination of the materials obtained during the three research phases. The second half of the chapter delineates the research design of the thesis, and thus outlines the different methods used for generating and analysing the materials in each of the three phases. The chapter concludes with some ethical considerations.

4.2 Part one: methodologies

Parental choice of preschool often takes place in a complex social and emotional context. Exploring it, therefore, requires an analytical approach that accounts for the variety of elements at play during the process. To gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of how mothers rationalise and negotiate their choices, this research took place in three distinct phases and employed a combination of three main methodologies. The main approach is a mélange of feminist poststructuralist theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Aligning the 'traditional' CDA with a less structured post-structural feminist approach strengthens the research by highlighting the role of gender and class in the field of preschool choice. The other two methodologies employed to enrich the examination are social semiotics and affect theories. The three approaches were used either independently or in a combined manner, depending on the phase of the study and on the materials under analysis. For example, the website analysis paid particular attention to how gender pronouns were used, and how women/girls were positioned both in discursive texts and images, while the analysis of the parent questionnaires focused on how gender and class featured in the texts. Illuminating the social implications of the power relations embedded in the act of choosing in a rich manner required these eclectic analytic tools. The next section describes each methodological approach.

4.2.1 A combined methodology: CDA enriched with a feminist poststructuralist lens

Critical Discourse Analysis is interested in how language is implicated in power relations, but is concerned more broadly with the ways in which discourses produce subjectivity, for example through social positionings (Burr, 2015, p. 191). As discussed, discourses are ways of speaking or otherwise representing the world that constitutes us as persons. We are the subjects of various discourses and the knowledge they bring with them, and our subjectivity – our selfhood – is understood in terms of the positions within these discourses that are available to us. In this sense, discourses bring with them different possibilities for what a person can and should do, what they may do to others, and what they are expected to do for them (Burr, 2015). These actions are closely connected with the social practices implicated in particular discourses, as well as with the material conditions and the social structures that form the context for these. Therefore, they imply particular power relations.

CDA aims to identify the discourses operating in a particular area of life and explores the implications of such power relations for subjectivity, practice and social action. In doing so, it aims to expose power inequalities and ideologies (Burr, 2015, p. 191). As discussed in the previous chapters, the machineries of power and ideology in discourse play an important role in sustaining hierarchically gendered social orders, and result in a 'stickiness' of specific moral imperatives, roles, and expectations to some bodies, more than others. School choice and the social processes associated with it are an example of this stickiness, as the domestic responsibilities associated with it — requiring time, access to knowledge, resources and transportation — tend to stick to mothers. For this reason, a feminist poststructuralist lens is also used as an additional tool, to the more traditional CDA approach, to produce a richer theorisation of gender, class and subjectivity, and the ways in which certain assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained and negotiated in the context of preschool choice.

Scholars including Reay (1998a); Reay (1998c); Reay (2005a), Wall (2014), Wilkins (2011a), Hutchinson (2011) and Hey (1996) have argued for more than two decades that the marketisation of education is underpinned by relations of power that work through social class and gender, and that the expectation to fulfil the extra duties connected to researching and choosing a child's education is, in the majority of cases, allocated to mothers. Research further provides evidence that the focus on mothers' role sand responsibilities is particularly true in the context of early childhood education (Proctor & Weaver, 2020, p. 46) which, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, was confirmed by the representative sample of participants involved in this study.

Generally, the approach to CDA used here draws on the work of Norman Fairclough's theory (2003, 2010, 2015) that the analysis of discourse is the study of the relationship between semiosis (language and other modes of communication) and other elements of social practice. Fairclough posits that events that happen are framed by social structures (like class, kinship, gender etc.), and are the direct result of specific social practices through which they are mediated. Fairclough theorises that individuals enact certain structural possibilities and forms of communication to create meaning for some and, in turn, exclude others (Wilkins, 2009, p. 149). As such, individuals negotiate their subjectivities and shared positionings through specific contexts that elicit their own social and affective practices, as well as their own ways of behaving (Wilkins, 2009).

Discourses offer positions from which a person may speak the truth about objects. A subject position identifies "a location for persons within a structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire" (Davies & Harrè, 1999, p. 35). But 'discursive positioning' also involves the construction and performance of a particular vantage point (Bamberg, 1994), in that it offers not only a perspective from which to view a version of reality, but also a moral location within spoken interaction (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2011). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2011) explain that this is not dissimilar to "how the 'moral adequacy' of people's accounts are linked to the 'moral order' in which they seek to locate themselves" (p. 15), and explain that this moral location and moral order are intimately linked to spoken interactions and social relations.

As such, meaning can be varied, depending on where and when the social activity from which it derives takes place – namely, different institutions, contexts, texts, and/or collectivities (Fairclough, 2003). Therefore, particular attention must also be paid to intertextuality, namely, the relationships between different texts, as well as to interdiscursivity, meaning the common discourses from which people might draw (Fairclough, 2015), and/or the common discourses which might validated or not by different structures or collectives. In analysis, this requires a constant move between what is literally in the text and what was drawn on to create it. In the case of this research, neoliberal discourses of marketisation, and the positionalities of power, responsibility and control associated with them, could not be ignored in the analysis of how parents' choice is mediated and influenced.

For instance, Davies and Bansel (2007) argue that neoliberal discourse constitutes a set of relations among governments, society and the individual, and that this impacts not only on the terms in which subjects are governed, but also on the terms in which they understand themselves, their lives, their opportunities and their desires (p. 252). As Fairclough (2003) explains, this process produces new

ways of acting and interacting by people (whether they do it consciously or subconsciously), and this results in social actors interpreting and reinterpreting themselves through new identities and subjectivities, whilst being interpreted and represented by others in new ways, through new ideologies and new collectivities.

Giddens (1984) explores how the relations between agency and collectivities are reproduced, becoming regular social practices (p. 25), and argues that just as an individual's autonomy is influenced by structure, structures are maintained and adapted through the exercise of agency. The interface at which an actor meets a structure is termed 'structuration'. According to Giddens (1984), society is the ever-present condition and continually reproduced outcome of human agency; this means that systems are "reproduced relations between social actors and/or collectivities organized as regular social practices" (p. 25). Structures, in turn, are manifested in social systems in the form of reproduced practices. According to King (2012), the system refers to a society's major institutions, namely its state and legal and administrative systems, its social and class structure, and its economy (p. 219).

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, these social identities are complexly intertwined with existing social structures, institutionalised power asymmetries and gendered ideology. As discussed in Chapter Three, these asymmetries depend greatly on the type of access that individuals have to existing discursive circles, which in turn, is contingent on the broader socio-economic structure within which they operate (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 185). Therefore, individuals' actions, aspirations, and feelings — but also their experiences and opportunities — are strongly influenced by their positioning within a culture, race, socio-economic class and so on, as well as by the discursive norms available within it (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 185).

Accordingly, the mothers who can choose a Montessori preschool are not only situated within specific discourses of choice; they also interpret and create their subjectivities by drawing from them and the social structures and orders within which they operate. In turn, their actions and social relations can result in the creation and continuation of social injustices, particularly in terms of the creation of groups of inclusion and exclusion.

Therefore, utilising a feminist critical analytical approach in this research can be a useful way to explore one of the mysteries of the dialectics of discourse, namely the process through which what begins as self-conscious rhetorical deployment becomes ownership – how individuals become unconsciously positioned within a discourse, and how this positioning affects not only their identity

and their choices (Fairclough, 2015), but also the way in which the power of their positionality might contribute to existing social divisions.

However, as illustrated in Chapter One, choice is a complex, multi-layered field, often influenced by a variety of socio-economic elements, as well as emotional and symbolic factors. Amongst these, geographical positioning has been identified as a crucial factor in the process of identity-formation, and consequently, school choice. Therefore, the next section discusses how the contribution of a socio-spatial analysis can add depth and complexity to the discursive analytical approach discussed so far. The section draws heavily on the work of scholars such as Rowe, Gulosino and Lubienski (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; see Lubienski, 2016; Lubienski, 2018; Lubienski et al., 2009; Rowe, 2015; Rowe, 2017; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Rowe & Windle, 2012) to explore how the concepts of gender and class within discourses about school choice might be more dominant in specific geographical areas.

4.2.2 The importance of geography in school choice

The rationale for this phase of the research comes from an emerging body of research in the UK, US, New Zealand and Australia that identifies an uneven spatial distribution of the benefits and opportunities of school choice (Lubienski, 2013; Lubienski et al., 2013). In particular, these studies find that independent (pre)schools or choice programs are more available or popular in affluent neighbourhoods (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Lubienski et al., 2009). Correspondingly, they also find that 'low-performing' institutions are disproportionately located in more disadvantaged suburbs, and thus working-class and marginalised groups have less access to 'quality choice' (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Lubienski et al., 2009). In turn, the children of such groups often attend institutions in 'spirals of decline' (Yoon et al., 2018), compared to those of middle-class professionals, who tend to opt their children out of such sites (Butler & Robson, 2003; Reay, 2007a; Reay & Lucey, 2003).

In the UK, for instance, Taylor (2002) notes: "the state schools with the worst examination performances, [have become] concentrated with pupils from relatively socially disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 235). Similarly, in Australia, research has found that highly selective choice programs within the public school system tend to segregate students by admitting more students whose families can afford extra coaching and tutoring to help their children (Ho, 2015). Importantly, this segregation is seen in an urban context in which more affluent, white, middle-class families increasingly choose either private schools or public schools whose students have social, racial, and

religious backgrounds similar to their own (Rowe & Lubienski, 2017). Drawing from such research, I therefore argue here that geographies inform and instruct parental processes of identity and choice.

In her research, Rowe (2015); Rowe (2017) argues that class-identity can be theorised as *geo-identity*, and highlights the importance of geography in constructions of social and economic class. She explains that the participants in her projects, albeit to varying degrees, all constructed class topographies by measuring their class-identity via their geographical (or residential) positioning (Rowe, 2015; Rowe, 2017; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Rowe & Windle, 2012). In her words, the participants' "class story was informed and located by their landscape" (Rowe, 2017, p. 285) and, in turn, their "*geo-identity* directly influenced how they engaged with school choice, as well as what an ideal institution would and should represent for their children" (Rowe, 2017, p. 285).

I have argued in the previous chapters that gender and class feature significantly in discourses about school choice, and that this is particularly true in the preschool sector, seeing the young age of the children involved. Here, I explore that argument by identifying any patterns of socio-spatial features of the families choosing Montessori preschools. In particular, I propose that these emotional and discursive investments, which do not occur just individually, but also as a collective — what I call the '*We Montessori parents'* collective — might be more prevalent in specific geographical areas.

This is because, in affective terms, places are shaped by shared affectual responses which may include, for example, a sense of achievement and pride in the representations that a specific school, in a specific location, can signify in terms of responsible or successful parenting and caring. Such emotions are not personal because they are constructed, experienced and expressed within specific social, political, economic and cultural contexts (Byrne & De Tona, 2019, p. 14), whilst also being represented through advertising regimes. Within those contexts, these emotions circulate and stick to some bodies more than others, and are thus maintained and reproduced through people's actions, discursive relations and affective practices. Therefore, a combined socio-spatial analysis of the preschools — presented in detail in Chapter Five — can improve our understanding of the social relations and affective practices that these mothers engage in, as well as illuminate the social ramifications that their actions have beyond the geographic places in which they originate.

In sum, the way in which mothers belonging to the 'Montessori collective' construct their geo-identities is determined by the geographic environment in which they exist and operate, which, in turn, is shaped by broader economic, cultural and political structures and forces. These forces also include specific advertising regimes that reinforce particular neoliberal subjectivities and discourses

of choice through texts and images. The next two sections therefore provide a justification for incorporating social semiotics in the discursive analysis of six Montessori preschool websites.

4.2.3 Website analysis through discursive analysis and social semiotics techniques

The research began with a geographical analysis and socio-economic mapping of the suburbs in which all South Australian Montessori preschools are located. The aim of this preliminary stage was to increase socio-economic and spatial understanding of preschool choice in Adelaide, and to gain a richer insight into the demographics involved in the research. The methods and analytical approach used in this phase of the study are discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

Following this brief and initial phase, the second stage of analysis involved the study of the images and language presented on the websites of six Montessori preschools, with the underlying premise that the advertising messages contained in them can be read as examples of both discursive and affective texts, whereby certain types of subjectivities are constituted and legitimised. Websites are interpreted here as "productive spaces within which certain meanings and identities can be strengthened and legitimised" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 116). Whilst the main methodology used in this process was critical discourse analysis, it was also enriched by a visual approach to the examination of text, based on the social semiotic framework of Kress and VanLeeuven (2006). Together, these approaches allowed for a rich and deep understanding of how material realities (with choice being constructed and represented as a reality) are "lived, experienced and translated by individuals" (Wilkins, 2009, p. 131).

The semiotic analytical framework employed in this phase draws on the method of analysis of multimodal texts designed by Kress and VanLeeuven (2006), which, in turn, is founded on Halliday's (1978; 1985) model of language as a social semiotic resource. Therefore, framework used reflects Halliday's (2004) principles of systemic functional linguistic, which is why it was drawn upon in the analysis of the visual elements of the websites. It is founded on the notion that semiotic resources (images) are situated within specific social and cultural contexts that inform the text. Therefore, much like language, semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualised in concrete social contexts where their use is subject to some form of semiotic regime (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 285).

According to Kress and VanLeeuven (2006), images play an important role in contemporary communication, and many kinds of texts today involve a complex interplay of written text, images and other graphic elements that combine together into visual designs by means of layout and other

techniques (p. 15). Therefore, drawing on Fairclough (1992), Kress and VanLeeuven also argue that "the incursion of the visual into domains of public communication where formerly language was the sole and dominant mode is an equally significant theme for analysis" (p. 13).

Kress and VanLeeuven (2006) conceive images of every kind as entirely created and located within the realm of a system of values. For example, when discussing modality (the truth value or credibility of a statement), they explain that in visual representations, the value of a statement relies on several cues such as colour saturation, colour differentiation, brightness and detail, and the interaction of these cues may lead viewers to read or interpret a picture as more or less naturalistic, abstract, sensory, technical and so on (Kress & VanLeeuven, 2006, pp. 165-171).

Kress and VanLeeuven (2006) compare the use of these visual cues to the way in which modal and auxiliary verbs are utilised as linguistic resources for representing different versions of truth and certainty (as discussed by Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Much like grammar, they explain, "[modality] is interpersonal, in the sense that it is not used to express absolute truths or falseness" (p. 160). Rather, it is used to "produce shared truths by aligning readers with some statements and distancing them from others" (p. 160). It serves, they say, "to create an imaginary we" (p. 160), and the social groupings instituted in this may be very real, and may have real effects on people's lives (Kress & VanLeeuven, 2006, p. 161). This is closely linked to the role that affective encounters play in the creation of social collectives and social boundaries, and is therefore vital in an examination of the impact of images, as discursive bodies, on the emotional state of parents as they peruse a website to choose a preschool.

In sum, websites are not just verbal and informative texts; they can be classified as entertainment and advertisement material, as they include visual designs and graphic compositions. Therefore, a robust analysis of website content should include an examination of what is communicated through images. Kress and VanLeeuven's framework (2006) proved a very useful tool for enriching this research and visually examining the structures and elements embedded within the preschools' webpages. As will be evident in Chapter Six, features such as set up of the page (position and size of logos, for instance), saliency of certain elements in the page, size and colour of font used, the type, size and position of photographs, use of colour (for modality), and other targeting tactics were examined in order to explore how parents might 'feel' when they navigate these promotional materials. Parents' affective experiences, however, were also explored using qualitative questionnaires, and analysing the responses through a discursive-affective lens. Therefore, the next

section of this chapter illustrates the contribution of a 'reading for affect' approach for a richer understanding of parents' emotions and subject positionings during their choice practices.

4.2.4 Parent questionnaires: the 'Reading for Affect' approach

The questionnaires were initially interpreted through a feminist critical discursive lens. This initial reading involved three key stages of analysis: description, interpretation and explanation. In the descriptive stage, each source of material was examined individually at first, and specific and recurrent language and/or quotes were selected as 'representative' of certain values, emotions and/or attitudes, and organised into tables and codes, to make evident specific patterns and categories. In the second level of analysis, I used an interpretive focus and tried to identify what discursive practices parents might engage with when describing their choice-making mechanisms. For example, what dominant discourses might they be drawing from when discussing their hopes and aspirations with regards to preschool education (discourses of schoolification, discourses linked to neoliberal ideals of independence and autonomy, and so on). Last, in the explanatory stage I combined descriptions and interpretations and presented the six themes that emerged from the analysis. The aim was to explain how the materials led me to the creation of such themes as well as to highlight my critique and conclusions. Importantly, what was *not* mentioned or openly stated by participants was also noticed in the analysis, as inclusions as well as exclusions reflect dominant discourses, "even if this is largely an unconscious act on the part of the creator" (adapted from Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 53).

However, because the approach used here is also comprehensive of parents' affective environments and highlights the importance of emotional dynamics in the process of justifying choice, a "reading for affect" lens (Berg et al., 2019), as previously introduced, was also used in the analysis. This approach is based on Sara Ahmed's (2004b) analytical focus on emotion-bound vocabulary, to map the relational affective dynamics in which bodies are enmeshed. Ahmed (2004b) claims that emotions "work to align some subjects with some others and against other others" and shows how these alignments, circulate between bodies and signs, "to create the very effects of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (p. 117).

Ahmed's work highlights one crucial dimension of affect in discourse: namely, its potential to position individuals within (or outside) certain boundaries, and to provide a framework of alignment that is not so much grounded in conceptual and propositional knowledge, but rather in the registers of affecting and being affected (Berg et al., 2019). Particularly relevant is her underlining of the

importance of tracing the implications of the uses of emotion words for issues of power (in this case, in terms of power of choice). In particular, she points out the group dynamics that are presumably put into action through affective speech. This resonates very well with the notion of discourse bodies proposed by Berg at al. (2019) and indeed serves as the starting point for their proposed methodological framework.

Berg et al.'s (2019) 'reading for affect' framework consists of three main "dimensions of analysis" (p. 52). The first is concerned with identifying discourse bodies that are created in texts through associations of specific (emotion) words. It involves recognising certain emotion words and understanding to whom they are attributed, and understanding that this process of ascription results in the affect-based relational construction of discourse bodies (p. 52). This is based on the underlying assumption that portraying a group, an individual, an idea, or an object in the registers of affect contributes to its bodily creation and perception, and that this, in turn, can have different effects, varying from a sense of commonality to a strong sense of rejection of certain entities, based on some of their perceived characteristics which are deemed inappropriate (Berg et al., 2019, p. 52).

Capitalising on emotions promotes affectively charged constructions of a subject positioning, giving way to an identification on an affective basis, thus effectively initiating a process of discursive inclusion and exclusion (Berg et al., 2019, p. 54). Importantly, this dimension can emphasise not so much the bodily, but rather the cultural component of an affection, which can be interpreted as "the demand for adopting a specific emotional repertoire or regime" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 55), or, as was the case in this research, an emotional commitment to a specific set of social, cultural and political values and ideals.

The second dimension of analysis concentrates on relating discourse bodies. This means interpreting social collectives as agents with bodily qualities and understanding that these different discourse bodies are connected through affective dynamics (in the case of this research, for example, the parents of preschoolers become a WE *collective body*). However, Bast and Walberg (2004) explain that giving collective bodies emotions causes certain dynamics of attraction and repulsion, and thus results in social positionings and boundaries of exclusion and inclusion (p. 53).

The last level of analysis centres on the materiality of discourse itself, whereby text and language take on a bodily quality in themselves and, therefore, as discourse bodies, gain the capacity to affect and be affected. In this level, language and rhetoric transcend the purely textual form and become translinguistic phenomena within society. In this sense, sentences are transformed so that, for

example, slogans are no longer just advertisements, rather they become discourse bodies in themselves. They take on a material element and create a series of affective arrangements, thereby "binding other bodies and transforming affective relations within society" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 55). In the case of my research, for example, the 'moral' qualities that the collective body aspires to create in their children, produced through semantics of independence, autonomy, responsibility, and their register of what is arguably perceived as 'moral superiority' (the power allocated to them by 'having the choice') becomes the discourse body. This and other examples are discussed at length in Chapter Six, where the reading for affect model is applied to the analysis of the questionnaires.

In sum, this research views affect as constituting the structure of relations between feelings, and discourse as constituting the structure of relations between words. The methodologies and methods of data generation and analysis discussed here are designed to illuminate how those relations intertwine and what their social consequences are. In particular, using affect theory and a 'reading for affect' approach to the analysis of the questionnaires allowed me to examine what affects do in the context of choice, namely how they move certain mothers into action, and how these actions can result in the reproduction of social divisions and inequalities. The next part of the chapter details the timeline and the methods used to gather the research materials.

4.3 Part two: research design

4.3.1 Research phases and data generation

The materials in this thesis were generated and obtained through three phases of research, in order to obtain as much depth and breadth of data as possible.

4.3.1.1 Socio-economic mapping

The first step in this research was a socio-economic analysis, carried out between August and December 2019, through which the geographic locations of all Montessori preschools in urban South Australia were mapped by postcode area, and then plotted on a Social Atlas map, highlighting values of the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) (Glover et al., 2006). Comparing geographical locations of the preschools with socio-economic indicators of their intended demographics was considered a useful first step towards a better understanding of the relationship between marketisation, the recent rise in Montessori preschools in urban SA, and the intended demographics of the preschool locations.

I have claimed that parents are navigating a complex field of emotions and aspirations as they make decisions about their children's education. Thus, the imaginative leaps that are required to choose an 'appropriate educational setting' are arguably affective, more-than-rational processes which include the – often local and emplaced – collective responses, feelings and emotions around what a 'good' school should look and feel like (Byrne & De Tona, 2019). At the same time, however, other categories of social identity — such as race, gender, social class and geographical positioning— are also lived at an affective level framed by and generating a range of emotional responses. Thus, school choice is an intensely affective process in that it involves highly relational and social judgements producing patterns in the way local schools, their populations and their practices are seen (Anderson, 2005; Bell, 2007; Gallagher, 2018; Holloway & Kirby, 2020; Rowe, 2015).

As a result, the class-specific circuits of education (Ball et al., 1995) through which people navigate the educational system on behalf of their children draw on 'geographically localised' affective economies (Ahmed, 2004b; Anderson, 2014; Nayak, 2010; Thrift, 2004), producing shared feelings and responses to different schools in different areas (Byrne & De Tona, 2019). Therefore, beginning the research with a socio-economic analysis of the geographical areas where such affective economies circulate seemed a robust way to introduce the field of preschool choice in South Australia, and to explore some demographic characteristics of the 'collective we' involved in this study. Details of the mapping phase and of the findings that emerged are discussed in Chapter Five.

4.3.1.2 Website analysis

The second step of the research took place during the first half of 2020, and entailed a semiotic and discursive analysis of six South Australian preschool websites, aimed at investigating how school choice discourses are visually mediated and communicated through these forms of online marketing material. As discussed above, a discursive analytical approach was employed during this phase, combined with social semiotic techniques, to illuminate how discourses, specific subjectivities, and political formations (refracted through advertising materials) collectively create the conditions for certain emotions to surface. I discuss in Chapter Six, for example, how during the choice-process, some mothers may experience emotions such as anticipation and pride or even anxiety and stress connected to discourses of schoolification and/or the crucial importance of preschool in preparing their children for a successful future and an anticipated rise in the social hierarchy.

4.3.1.3 Parent questionnaires

Between September 2020 and the early months of 2021, the last research phase took place, whereby a qualitative questionnaire was offered to parents of children who had chosen one of the six preschools. The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate the relationships between marketisation, identity construction, and the role of affective-discursive practices and routines in a highly marketised context. To this end, the questionnaire contained a series of open-ended questions aimed at investigating parents' motivations, rationalisation, and emotional experiences during the process of preschool selection. Whilst the main aim of the questionnaire was to better understand parents' thinking and justifications, the questionnaire also included a few questions about the participant demographic, intended to offer a general overview of their socio-economic circumstances.

4.3.2 Participant recruitment

Six Montessori preschools were selected using the National Register of the Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website. Different postcodes in South Australia were targeted so that different geographical areas could be covered, and different providers were selected from amongst the six main Montessori organisations to ensure coverage across providers in this field. Only preschools that had been operating for 5 years of more were selected, to ensure that patterns of operation had been established within each centre, and so that parental decision-making was based on established providers known to the public.

Initially, owners/directors of the selected centres were contacted via email. Through an introductory text, the study was explained to them, and they were asked if they would be willing to participate as a centre (in terms of site for parents/caregivers' recruitment). They were made aware of their right to decline, and they were advised that, if willing to participate, they would receive an information pack containing an introduction letter about the researcher, a detailed information sheet about the study, a copy of the questionnaire and consent forms. For privacy and confidentiality reasons, the participating directors contacted the parents/caregivers directly and offered them the option to take part in the study. This was done via a recruitment email, which included the information pack. In the consent form, parent-participants had a choice to either complete the questionnaire online, or to receive a paper copy and once completed to place it in a collection box at the preschool.

Four centres chose to participate, one declined, and one did not respond (despite being contacted three times through reminder emails.) A total of twenty-four parents completed the questionnaire, and all chose to do so online via a link for the application *Survey Monkey.* This online focus was due to COVID-imposed restrictions which did not allow me to visit any site in person.

4.3.3 Sampling and data size

The main sources of materials for two phases of the research were obtained through the analysis of six websites, and the twenty-four questionnaires. Whilst this may seem to be a small sample size, the focus of this study was on explorative and qualitative research, as distinct from a corpus-driven, quantitative analysis. This difference is important, as a study of this nature does not require a large amount of data, as it is the extent of engagement with the materials that matters. The analysis focused in detail on several specific elements, not necessarily to generalise to the whole population, but as a starting point for developing theoretical generalisations. The websites and questionnaire responses, therefore, were seen as an initial resource for analysing broader structural relations within a highly marketised educational context. Further studies can expand on the initial findings.

4.4 Reflexivity and ethical considerations

It is important to acknowledge that constructionist research is inherently influenced by personal experiences, values and ideals. As such, the way in which meaning and knowledge have been constructed in this research is dependent on my assumptions and interpretations of the materials, as well as on my interactions with the participants. Findings, therefore, can arguably be deemed as subjective and relative, even if objectivity and self-reflection were a constant priority during the investigation process. However, embracing a social constructionist orientation that understands that truth is *constructed* through power relations, whilst employing a reflexive process, has allowed me to operationalise deep, critical engagement with the field of study, which transcends subjective 'opinion', and to explore those systems of power and ideology that are embedded and represented through discourse and which, in turn, sustain hierarchically gendered social orders and institutionalised power asymmetries.

In many ways, I am living the challenges that bear on structurally marginalised women who need to choose a preschool. I am not only a single parent with a strong belief in the principles of social justice, but I am also an early childhood educator, working part-time within an environment which has become highly neoliberalised. Through the financial challenges I face in such a marketised context, I am therefore positioned to carefully consider the social justice implications of the choices

of those in more privileged positions in society. As Frankenberg (1993) famously said: “the oppressed can see with the greatest clarity not only their own position but ... the shape of social systems as a whole” (p. 8). My social identity and positioning, therefore, have allowed me to carry on important research which aims to contribute to the existing knowledge about ECE in a way that consciously co-opts critical lenses to understand how particular ‘truths’ and ‘knowledges’ are operating in this field, and what their social consequences are.

4.5 Summary

This chapter has illustrated the different methodologies and methods used in the thesis. It has explained the choice to enrich the underlying critical analytical approach with feminist theory, whilst also justifying the use of social semiotic techniques in the analysis of the messages contained in six preschool websites. Drawing on affect theory as a useful approach for exploring the effects of neoliberalism on parental choice mechanisms (Wetherell, 2012, p. 51), the chapter also introduced the notion of ‘reading for affect’ as a valuable tool to examine mothers’ recounting and understandings of their experience of choosing. The rest of the thesis — the empirical chapters — explains how these methodologies have been put into practice, to obtain a better understanding of how choice is experienced and negotiated by a particular group of parents (mothers) of preschoolers in South Australia. I start by providing a picture of who these mothers are and where they live in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 CHOICE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GEO-IDENTITY

> One's residence is a crucial, possibly the crucial, identifier of who you are. The sorting process by which people choose to live in certain places and others leave is at the heart of contemporary battles over social distinction. Rather than seeing wider social identities as arising out of the field of employment it would be more promising to examine their relationship to residential location. (Savage et al., p. 207)

5.1 Introduction

This is the first of the empirical chapters. It is designed to provide readers with a better spatial, social and economic understanding of preschool choice in South Australia. In an increasingly neoliberalised market, parents' capacity to choose is increasingly determined by factors such as economic class and social status and, often, these are closely related to residential location. Therefore, the chapter begins by recording all the locations of Montessori[4] preschools on a suburban map of Adelaide, and then plotting those locations on maps drawn from the *Social Health Atlas of South Australia* (Glover et al., 2006). These maps feature the state divided into Statistical Local Areas (SLA) as well as the variations in values of the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD).[5] By combining this data and ascertaining the IRSD values of the SLAs, the chapter aims to investigate the demographic and socio-economic contexts for Montessori preschools in suburban South Australia.

The chapter is organised in two main sections. The first part of the chapter outlines a brief history of ECE services in Australia, from their establishment as social and charitable services to their transformation, in recent years, into institutions increasingly affected by market forces and mechanisms. This is necessary in order to understand the growing impact that marketisation is having on the preschool sector in South Australia, and to justify the use of the Montessori preschool as a case-study for this research. The second section of the chapter details the three steps in the socio-economic mapping and provides a brief analysis of the findings that emerged. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings, in terms of patterns of preschool choice in urban Adelaide. This will, in turn, create the backdrop for the remaining chapters of the thesis, where the broader socio-economic structures of choice are discussed in relation to how mothers construct and

[4] As discussed later in the chapter, the choice to focus on Montessori preschool is due to recent increasing demand for this educational approach in Australia.

[5] The IRSD is a socio-economic index that uses a range of information regarding the economic and social circumstances of people and households within an area Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2017). *Social Determinants of Health*. Australian Government. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/social-determinants-of-health

interpret their subjectivities as consumers of education, as well as to how they experience preschool selection as an affective environment.

5.2 Section one: The marketisation of Early Childhood Education in Australia

Plans for Australian settlements did not originally include provisions for children under five, so early childhood education services were predominantly run by charitable organisations (Brennan, 1998). Therefore, the establishment and running of day care, nurseries and kindergartens was initially guided mostly by philanthropic groups with only a few small private businesses providing preschool care (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 233). However, starting in the 1970s, a series of new market-based policies — which became known as known as New Public Management (NPM) — was gaining momentum globally. Supposedly aimed at only importing the "good commercial practices from the private sector" (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 231), these adjustments led to significant reforms in the Australian public sector, with children's care and education being one of the first areas to be transformed (Newberry & Brennan, 2013).

In 1972, following new governance strategies which favoured principles of privatisation, marketisation, accountability and competition, ECE fee relief was expanded to include for-profit services for the first time in Australian history (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 233). This required an amendment to the federal ECE Act (Hunkin, 2016), through which the national government instituted federal and state responsibilities for ECE, and established a universal community model (Brennan, 1982, 1998, 2014; Hunkin, 2016). These policy changes effectively marked the beginning of the marketisation of ECE in Australia (Newberry & Brennan, 2013). However, whilst they allowed public funds to go to for-profit ECE providers (Brennan, 1982), non-profit institutions still received the majority of the funding in the form of fee relief, and remained dependent on elements such as the number of children attending and criteria related to the parents (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 233).

By the early 1990s, demand for early childhood education sites had increased significantly, and services shifted from being predominantly delivered by non-profit providers, to being dominated by the private sector (Brennan, 1998; Newberry & Brennan, 2013). A pivotal moment was the extension, in 1991, of public subsidies from community-run, non-profit services to include private, for-profit provision, a move that was followed by a rapid expansion of these providers (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. xi). Over the last three decades

> a large and sophisticated market in early childhood education and care (ECE) has emerged … reforms since the 1980s have underpinned a 'radical marketisation' of the sector […] and by 2017 for-profit companies provided nearly half of all ECE services […] Government policy has shifted from supply-side finance in the form of operational subsidies and capital grants, to demand side support in the form of direct subsidies to parents. (Hill & Wade, 2018, p. 21)

Since then, the marketisation of ECE has continued to intensify, with prices increasing rapidly and larger corporate operators emerging and competing in the field (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 233). In 1994, for instance, in line with neoliberal principles of accountability and performativity, the Australian government introduced a system of monitoring and accreditation, whereby eligibility for ECE subsidies became limited to "accredited providers" only (Hunkin, 2016, p. 40). In Ball's words the "global neoliberal agenda for education included a package of three interrelated policy techniques: markets, managerialism and performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 215), where performativity refers to a "technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation" (Ball, 2003, p. 216) in which sanctioned ideas and judgements are used to control and/or change the behaviour of a population, often in conjunction with rewards (subsidies) (Ball, 2004).

The basis on which these changes were made was the "discourse of quality" (Hunkin, 2016, p. 40), as discursively linking accreditation to quality allowed neoliberal governments to prevent market failure by shaping consumers' behaviour, as only "accredited ECE centres" receive subsidies (Hunkin, 2016, p. 40). As a New Public Management technique, accreditation systems became a means for regulating how a marketised sector functions, whilst also shaping consumer behaviour by restricting subsidies to accredited services (Brennan et al., 2012). During this time, small advances were being made towards increasing the qualifications of workers in the field, while financial incentives were handed to individuals with the aim of increasing reliance on the private sector. These moves aimed at influencing consumers' preferences were described by Cleveland and Krashinsky (2002), who commented that "demand-side subsidies place funds in the hands of parents who can spend them on forms of ECE that provide the most attractive types of care" (p. 38).

In sum, during the last fifty years, neoliberal policies have increasingly provided the wider institutional framework for the marketisation of human services previously funded by the state, whilst allowing governments to fund users of such services rather than the services themselves (Newberry & Brennan, 2013, p. 233). According to Press et al. (2018), ECE services in Australia have shifted from the community,

> to becoming more commodified and subject to the market than any other form of education, leading to a neo-liberal hegemony … [that] has not only normalised the dominance of the

> market in the provision of such services for children, [but] appears to have limited our capacity to consider/envision the role and positioning of ECE in society in alternative ways. (adapted from Press et al., 2018, p. 329)

As mentioned previously, this marketisation of public care sectors (such as education) was part of a broader neo-liberal globalisation agenda vigorously promoted by world superpowers like the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Hunkin, 2016, p. 39). However, the anglophone countries were the first to adopt full 'market models for ECE', probably because the ECE sector in those countries had typically developed more slowly due to conservative governments, and thus required a more rapid expansion (Moss, 2009; Penn, 2013). This led to a very rapid growth in the number of business centres, while non-profit provision effectively stagnated (Brennan, 1998, p. 214; Newberry & Brennan, 2013). As described below, South Australia has been following similar patterns of marketisation.

5.2.1 Montessori in South Australia: a case-study of marketisation of preschool

In South Australia (SA), where preschool education has had a long and recognised history, kindergartens (or preschools) were established as part of a social and educational reform taking place in the early 1900 (Krieg & Whitehead, 2015). In their earliest iterations their main function was to help mothers and children in the poorest parts of Adelaide, the capital city of SA (May, 1997; Trethewey, 2009). Through the 20th century, the responsibility for preschool education gradually shifted from being in the hands of a voluntary body — the Kindergarten Union of South Australia — to becoming incorporated in the state education system (Krieg & Whitehead, 2015).

In recent years, however, the SA preschool sector has undergone some significant changes, and has steadily moved away from a 'the government-model of provision', where the state funds, regulates and delivers most preschool education (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009, p. 4), while witnessing a constant increase in the enrolments of children in private preschools (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009). [6] For example, whilst in 2008 just over 95% of preschool providers in SA were registered as government (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009, p. 5), that number had dropped to just 39% in 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, 2020a).

An indication of this move towards private provision has been the constant and steady growth of settings in urban SA that offer a Montessori approach to preschool education. This is of particular interest for this research, as such increase could arguably indicate the effectiveness of neoliberalism

[6] Intended either as stand-alone settings or as part of private long-day care settings

at work in the ECE sector, a phenomenon that various researchers have already observed in both childcare and the higher sectors of education (Doherty, 2009; Johnson, 2000; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009; Whitehead, 2006). Notably, the expansion is part of the growing demand for Montessori education across all Australia (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2017) which has resulted, in the last six years, in an average annual 20% increase in Montessori sites of (from 187 in 2015 to 335 in 2021) (Montessori Australia Foundation, 2017; Montessori Australia Group, 2021).

It should be noted, however, that the growth in new Montessori sites has not occurred evenly across all suburbs of Adelaide, but rather has followed a specific geographic pattern, reflective of the socio-economic characteristics of the city. Within the current preschool market, private services are not equally accessible to all parents. They are more available to some groups of parents, both because they have more purchasing power and resources, but also because "providers flock to the areas that high income parents live in" (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 77). As Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) note, "such companies are not in the business of providing for low-income families living in poor neighbourhoods" (p. 77). Therefore, the importance of geographical (or residential) positioning in constructions of social and economic class needs to be taken into consideration when examining patterns of school choice.

Further, as Brennan and her colleagues (2012) suggest in their article on the marketisation of early childhood, differences in quality, too, are inherent in market provision, as it is through such differences that markets are supposed to promote efficiency. It is argued that, "markets almost inevitably lead to increasing inequality in the quality" of care and education (Brennan et al., 2012, p. 380), and these inequalities in both distribution and quality of services are reported from a number of countries (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021), with Australia being no exception. As the next section shows, the spatial distribution of Montessori preschools in Adelaide is contributing to an existing system of choice which is increasingly characterised by inequality and disparity.

5.3 Section two: Socio-spatial mapping of Montessori preschools

Chapter Four illustrated the importance of geography in the field of choice, and argued that the concept of parental *geo-identity* directly influences how families engage with school choice. The rest of the chapter outlines the socio-geographic mapping by describing the three main steps involved in this research phase, and discusses the implications of the findings. The final section shows evidence of how the patterns of Montessori preschool distribution are closely related to the socio-economic characteristics of the people who might potentially enrol their children in such private

institutions, a pattern that reflects existing arguments about neoliberal forces reproducing social division and inequalities.

5.3.1 Selection of the preschools

During December 2018 and April 2019, a three-stage preliminary research process was conducted. The first stage involved an internet search using the National Registers on the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website as the main data source to locate all the Montessori preschools in urban Adelaide (ACECQA, 2019). The next stage involved using the geographical marking (by postcode) of these preschools to place each site on a map to identify the local council in which they are located and local statistical area. This was necessary in order to gain information about the populations living in these postcode areas, particularly their cultural, material and social resources. Lastly, using a combination from the Index of relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) scores and other Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) indicators about the demographic composition of each site was collated.

5.3.1.1 Step 1: Internet Search (Montessori)

The first step in this process was an internet search of all Montessori preschools in urban South Australia using the ACECQA National Registers. These registers contain information about approved education and care services and providers in every state of the country. The registers are updated daily from data held in the National Quality Agenda IT System. It is possible to search the relevant register by name, suburb, postcode, or service approval number, and it is also possible to differentiate the searches between providers and education and care services.

In brief, a service can denote centre-based care or family-day care, preschool, or kindergarten. The term 'service' is thus used to refer to either the physical setting or the type of institution. In contrast, provider refers to the business name, operator, or owner. For example, to operate a service, a potential owner needs to apply for provider and service approval, which can be granted only if specific standards are met. In that case, authorities will release a provider number, associated with the business name. In this context, when searching the registers, families can either search via a service type (for instance, long-day care or preschool) or via a provider name or number. During this research, the registers were searched three separate times to ensure accuracy, using different words and different methods.

The first search utilised the *general keyword* 'preschool' for services in SA. This returned 132 results which included government and non-government preschools, as well as preschool programs

delivered in LDC settings. Only four out of 132 sites included the word Montessori in their site name (ACECQA, 2019). A more specific search of the ACECQA site was then conducted through the *services keyword* tab including the word 'Montessori'. This produced 25 results, which was a smaller than anticipated outcome. This small number was possibly due to the fact that, while a variety of providers promote their educational programs as Montessori-based or Montessori-inspired, they do so without including the word Montessori in their name.

Two such examples are 'The Learning Sanctuary' and 'Precious Cargo' settings, which market themselves as 'Montessori Early Learning', through statements such as, we "proudly educate and care for children in the Montessori method" (https://preciouscargoeducation.com.au/about/cheryl-shigrov/), and "we provide Montessori inspired development programs that will encourage your child's love of learning, exploration and curiosity" (https://www.thelearningsanctuary.com.au/centres/ECE-littlehampton/) respectively. At least two of The Learning Sanctuary centres (Norwood and Thebarton) are owned by the same provider, which is *Adelaide Montessori Pty Ltd* (http://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/national-registers/providers/adelaide-montessori-pty-ltd).

Scanning the 25 results in the Montessori-specific list, indicated that one *Precious Cargo* site and two *Learning Sanctuary* centres were included, in that they explicitly contained the word Montessori in their names. For privacy reasons, these will be referred to as: *Site Number 1, Site Number 2, and Site Number 3.* It was thus decided to change the search to a *provider-based search* (rather than a service). The words 'Precious Cargo' were typed in the provider tab, and the scope was limited to SA only. This produced eight results; one was the same *Precious Cargo Montessori* centre mentioned above, while seven others were spread across other metropolitan areas of Adelaide. Similarly, searching for 'Learning Sanctuary' returned three results; the two mentioned earlier plus a further site in Littlehampton. This meant that, in total, not 25 but 32 Montessori preschool (programs) were listed in South Australia.

Lastly, to cross-reference sites and providers, one last search was conducted — a specific *provider-based search* in South Australia, using the keyword 'Montessori'. This resulted in 14 providers, all offering a preschool program, and all granted approval between the years 2012 and 2018. All providers owned between one and three sites each, with the exclusion of Precious Cargo Ltd Pty, which owned seven in SA. Cross-referencing the two lists of Montessori providers and of Montessori services, the previous findings were confirmed and the presence of 32 preschools was established.

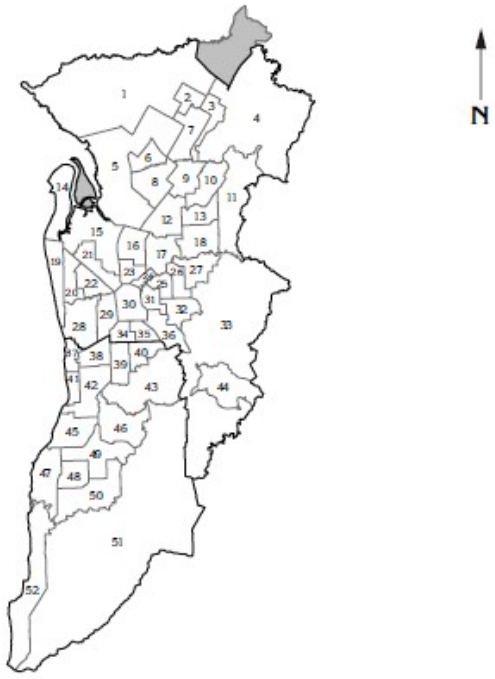
5.3.1.2 Step 2: Comparison of Montessori and other preschool program by postcode

The next step in the process involved locating the 32 preschools on a map of Adelaide using the postcodes provided in their address. The results were then compared with a map of Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) obtained from the Social Health Atlas of South Australia (Glover et al., 2006). SLAs are generally the smallest geographic units, designed to maximise the geographic detail available for Census of Population and Housing data (www.abs.gov.au). Figure 5.1 (Adelaide postcodes) and Figure 5.2 (Adelaide SLAs) are shown below.

Figure 5.1: Adelaide postcodes (obtained from the Social Health Atlas of South Australia)

Figure 5.2: Adelaide SLAs (obtained from the Social Health Atlas of South Australia)

Key to areas mapped by Statistical Local Area, Adelaide



Alphabetical key to Statistical Local Areas, Adelaide, 2001

Adelaide (C)	30	Onkaparinga (C) - South Coast	52
Adelaide Hills (DC) - Central	44	Onkaparinga (C) - Woodcroft	49
Adelaide Hills (DC) - Ranges	33	Playford (C) - East Central	3
Burnside (C) - North-East	32	Playford (C) - Elizabeth	7
Burnside (C) - South-West	36	Playford (C) - Hills	4
Campbelltown (C) - East	27	Playford (C) - West	1
Campbelltown (C) - West	26	Playford (C) - West Central	2
Charles Sturt (C) - Coastal	19	Port Adelaide Enfield (C) - Coast	14
Charles Sturt (C) - Inner East	22	Port Adelaide Enfield (C) - East	17
Charles Sturt (C) - Inner West	20	Port Adelaide Enfield (C) - Inner	16
Charles Sturt (C) - North-East	21	Port Adelaide Enfield (C) - Port	15
Holdfast Bay (C) - North	37	Prospect (C)	23
Holdfast Bay (C) - South	41	Salisbury (C) - Central	8
Marion (C) - Central	42	Salisbury (C) - Inner North	6
Marion (C) - North	38	Salisbury (C) - North-East	9
Marion (C) - South	45	Salisbury (C) - South-East	12
Mitcham (C) - Hills	43	Salisbury (C) Balance	5
Mitcham (C) - North-East	40	Tea Tree Gully (C) - Central	13
Mitcham (C) - West	39	Tea Tree Gully (C) - Hills	11
Norwood Payneham St Peters (C) - East	25	Tea Tree Gully (C) - North	10
Norwood Payneham St Peters (C) - West	31	Tea Tree Gully (C) - South	18
Onkaparinga (C) - Hackham	50	Unley (C) - East	35
Onkaparinga (C) - Hills	51	Unley (C) - West	34
Onkaparinga (C) - Morphett	48	Walkerville (M)	24
Onkaparinga (C) - North Coast	47	West Torrens (C) - East	29
Onkaparinga (C) - Reservoir	46	West Torrens (C) - West	28

This comparative plotting was, in turn, followed by an analysis of the demographic composition of the residents of these suburbs, aimed at increasing my understanding of the socio-economic characteristics of the families who might be accessing these preschools. The data that emerged — which have been put in Table 5.2 —are discussed in more detail in a separate research step (called Step Three), which illustrates the social and economic characteristics of the families living in the suburbs where the Montessori preschools are located. As can be seen in Table 5.2, various socio-economic indicators relating to cultural composition, income, qualifications, employment, use of material resources, and so on, were taken into consideration in this research phase.

Following the demographic analysis, the locations of the preschools were also plotted against a map highlighting the Index of Socio Economic Relative Disadvantage (IRSD). Through this phase, it quickly became evident that the majority of Montessori sites were located in the suburbs with lowest IRSD scores. In other words, most Montessori preschools in Adelaide have been built in the richest suburbs. Below, Figure 5.3 compares two maps: the one on the left is a modified version of the SLA map used before, this time highlighting the locations of the preschools. The map on the right shows the overall pattern of distribution of index scores across Adelaide, and reveals that the least disadvantaged areas (in the lighter colours) are to the east and south of the city. These also happen to be the areas where most Montessori sites were concentrated.

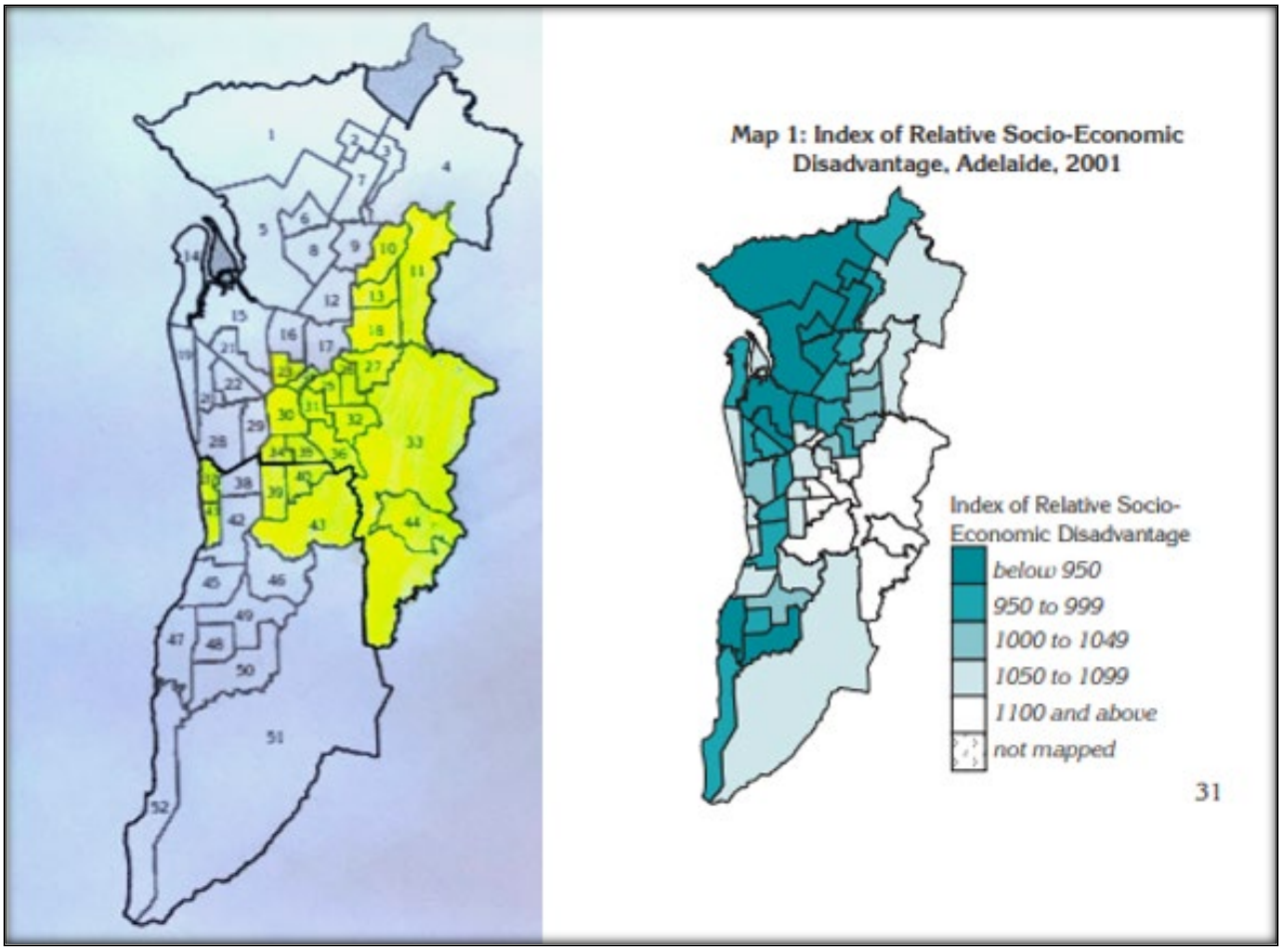


Figure 5.3: IRSD Distribution versus Montessori preschool locations (maps obtained and adapted from the Social Health Atlas of South Australia)

Following these mapping exercises, it was also considered beneficial to compare all other preschool programs offered within the same postcode areas. This was done using a combination of data obtained from: the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Local Government Area (LGA) webpages (Australian Statistical Geography Standard [ASGS] and Statistical Local Areas [SLAs]), and from the ACECQA National Registers. The rationale for this comparison was that examining all the preschool options available to families living in those suburbs would increase our understanding of their social and economic conditions.[7]

The materials obtained through these phases was compiled in Table 5.1 below, which compares enrolment numbers between Montessori preschools and other programs. The information contained in the table was obtained by either searching the ACECQA website, or by browsing the

[7] It should be noted that, on the ACECQA registers, those preschools categorised as part of LDC settings showed numbers representing the whole site, rather than just the preschool actual enrolments. Once ethics approval was received, it therefore became necessary to inquire directly by email or telephone and get the exact figures from the centres.

Department of Education website (South Australian Government Preschool Enrolments in their Eligible Year, as at Term 2, 2018).

The table shows the total numbers of preschool programs available in different local government areas, the number of both Montessori preschools and other preschools; both the total number of enrolments on 'any given day' for the Montessori preschools and for the others in the LGAs, and the percentages of children attending a Montessori program, for a minimum of two days per week (in red). The table does not, however, specify whether those children also attend other programs in other settings on different days.[8]

[8] Also please note that numbers in this table might be different from numbers provided on local government areas (LGA) tables by the Australian bureau of statistics because this table deals **only** with certain postcodes within any LGA whereas the abs tables include all postcodes in any LGA.

Table 5.1: Comparison of Montessori and other preschools enrolments by SLA and postcode

Statistical local area (SLA)	Location of Montessori preschools by postcode	Programs available		Children enrolled		
		All preschools	Montessori	All programs	Montessori programs	
		#	#	#	#	%
Adelaide City	5000	6	2	355	103	29.0
Adelaide Hills	5154	2	1	102	44	43.1
Burnside	5064	5	1	206	33	16.0
	5067	4	2	218	95	43.5
	5072	2	1	88	23	26.1
Campbelltown	5074	2	1	133	70	52.6
Charles Sturt	5011	3	1	131	36	27.5
	5014	3	1	204	45	22.1
Holdfast By	5049	3	1	135	40	29.6
Marion	5043	5	1	258	60	23.3
Mitcham	5041	4	1	215	80	37.2
	5050	2	1	85	34	40.0
	5051	4	1	186	50	26.9
	5052	3	1	165	90	54.5
Onkaparinga	5162	7	1	371	60	16.2
	5166	2	1	101	41	40.6
Regional (McLaren Vale)	5171	2	1	97	42	43.3
Payneham, Norwood & St. Peters	5067	5	2	168	45	26.8
	5069	4	2	259	155	59.8
Prospect	5081	4	1	299	32	10.7
Unley	5061	4	2	145	74	51
Tea Tree Gully	5125	2	1	164	60	36.6
	5090	2	1	84	30	35.7
	5092	5	1	189	30	15.9
	5096	5	1	194	60	30.9

Statistical local area (SLA)	Location of Montessori preschools by postcode	Programs available		Children enrolled		
		All preschools	Montessori	All programs	Montessori programs	
		#	#	#	#	%
West Torrens	5024	2	1	144	80	55.6
	5031	4	1	165	93	56.3
	5032		1			
Mid-Murray Council (Littlehampton)	5250	2	1	94	44	46.8

NB: enrolment numbers were correct at the time of writing this chapter

5.3.1.3 Step 3: Socio-economic characteristics of SLAs with Montessori preschools

The final step in this socio-spatial analysis aimed to expand the understanding of the social and economic characteristics of the families who would access the Montessori preschools in this study. The previous two steps of the research had focused on the geographical aspect of choice and had provided an initial picture of the general demographic characteristics of the people living in such locations. Here, I combined information obtained from ABS papers, the Social Health Atlas of South Australia, and the Index of IRSD scores to construct a more robust social picture of the parents who might participate in later phases of the research.

Indicators, including social and cultural resources, median equivalised income, internet access, qualifications, employment, and languages spoken were analysed thoroughly and used to produce Table 5.2. It should be noted that the data is drawn predominantly from the 2016 census data and from the ABS Australian Demographic Statistics of 2017, as these were the latest available records at the time of writing this chapter. Nevertheless, they contributed to provide information regarding the socio-economic demographics of families living in those areas.

The socio-geographic analysis shows that most families in the selected suburbs are composed of professionals, either fully employed, or working part-time, who consequently have relatively high median weekly incomes (compared to the median South Australian weekly income of $769). It follows that those parents who opt for a private Montessori preschool in Adelaide tend to come from suburbs with relatively high IRSD than those who select to send their children to a public kindergarten. Overall, then, that the spatial inequality in preschool choice generally follows the uneven distribution of capital/wealth across the city.

In the context of this analysis, it is important to remember that the IRSD index only includes measures relative to disadvantage, so a low index score (below 940) indicates greater disadvantage, meaning that people in those areas have more disadvantages in terms of being able to access material and social resources. This could be due, for example, to a high proportion of households with low income, a high proportion of people with no post-school qualifications or in low skills occupations, a high proportion of people who are not fluent speakers of English, or many dwellings with no internet connection. In contrast, a high IRSD score (from 1020 to 1060 or higher) indicates few households with low incomes, low percentages of unemployed people, few dwellings with no internet connection, few households with low qualification and so forth.

This means that people living in areas with ISD scores are the least disadvantaged and have a higher socio-economic status and more access to resources. In fact, as can be seen in Table 5.2, between 51.4% and 65.8% of adults living in these areas possess post-school qualifications, and more than 88% are fluent in English. Significant numbers also speak another language, and on average 84% have internet access at home. These indicators all point to a suburban picture of parents who are relatively wealthy and well educated, and therefore presumably place a high value on education (Ball & Nikita, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Reay et al., 2011; Reinosa, 2008; Rowe, 2017; Rowe & Windle, 2012).

As can be seen in Figure 5.3, the greatest concentration of Montessori preschools in Adelaide is in SLAs whose IRSD index varied from high to very high. Specifically, eight out of thirty-two Montessori preschools were in SLAs that fell between the 6th to 8th decile, having an IRSD index score varying from 980 to 1019. Another fourteen were in SLAs in the 9th and 10th decile, with an IRSD score between 1020 to 1060, and the remaining seven were all in SLAs belonging to the 10th decile only, with an IRSD score of 1060 or above (see Table 5.2). This means that 65.6% (21 out of 32) Montessori preschools were in areas considered the most advantaged, having a high to very high socio-economic status.

Only three of all the Montessori preschools were located in a low IRSD index area (below 940), namely the preschool integrated in Centre E, the preschool program integrated in Centre G, and Centre H. These three sites all belonged to the Onkaparinga Council (or SLAs), which fell in the 6th state decile. Notably, however, as discussed above, whilst being the lowest SES of all sites in this project, Onkaparinga still ranks higher than more than half of all remaining areas in the state.

TABLE 5.2: Socio-economic Demographics of Urban Adelaide Families by SLA

Statistical Local Area	SLA # on Key Map	Median Equivalised Household Income	Post-School Qualification	Speaks Another Language	Proficient in English	Home Internet Access	IRSD Score	IRSD State Decile
		AUS$	%	%	%	%		
Adelaide	30	943	65.8	36.3	88.3	86.7	1014	8
Adelaide Hills	33; 44	999	61.6	5.6	97.9	89	1080	10
Burnside	32; 36	1115	65.0	24.1	91.6	87.5	1081	10
Campbelltown	26; 27	782	53.0	34.6	87.2	80.1	1012	8
Charles Sturt	22	794	51.4	27.3	84.8	78.1	985	6
Holdfast Bay	37; 41	949	59.8	9.7	96.2	82.8	1043	10
Marion	42; 45	809	54.7	18.8	90.7	81.9	1001	7
Mitcham	39; 40; 43	988	62.9	14.7	93.7	87.2	1068	10
Onkaparinga	47; 48; 50; 51;	747	51.8	6.0	97.4	84.4	987	6
Norwood, Payneham and St. Peters	25; 31	899	61.9	26.5	88	81.9	1029	9
Prospect	23	992	60.0	26.2	88.1	84.9	1046	10
Unley	34; 35	1087	65.6	19.4	90.3	86.5	1066	10
Tea Tree Gully	10; 11; 13; 18	846	52.7	12.6	94.9	86.2	1031	9
West Torrens	28; 29	797	55.3	30.8	85.7	79.9	1002	7

5.3.2 Findings and discussion

In South Australia, the social welfare commitment to preschool educational equality has gradually been replaced by market-oriented policies and increasing social inequality. And as Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) point out, markets are not intended to produce conditions of equal choice and quality. Further, price mechanisms mean that, in any society with unequal distribution of resources, some 'consumers', namely, those with more resources, will have more choice and access to a wider range and better quality of services than others.

The socio-spatial mapping carried out in this chapter has not only confirmed this; it has also illuminated that, in urban Adelaide , patterns of preschool choice — at least the choice to enrol children in a Montessori preschool — are closely linked to geographical location. This reinforces Rowe's main arguments (2015) that geo-identity directly influences how parents participate in school choice, and that it affects what an ideal institution should look like for their children.

Further, the mapping has also highlighted that most Montessori preschools, being located in the least disadvantaged suburbs of South Australia, are accessible only to *some* families. The parents who reside in such suburbs, therefore, have the benefit of constructing their class-identity within a broader context characterised by cultural, social and economic advantages. Therefore, these parents are distinguished not only by their *geo-identity*, but also by the power and ability to choose which derives from such identity. Importantly, they are separate from other parents who might reside in other areas and have a different capacity to access to the ECE market due to their residential and financial status.

I argued earlier that, in affective terms, this study views these parents not only as *individuals,* but as constituting a collective body. However, what constitutes the Montessori parents' identity as a collective body (a body of parents) is not only their geo-identity, but also — and importantly — the assumptions, norms and social patterns that stick only to certain bodies; in this case, the neoliberal expectations which stick to mothers that they take care of matters like preschool education. The collective body in this study, therefore, is the body of Montessori mothers who enjoy the potential to choose and to pay for private preschool education.

As a collective body, these mothers are also constituted by neoliberal discourses on parenting, education and choice, which are refracted through specific advertising regimes, that target them as a collective in relation to which educational models they should choose, because as discussed

earlier, private companies would not offer their services to working-class or poor parents living in disadvantaged suburbs. In this case, the concentration of the Montessori preschool brand in the wealthy suburbs of Adelaide can be seen, in marketing terms, as a deliberate choice by private providers to establish sites in areas where an investment in marketing is very likely to pay off.

As will become evident in the next chapters, collectively, the affective practices that these parents (mostly mothers) adopt include neoliberal discourses and socio-political formations, cultural and social beliefs, social relations in general, and the language they use when discussing their choices, that collectively create the conditions for certain affects and emotions to surface and move them to make certain choices (these affects and emotions include excitement, pride or anticipation linked to choosing a 'good' Montessori preschool because it might guarantee a successful future for their child and keep or even advance their position in the social hierarchy, for example).Therefore, through the agentic power of choice that their privileged position grants them, this collective of parents allow for the emergence and circulation of specific affects, even if not consciously, which, in turn, contribute to the reproduction of classed and gendered social divisions.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have used a socio-geographical approach to delineate the spatial patterns of preschool choice in urban Adelaide. I have argued that this approach was necessary, as research has demonstrated that educational choice is closely linked to geographical (residential) location. The analysis has shown that the distribution of Montessori preschools in Adelaide follows a specific pattern of socio-economic distribution. This reinforces other studies which claim that spatial inequality in school choice generally follows the uneven distribution of capital/wealth across cities (Yoon et al., 2018).

A comparison of the locations of the preschools against some demographic indicators revealed that, as a collective, the parents who can choose a Montessori preschool reside in some of the most affluent areas in Adelaide, and therefore come from the neighbourhoods with above-average levels of income and greater access to social and cultural resources. The findings generated here add to a growing body of international research that examines the impact of education market reforms on educational opportunities for disadvantaged children (Gulosino & Lubienski, 2011; Healy, 2021; Lubienski, 2016; Ndimande & Lubienski, 2017; Perry et al., 2016; Rowe & Lubienski, 2017; Taylor, 2002; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). Importantly, they also form the backdrop for the work which will be done in the next two chapters, which are designed to illuminate the decision-making processes of

certain parents (middle-class mothers), as well as their individual and collective emotional investments in paying for a private (Montessori) preschool.

CHAPTER 6 CHOICE, MARKETING AND DISCURSIVE SUBJECTIVITIES

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the way in which choice is mediated through marketing regimes, by exploring how advertising materials contribute towards the establishment of emotive environments that create the conditions for certain affects to circulate. The underlying argument here is that, whilst it is true marketing tools play a role in influencing parents' choice-making, it is equally true that they are successful in 'moving' parents towards certain choices, because the underlying conditions for their effectiveness have already been put in place through dominant discursive norms and structures. The chapter thus utilises a discursive analysis of the text in six Montessori preschools websites to examine how the circulation of affects — like forces or waves — produces specific affective intensities designed to influence choice. In addition, I also uses semiotic analysis techniques to investigate how the targeted manipulation of visual elements such as the page layout, the position of images, the colours and fonts used, and so forth, are employed to create specific affective environments designed to uphold and reinforce specific discursive subjectivities (Gottschall et al., 2010) and define and/or amplify specific affective environments, to tap into the hopes, desires and ambitions of the target parents (Djonov & Zhao, 2017; Zhao et al., 2021).

6.2 Why websites?

In the current market-driven competitive context, very few – if any – providers can afford to ignore these elements of advertising and/or certain aspects of promotion and marketing (Maguire et al., 1999, p. 298). Institutions are therefore starting to brand themselves through educational logos in order to "promote and market a specific notion of distinctiveness to assist in recruitment of clients" (Maguire et al., 1999, p. 298). One way of doing this is through websites, as contemporary marketing experts argue that if someone needs to find information, they will most likely turn to the internet to locate it (Barner, 2018; Salerno, 2014).

Research has shown that websites have become a vital tool both for potential customers to gather information, and for businesses to influence their opinions. Barner (2018), for example, defines websites as "a digital storefront and showroom" (p. 1) and argues that, today, many people form their first opinion about a business based on them (Barner, 2018, p. 1) Studies from both Simmons (2007) and Schultz et al. (2000) found that, in the current Information Age, websites are an intrinsic part of brand communication, both visually and in tone and content. They have now become an

important brand communication tool Marginson and Considine (2002), through which institutional and consumer identities are constructed and represented. Websites aim to reflect, in some ways, the fantasies and aspirations of their target markets, and as such, targeting is critical, for a sense of audience is essential in preparing a demographic-appropriate website (Maguire et al., 1999). In a sense, websites offer a promise in advance (Maguire et al., 1999), and thus represent a very effective way to tap into people's emotional spheres.

To borrow from advertising jargon, webpage designers are very aware of what commands and dictates visual/perceptual attention; therefore, they follow specific rules in order to maximise impact (Maguire et al., 1999). Drawing on CDA and on the seminal work of Kress and VanLeeuven (2006), this chapter analyses websites according both to the language used and the visual elements, their locations and different functions within the webpage. Therefore, not just the language, but also the presence and type of images used and their location in the page are also very important features to investigate. As discussed by other scholars, photographs play a very important role in signifying who is supposed to be the viewer/reader, because they can activate specific emotive responses and connections in the target public (Drew, 2013; Wardman et al., 2010; Wilkins, 2012). For example, the notion of gaze (a specific, direct look to the target) has been discussed by Wardman et al. (2010) to exemplify how images are used to engage customers of a specific type (age, culture, race and gender).

6.3 Selection criteria

Sampling methods were discussed in Chapter Two. However, it is important to note that, to limit the scope of the study, the selection of websites was determined by four criteria. These were: the number of students enrolled in the Montessori preschool (between 40 and 60); the independence of site (i.e. stand-alone preschools or preschools that operated independently within a larger education complex were chosen, as opposed to those co-located in long-day centres); different ownership (i.e. each preschool had to be registered to a different provider); and finally, different location (choosing six sites from different geographical areas).

Following local statistical maps, Adelaide was divided into areas labelled north, east, south, west, hills and CBD and one site from each was selected. It was thought that these criteria would maximise the socio-economic and geographical breadth and depth of information. Last, to maintain anonymity, a simple A-F identification system was adopted to refer to the six preschools and their websites. The identifiers allocated to the selected preschools are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Preschool Identifiers

Preschool geographical area	Identifier	Children Enrolled
North	Preschool A	60
Adelaide Hills	Preschool B	44
CBD	Preschool C	43
East	Preschool D	50
South	Preschool E	41
West	Preschool F	60

6.4 Analytical methods: A discursive-semiotic analysis

Maguire et al. (1999) argue that although advertising tactics and tenets vary with time and cultures, some key components or attributes remain and can be instructive in website analysis. In particular, the ideas and concepts which underpin the tactics deployed to sell any commodity remain constant. "Values, attitudes and 'consumer-oriented lifestyle' are sold to target groups" (Maguire et al., 1999, p. 297). Further, brand (or logo) loyalty is built up and sustained around certain key components or attributes, "which provide an identity, which engage with the fantasies or aspirations of the target market" (Maguire et al., 1999, p. 298).

To identify the dominant discourses in the websites, and how they influence parental identity and decision-making, a choice was made to study the frequency and usage of certain words and statements within chosen groups of tabs. Based on both the recurrence of specific words and the context in which they appeared, the language was categorised in relation to broader, emerging themes, and a pilot thematic framework was created. Consideration was given not only to what was written and how often, but also to how this was framed (whether explicitly or not). Four main themes emerged: first, the child as an independent and responsible learner. The second theme related to a sense of apparent freedom and liberty of choice, Third, the child as a *worker* — not a player — and as future producer of social and economic good. And finally, the schoolification of early childhood education. These themes are presented more fully in later sections.

Importantly, the linguistic analysis was enriched by a feminist poststructuralist lens, in that particular attention was paid to elements such as the use of pronouns in the texts, as well as the ways in which boys and girls are positioned and constructed, not only through textual but also through visual clues. Similarly, the way in which allusions to social and economic class featured

indirectly through the manipulation of images played an important role in the investigation. These are also techniques used in examinations of the visual elements in texts proposed by semiotic analysis scholars, for example Kress and VanLeeuven (2006). Accordingly, the semiotic portion of the analysis focused not only on the images themselves, but also on how and where both the text and the images were positioned, since a webpage's set up and design follow a specific order (from top left to bottom right), which is never casual. Rather, the page is divided into specific sections, all of which have different and definite functions (Kress & VanLeeuven, 2006).

For example, in the case of this analysis, it was noted that elements such as the logos, institutional colours and accreditation markers designed to indicate notions of quality, leadership in the market, or excellence, tend to be on the left-hand side. This is because, as Kress and VanLeeuven (2006) explain, all the elements designed to portray familiarity, legitimacy or even authority tend to be positioned on the left side of the page. In contrast, components designed to introduce new knowledge and innovation, or those intended to establish difference and change, are often found of the right side (Kress & VanLeeuven, 2006). The bottom of the page is often filled with elements designed to recall or evoke a specific identity — whether social or cultural, whereas elements aimed at invoking fantasises, aspirations or ideals are often located on the top half of the page.

All these signifiers are designed and positioned within the webpage specifically to influence the target consumers to identify with, or dream of, a specific feature of the product or service for sale (Kress & VanLeeuven, 2006). In this analysis, for example, Montessori's ideals and ethos were often found at the top of the page, along with words suggesting certain values that parents should aspire to. Similarly, modality – which is the truth value of a statement – is often determined by the use of colour, while the saliency of specific elements (such as the logo) or particular words or aspects of the Montessori method is reinforced though the use of specific types of font, the size, colour and position of text within the page. For example, often, the lower end (middle) of the market providers had brighter, more colourful and busier photographs, and often displayed large images of their facilities. In contrast, the higher end providers tended to use more neutral palettes, focusing more on children's faces and human subjects rather than on their wares and spaces (Maguire et al., 1999).

Through the analysis, four main discursive themes emerged, which strongly relate to neoliberal ideologies currently dominating the ECE landscape. As will be discussed later, these themes all correspond to neoliberal ideals and values, and include explicit constructions of the child (as a gendered, culturally homogenous, autonomous and confident leader of the future), as well as

indirect representations of the parent (as the individual in charge of making careful and responsible decisions). Firstly, and importantly for this research, the child was nearly always referred to as a *he* across all websites, and was often implicitly presented as a white, middle-class, socially advantaged boy. This gendered version of children was evident also in the images. Whilst there was the occasional photograph of girls or children of other races, the absence of any specific words relating to the female gender or diversity of race and class was important. Whiteness and masculinity were interpreted and understood as 'normal' across the websites, and the absence of other images or words directly related to any type of diversity could arguably be, in itself, a technique to communicate what customer the preschools were aiming to attract. This reflects what was previously highlighted in the socio-economic analysis in Chapter Five, namely, that Montessori preschools in Adelaide are concentrated in high-income suburbs, populated mostly by white, Anglo-Saxon professionals.

6.5 Findings: Four neoliberal themes

6.5.1 The neoliberal child as an independent and autonomous *boy*

Language that referred to specific capabilities deemed as valuable and desirable within neoliberal discourses was common across all six websites, particularly within the preschools' philosophies and aims. At the same time, the analysis highlighted the absence of other values, arguably more humanistic or socially focussed, which perhaps do not align as much with neoliberal discourses. For example, most preschools promised to produce students (predominantly referred to as a *he*) possessing vital qualities such as *individuality, responsibility, freedom (of choice), concentration, self-discipline, and confidence*, all vital for a good work ethic, a sense of achievement and future success, and markers of masculinity when compared with equally desirable characteristics denoted by words such as empathy, kindness, compassion, collaboration, and so on. The quotes below, from Preschools A and B reflect this focus on independence whilst linking it to desirable human characteristics and life-long skills:

> any child who is self-sufficient … reflects in his joy and sense of achievement the image of human dignity, which is derived from a sense of independence. (Preschool A)

> The child will develop life-long skills such as independent problem-solving and analytical thinking, and that this will build his self-confidence and the sense of satisfaction that comes from self-accomplishment. (Preschool B)

These, arguably dominant neoliberal words were used repeatedly in the websites. For example the terms *independent* and *independence* featured 11 times across all websites (in Preschools A(4), B(1),

C(2), E(1), F(3). Similarly, the words *confidence* and *discipline* appeared 8 times each, either alone or in conjunction with the word *self* (in Preschools A(2), B(1), C(3), E(1) and F(1) and A(2), B(2), C(2) and E(2), and the word *concentration* was used seven times (in Preschools A(2), B(2), C(1), E(1), and F(1). Quotes such as "we promise to develop the child's initiative, independent choice, concentration and power of deliberation", or similar were very common across all the websites.

Every preschool promised to instil fundamental neoliberal arguably masculine characteristics in the children, and to develop them into autonomous, free and independent individuals. Preschool A vouched that "The child will develop life-long skills such as independent problem-solving and analytical thinking, and that this will build *his* self-confidence and the sense of satisfaction that comes from accomplishment" (emphasis added). Further, both Preschools E and B featured statements about fostering individuals' responsibilities and independence in order to improve society as a whole. Similarly, Preschool B promised a focus on "the education of each individual for the betterment of human kind", Preschool E assured "the pursuit of building a better world by educating each individual", and Preschool F guaranteed "to develop the child's initiative, independent choice, concentration and power of deliberation" (all characteristics which denote power and control, which are, arguably, often associated with maleness).

In line with dominant neoliberal discourses, the impression constructed through the websites examined is that future success for preschoolers can be guaranteed by choosing Montessori education (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2016), as the skills and personal qualities taught through this method/brand are promoted as essential commodities that parent-customers can acquire on behalf of their children (Gottschall et al., 2010; Wardman et al., 2010). This is not surprising as principles such as responsibility, autonomy and individualism, so highly promoted through Montessori education, actually fit perfectly within neoliberal discourses and their associated masculinity, as they closely align with some of the key values promoted by this political theory. The following quote is a good example:

> Imagine your toddler saying a heartfelt "thank you" for your help; setting a table for lunch; rushing to help wipe up a friend's water spill; sweeping the floor at the end of the day; and modelling for *his* younger friends how to use the toilet successfully. Imagine your child able to concentrate on a task, able to wait patiently for *his* turn with the puzzle, and walking around *his* friend's work rather than trampling all over it. Imagine a community of children who truly enjoy each other's company and care about their friends' daily 'ups and downs'. These are common scenes to be found in a Montessori centre. (Preschool A)

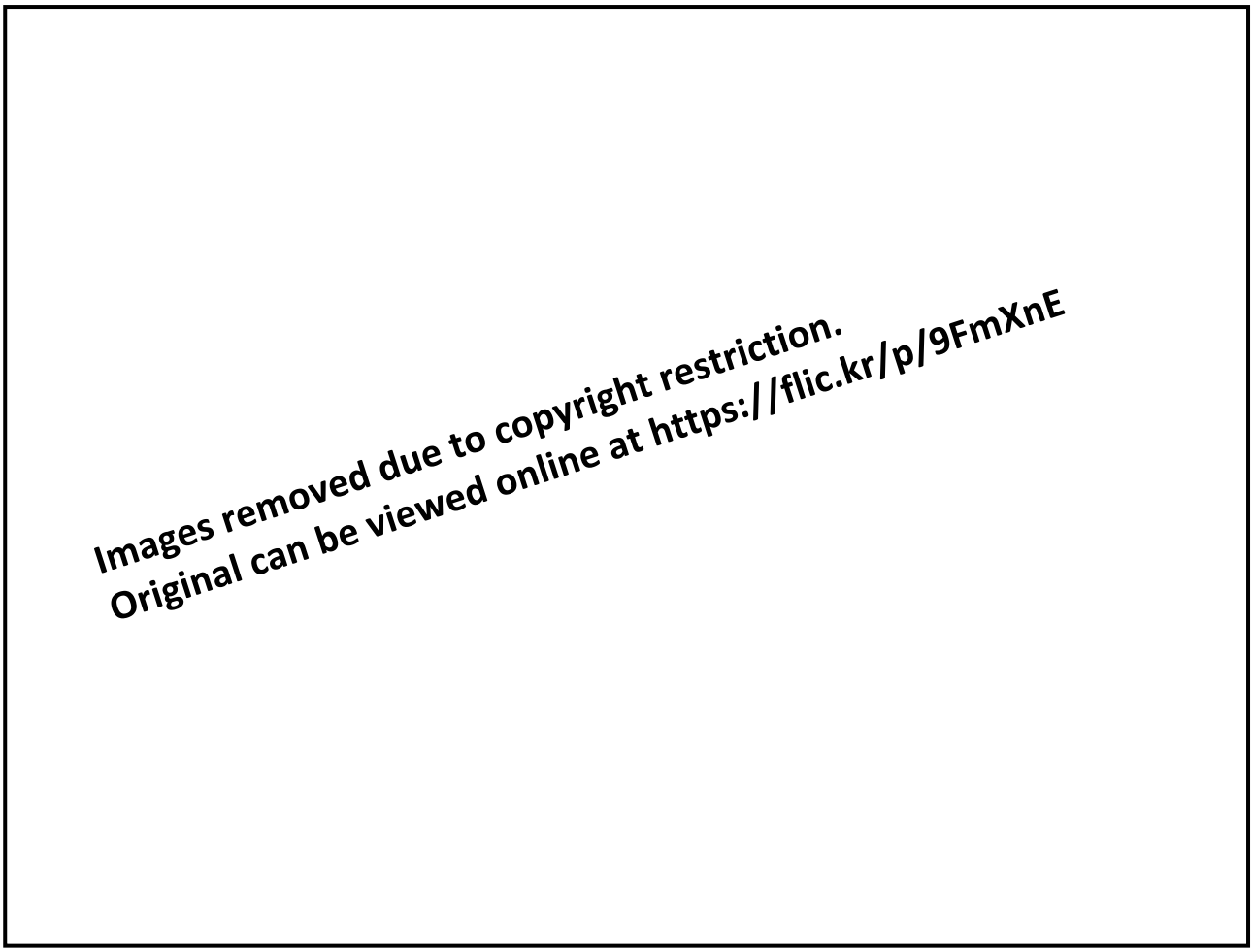
Typical neoliberal ideals such as discipline, independence, autonomy and accountability (to improve oneself but also to work for one's society) were commonly transmitted also through visual texts. Images of focused, self-controlled children were often accompanied by written texts reinforcing Montessori's promise to instil and develop "self-discipline and independence" (Preschool C), whilst "sharing in the children's joy of self-achievement" (Preschool C). As seen in Figure 6.1, often, images of children looking completely immersed in their individual tasks are accompanied by statements such as "we believe in the education of individuals" or "children take responsibility for themselves as learners" (Preschool B). Preschool A reinforces the importance of autonomy and self-reliance independence by stating: "any child who is self-sufficient … reflects in *his* joy and sense of achievement the image of human dignity, which is derived from a sense of independence" (emphasis added, Preschool A). The autonomous neo-liberal child, therefore, is nearly always depicted working alone. Indeed, Preschools C and F only have images of children working independently, while the other preschools have only one or two images of children working in small groups, or with an educator, and these are generally very small, and in the background (as opposed to other large, close-up images of children working by themselves).

Figure 6.1: Children focusing on their individual tasks

Importantly, just like in the text, in most of the photographs the neoliberal child is nearly always a boy. As can be seen in most of the images, most children photographed across the website are young males, and when girls are present, they tend to be either working with a teacher or in group. Further, as will become evident a little later, they are often depicted engaging in tasks that are more commonly connected or associated with domestic chores (such as gardening, laundry or kitchen tasks) (see Figure 6.7). As is the case with education-related chores, this reinforces the notion already discussed that some societal or moral expectations tend to stick more to certain bodies — female bodies — than others.

Further, in websites A, B, C, D and F most of the images are of children not only working autonomously, but also looking proud, focused and satisfied, reinforcing the notion that through independent work comes success and personal satisfaction (see Figure 6.2). The photos are often captioned with words like: “building a lifelong love of learning”, or “the joy of independence”. Often, it looks as if the children are not even aware of being photographed; in terms of affect, this lack of eye contact with the viewer is another technique utilised to convey the emotional message, in line with neoliberal discourse, that the children are so engrossed in, and content with, their task that nothing can distract them, because this is what happens when individuals can choose their work ‘freely and autonomously’.

Figure 6.2: Children looking satisfied and proud



If teachers are present in the shot, their body language is usually reserved, with their hands often on their lap, highlighting physical distance and promoting the idea of the child’s freedom of movement and self-direction. Only during reading time educators have a ‘warmer’ attitude towards the children, displaying more inclusive behaviours and sharing physical contact. The idea of independence is strongly transmitted also through the fact that the children are nearly always

physically separated from each other while they engage in activities, and there is always a fair amount of space between them (which is in line with Montessori theories, where children utilise a mat to mark their working space and to indicate that they cannot be disturbed during this time). Only in one website (Website E) is there a photograph of children working on a learning task together, and actively collaborating. In contrast, in the other group shots, children tend to be outside running around, or otherwise not actively engaged in a 'learning task'.

In addition, if children are portrayed with an educator, it is often one-on-one work, where the teacher is either demonstrating how to use the material or reading to the child. None of the shots on the websites represented children working in a group, choosing instead to focus on characteristics such as autonomy and self-sufficiency. This reinforces the neoliberal focus on individualism already identified by Reay et al. (2008), Brown (2003), Apple (2006) and Davies and Bansel (2007). By instilling in children values such as individual freedom, autonomy and responsibility, these preschools are inadvertently reinforcing neoliberal, gendered systems which in reality limit subjects' freedoms and field of action by hiding behind the technology of choice (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 251).

Interestingly, the websites also highlight the importance of instilling moral values in future leaders. However, these values seem to take a lower degree of importance, featuring much less frequently and in a seemingly subordinate manner. Words such as *honesty, tolerance, patience,* and *kindness* do not appear at all, despite these arguably being very desirable characteristics in a child. Similarly, the words *cooperation* and *collaboration* only appear once or twice, and only in two websites (in Preschools B and E), while the adjective *social* appears a total of five times, and was either co-located with the words *skills* and/or *behaviours* (again in Preschools C, E and F). As Wilson and Carlsen (2016) note, "an absence can also be a statement" (p. 33). Rather than promoting social and human values, the websites consistently focus on self-reliance and entrepreneurial skills as ideals to be equated with future success and happiness. This *absence of human qualities* is as important in the analysis as the overly present neoliberal elements, as it reinforces and legitimises the discursive focus on individualism and autonomy.

As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, the same lack of social and 'human' values also features significantly in the affective analysis of the parent questionnaires. Whilst it is overly simplistic to argue that advertising materials are the only influence on parental choice, this analysis provides evidence that they certainly contribute towards the establishment of specific emotive environments

that promise parents to deliver specific attributes deemed important by dominant neoliberal discourses. Dominant discursive norms, therefore, allow for the creation of emotional assemblages, within which advertising works by moving some parents to invest in — and choose — specific brands of preschool education.

6.5.2 'Well-regulated' freedom in a clean, controlled, and classed environment

Statements about freedom and choice were very common across the websites. For example, preschool E advertised, "Our aim is working towards the development of self-sufficient, considered, informed, and active young people, who will use their talents *freely* and responsibly to work autonomously" (Preschool E). Preschool F stated that, "By living as a *free* member of a real society, the child is trained in those fundamental social qualities which form the basis of good citizenship" (Preschool F). Similarly, Preschool B vouched that, "Our students are allowed *freedom* of movement and choices and will have opportunities for autonomous […] learning".

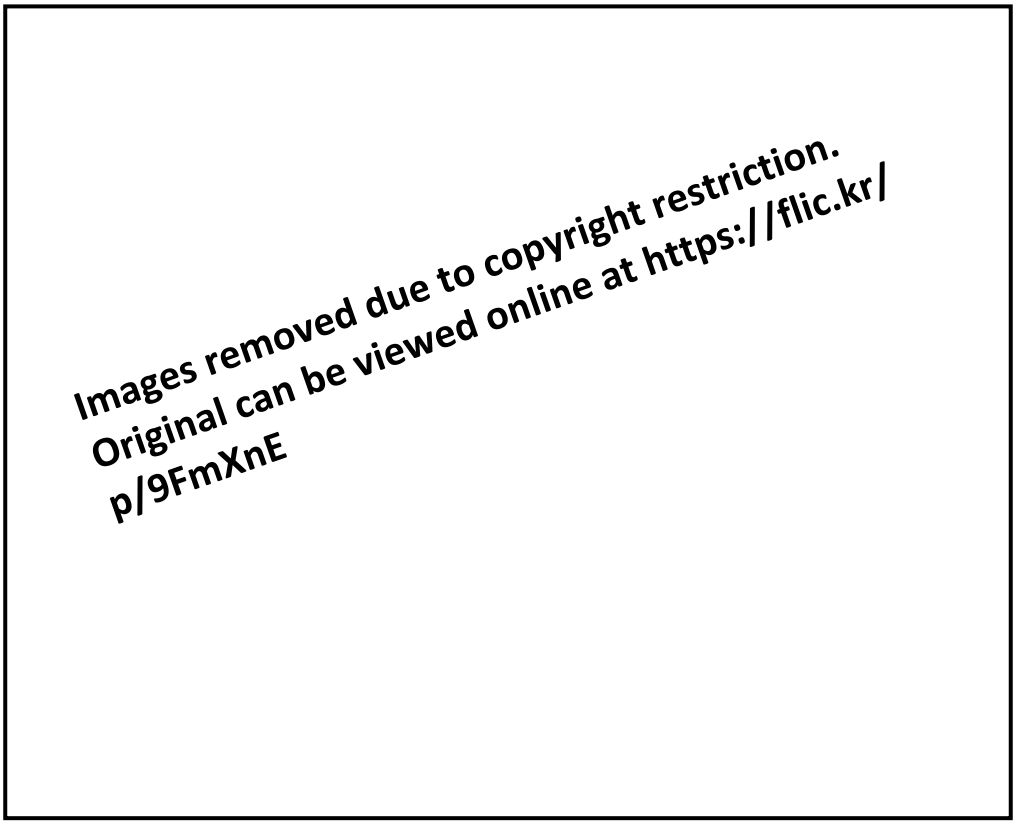
In every website, the orderliness and material wealth is often represented by displaying panoramic shots of the classroom, with no children present, and all the materials perfectly displayed on the shelves. There are often images of pencils, all sorted by colour tone and stored in jars of the same main colour. Nothing seems left to chance; the resources and furniture are all positioned strategically, and this gives a sense of freedom but in a rather controlled environment. The resources are mostly in natural materials and/or natural, earthy colours. Often, they look brand new and they do not display any sign of wear and tear, which one could expect in an environment where children exist and play. As seen in the images in Figures 6.3 and 6.4, the environment is depicted as very well resourced, calm, relaxed, extremely tidy and the learning materials look nearly perfect and arguably expensive.

Figure 6.3: A calm, clean and tidy environment

Figure 6.4: A well-resourced learning environment

The children are presented as tidy, calm and almost immaculate; a picture of socio-economic comfort and class. For example, in both websites B and E, even whilst the children are photographed cooking or preparing fruit, everything is perfectly organised and clean, with no rubbish or imperfections visible. Similarly, on the rare occasion that children are photographed outdoors, they are rarely dirty or messy in appearance. As can be seen in the images in Figure 6.5, these versions of 'idealised' children will become important in the discussion in the next chapter, where the creations of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through affect are examined, through the perceived difference between Montessori preschools and other sites.

Figures 6.5: Idealised children during indoor and outdoor tasks



Both Wardman et al. (2010) and Gottschall et al. (2010) describe this tendency to utilise action-shots or 'real photos', which "normalise and naturalise activities as 'real', shifting focus away from their function as constructed and idealised" (Gottschall et al., 2010, p. 23). Through the association of specific words or images with various social and cultural references (for instance, most depictions being of white boys), metaphors, and so on, providers arguably aim to produce what Williamson (1978) had referred to as 'transfer of meaning', where the metaphor becomes the product (Maguire et al., 1999). In this case, order, cleanliness, concentration and economic comfort become Montessori. And, in turn, Montessori promises to produce idealised versions of children, albeit very gendered and classed ones.

6.5.3 The boy as a worker and the girl as a domestic carer

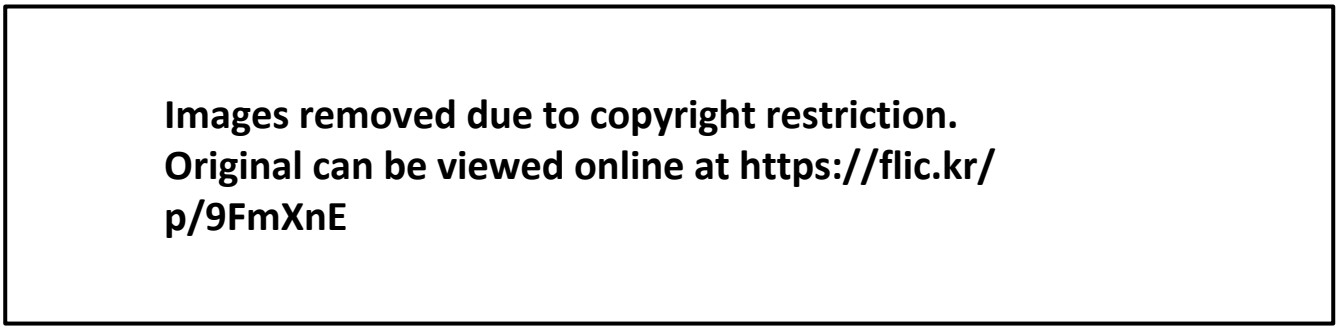
The third theme that emerged from this analysis is linked to the fact that the concept of play was completely absent across all the websites examined. Indeed, not only did the notion of play-based pedagogy not appear at all in the websites analysed; the only two times that the word *play* was mentioned was in contexts which opposed it critically to the idea of children's work. For example, on the website of Preschool B, we find the statement "such experience is not just play; it is important work *he* must do to grow" (emphasis added), and as can be seen in the following phrase on website A: "the children work with the materials, they do not play with the toys!" (Preschool A), which juxtaposes the concepts of 'work and materials' to those of 'play and toys', clearly favouring the former. Quotes such as the following exemplify this:

> The harder I work, the smarter I get (Preschool A)

> Be nice. Work hard. Achieve excellence (Preschool D)

Once again, this dichotomy is evident also in visual terms. When portrayed inside, the children are always using the specific Montessori materials, either aimed at promoting either academic learning (in which case, the photographs feature mostly boys) or at learning life-skills/domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, or doing laundry (portrayed predominantly through girls using little domestic utensils). This is reflective of the focus on work rather than play in current neoliberal education, where children are prepared to be future efficient workers.

Figure 6.6: Children 'at work' using life-skills material



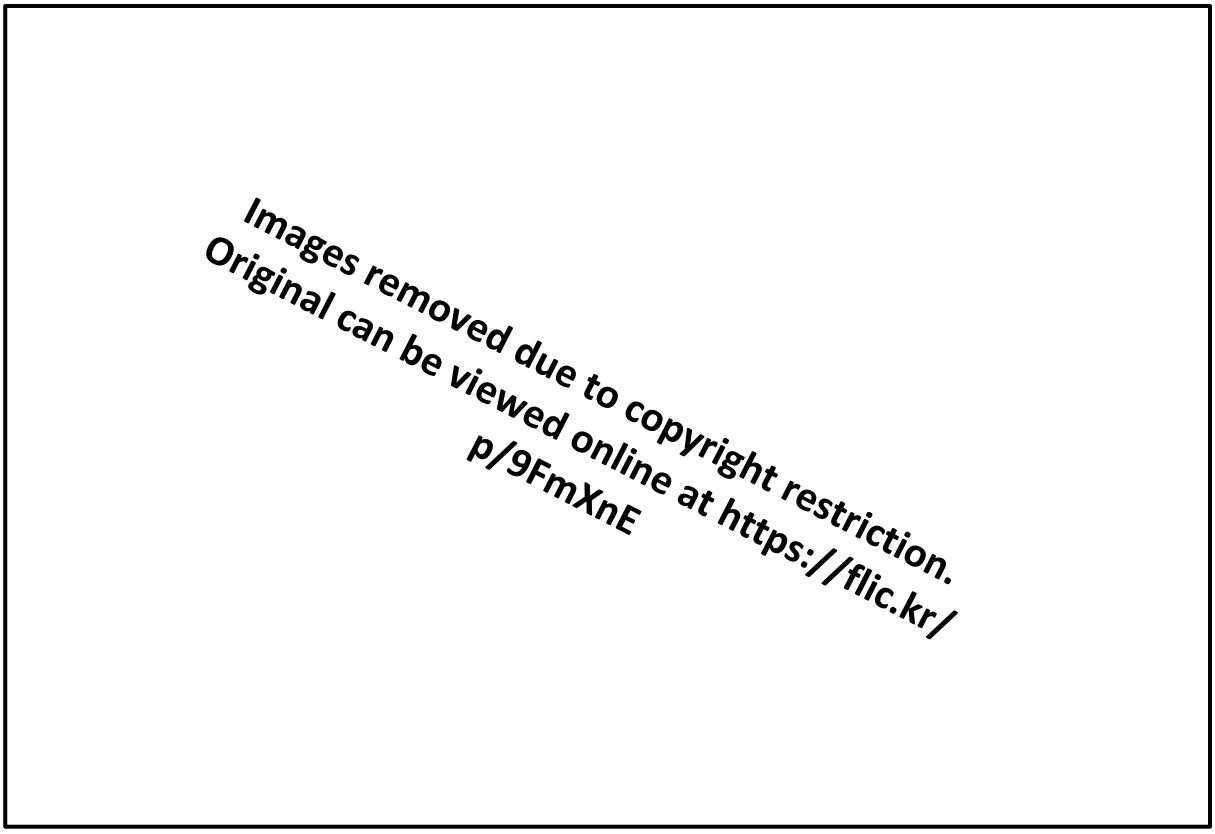
Similarly, when the (predominantly) boys are 'working' outside, they are either building with masculine tools or working in little sheds. This is a stark contrast to the use of toys such as, for example, dolls, balls, tricycles, building blocks or cars, which children might commonly use in child care centres.

Figure 6.7: Gendered roles depicting girls inside doing domestic chores and boys working outside

Images of focused children juxtaposed with captions that reiterate success are present across all the websites. The children are all depicted as heavily engaged in highly academic activities (like mathematics, sciences, geography, logical and abstract thinking) and displaying a strong sense of

both self-control and self-gratification, which persuades viewers that by choosing a Montessori preschool their children will achieve happiness and satisfaction. Visually, this is echoed in the close-up of the children looking either very happy and smiling, or deeply concentrating and displaying an intense air of satisfaction (see Figure 6.8).

Figure 6.8: Children deeply engaged in academic activities



This is interesting, seeing that, whilst it is true that, in Italian, Dr. Montessori referred to the children's learning as work (*il lavoro*), she did not intend work as "an effort done in order to achieve a result" or "as duties performed regularly for wages or salary" (Perica, 2018). Rather, she used the term to refer to a child's "useful activity" (*attivita' utile*), "a freely chosen activity or task within a learning environment, particularly one requiring sustained effort or continuous repeated operations" Lupi (2016, p. 115). This sub-theme is examined more deeply below.

6.5.3.1 Play versus Work: learning approach OR neoliberal marketing

The notion of the child as a worker was also linked to the completely absent notion of play in the websites. This stands in stark contrast to most Western ECE policy and practice which sees play-based pedagogies as an integral part of learning. Play as a natural vehicle for learning is generally viewed as central to most Western ECE theories, with various studies confirming the presence of discourses about the importance of play in the literature. For example, in an analysis of ECCs'

philosophy statements, Gould and Matapo (2016) noted that 70% of the materials they examined contained references to play as a crucial element for learning, and argued that early childhood services continue to be strongly influenced by play-based approaches (p. 54). Similarly, Smyth (2014) found that, within texts offering parents advice on how to optimise their children's cognitive development, the centrality of play to learning was emphasised (p. 15). Today, the importance of play-based education continues to be a privileged discourse within ECE texts.

This was particularly interesting to me, seeing that, whilst it is true that, in Italian, Dr. Montessori referred to the children's learning as work (*il lavoro*), she did not intend work as "an effort done in order to achieve a result" or "as duties performed regularly for wages or salary" (Perica, 2018). Rather, she used the term to refer to a child's "useful activity" (*attivita' utile*), "a freely chosen activity or task within a learning environment, particularly one requiring sustained effort or continuous repeated operations" (Ruggieri, 2017). In fact, Maria Montessori strongly believed that play was an indispensable activity for children; she simply preferred to refer to it as 'a child's job' (Montessori, 2005). She promoted the idea that children work to grow, and the notion that play (work) helped children to achieve internal discipline, and argued that a playful task or activity that was intentionally chosen and independently carried out by a child, would unquestionably engage their full attention and concentration, particularly through practice and repetition (Montessori, 1991, 1999a, 2005; Ruggieri, 2017). On this subject, Dr. Montessori wrote: "the child is a lover of intellectual work, chosen spontaneously, independently and freely" (Montessori, 1999b, p. 329).

She understood children's play as "the work of the child to create the adult" (Standing, 1998, p. 143). However, the choice to use the word work in this observation was based on her belief that the main function of children's activities was to help the child 'work towards becoming an adult', as this was the child's essential purpose. She wrote: "Adults work to finish a task, but the child works in order to grow and is working to create the adult, the person that is to be" (Standing, 1998, pp. 143-145). Such experience is not 'just play'; it is work "he must do in order to grow up!" (Montessori, 2005, p. 143).

Despite what might appear from the websites analysed, Dr. Montessori never considered play as irrelevant; she was simply convinced that, all too often, adults misunderstand or undervalue the motivation behind a child's chosen task/activity, and thus feel free to interrupt the child who is 'only playing' (Lupi, 2016; Montessori, 1991, 1999a, 1999b; Ruggieri, 2017). It is therefore argued here that the notion of work — as proposed in the websites — and the resulting position of children as

workers, might be part of a discursive misconstruction, deriving from the desire of the preschool to promote certain values and qualities that align quite comfortably with neoliberal ideals and discourses.

The key here is the Italian word *gioco* — play — which derives from the Latin *iocus*, i.e. joke). Therefore, Dr. Montessori's choice to define a child's playful activity as *lavoro* (job, labour, work), stemmed from her desire to give the right amount of importance and respect to the activity that the child independently chooses to do, through which the child is working towards the 'construction of the self, rather than simply playing' (*più che giocare, lavora alla costruzione di sé*) (Lupi, 2016; Montessori, 1999a, 1999b). In sum, Maria Montessori was highly respectful of children's play, which is why she preferred to use the word 'work' when referring to it. Her decision stemmed from her desire to show the respect owed to a child's effort and motivation during his/her process of growth and development (Montessori, 1991, 1999a, 1999b; Ruggieri, 2017).

In contrast, it could be argued that, by being juxtaposed to the notion of play, the term work has been (mis)used in the websites analysed, as if to convey to potential customers a feeling of superiority in an attempt to gain a marketing advantage. This could align with what some scholars have referred to as the increasing schoolarisation of ECE (Moss, 2009; Pardo & Woodrow, 2014; Sims, 2017), whereby the notion of learning-through-play is being replaced by concepts such as education, work and development, which are closely linked to values underpinning neoliberal theories of school readiness. Some scholars have argued that this shift in language (and practice) is putting children in a constant binary with adults (Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 56) and arguably contesting some dominant discourses and social practices in ECE. It is perhaps worth questioning, then, whether the usage of the term work in the websites analysed in this study is a genuine attempt to stay true to Montessori's language (tainted, perhaps, by a case of (mis)translation), or whether it is part of a larger neoliberal discourse, aimed at constructing particular versions of students and recruiting 'good parents' who might feel compelled to ensure that their children are school-ready from a very young age. This leads me to the last theme, namely the schoolification of early childhood, which I discuss below.

6.5.4 The schoolification of ECE: issues with the purpose of ECE

The perceived importance of school readiness was another dominant discourse that emerged from this analysis. This is particularly interesting because, within the ECE literature, one of the common criticisms of neoliberalism is that the fundamental values of this economic theory sit in stark

contrast to those ECE values centred on the nurturing and caring aspects of early childhood (Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 52). In particular, it is argued that neoliberal changes have negatively reshaped the political landscape of early childhood politics (May, 2009, p. 276), leading to the undesirable adoption of school-like practices and values in early childhood institutions (Bradbury, 2018).

A concern in the literature is that such focus on schoolification and on preparing children for school has happened at the expense of play (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016), a critique which aligns with my analysis of the use of the word 'work'. It is argued that the re-positioning of children as economically productive resources has resulted in pressures to assist them to "become school-ready from birth, despite the fact that school attendance is five to six years away" (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 67). These pressures are part of the affective flows which feature in some of the websites, and which exploit parents' fears of "leaving their children at a disadvantage", and resulting in assertions that "school-readiness has received a lot of focus among parents recently, and with good reason – as we know that children who start school behind, tend to stay behind" (Preschool D). Statements like these are designed to tap into parents' anxieties, and contribute to affect moving bodies to make certain choices. For example, Preschool E promises to "help children become school-ready through strong emphases on emerging literacy and numeracy skills and support the children in their acquisition of the skills they will need in their formal education".

Further, great attention is given to the crucial role and ability of the preschool teachers in preparing children for school (and beyond), and to the idea that the Montessori method is the most suitable approach to ensure children would be school-ready. For example, Preschool D stresses that "as the child approaches four years of age, we are all faced with the big decision of where to enrol them for their all-important kindergarten/preschool year to prepare them for school" (Preschool D).

Terms such as 'curriculum', 'subjects', 'spelling', 'grammar', and 'abstract reasoning' were present in most websites. For example, Preschool F promised to "prepare your children for later abstractive reasoning as well as the reading skills necessary for school", as well as stating that "subjects such as geography, biology, art and music are presented as extensions of language activities and are integrated into the environment as part of the curriculum" (Preschool F). Similarly, Preschool A advertises that:

> in the preschool room, your child will be exposed to subjects such as: geography, biology, botany, zoology, art and music. Indeed, your child will gain knowledge of the great Master of Art and music, and they will experience poetry in language and literacy. (Preschool A)

The concepts of literacy and numeracy were also predominant, not only through text but also in images (see Figure 6.9. Five out of the six websites contained statements about supporting children in their development of literacy and numeracy skills and preparing children in these 'core areas' necessary for their transition to formal school. Preschool B offered a: "hands-on curriculum with strong focus on formal spelling, grammar, maths and pure science", and Preschool C promised to "provide the best foundation for life-long learning and prepare the children for future schooling", focusing in particular on "sequential learning in all the core curriculum areas such as literacy and numeracy".

Figure 6.9: The schoolification of ECE

Similarly, Preschool A offers "a curriculum with a strong emphasis on emerging literacy and numeracy skills as part of the school transitioning program" (Preschool A), and Preschool E assures a "strong emphasis on emerging literacy and numeracy skills, in order to support the children in their acquisition of the skills they will need in their formal education". In an effort to highlight the crucial importance of the early years, Preschool C even offered a "limited number of spaces [available] for children *aged between 2 and 3 years"* who are considered "capable, independent and ready to transition into the preschool classroom" (emphasis added, Preschool C).

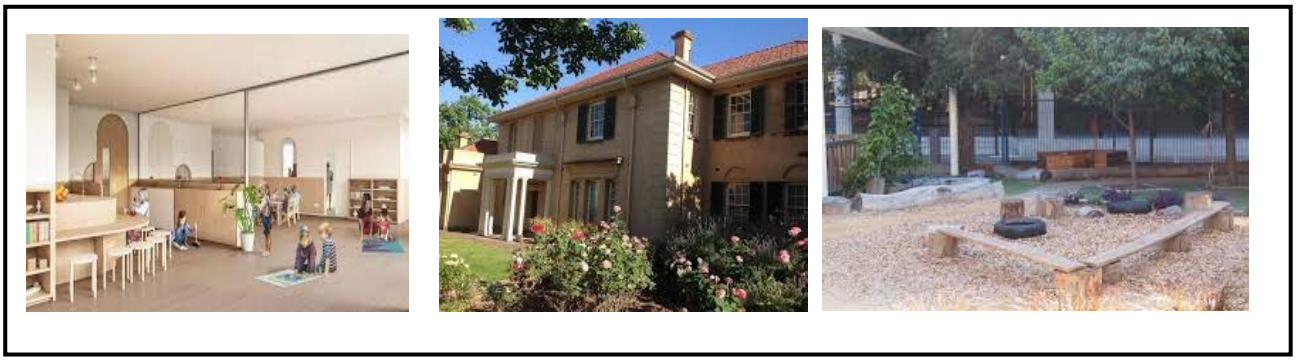
Figure 6.10: The schoolification of ECE

Images removed due to copyright restriction. Original can be viewed online at https://flic.kr/p/9FmXnE

The theme of schoolification was visually perceptible, both through images of very neat, prosperous-looking classroom environments, furnished with child-sized tables and chairs, and featuring various learning materials, and through the fact that, in four out of six websites, the children wear a uniform (entailing a T-shirt and some shorts, which, again, could denote a gendered preference). Arguably, these elements are preparing the children for a future in private schooling.

School readiness is also exploited in affective terms, with messages designed to tap into parents' fears and insecurities that their children will not be cared for as well as at home. Whilst the photographs of school-like environments evoke images of typically academic environments, it is also apparent that most preschools also want to portray their setting as a 'home', rather than 'only a preschool', and they do so by juxtaposing such photographs with words and images designed to produce particular emotions (such as care, comfort, safety) in viewers. For example, some preschools' exteriors are represented through photos of lovely old houses (Preschools C and F), often surrounded by manicured gardens, white porches, and beautiful fences (preschools A, D and E). Such images are designed to remind people of welcoming domestic environments, rather than of educational institutions (see Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.11: Warm, welcoming environments



This dichotomy is worth mentioning as it links in with arguments put forward by Henderson (2017), who explains that humans build dwellings to develop and enact certain localised activities. She notes that, historically, early childhood settings and schools have been built using different edifices and rooms, to reflect different theoretical perspectives and educational approaches, based on distinctive sets of principles and practices (p. 466). However, with the increasing schoolification of ECE, educators and providers tend to constantly referral to 'the classroom'. This was indeed the case in this analysis, which highlighted the common use of words like classroom, subject and curriculum.

6.5.5 The target audience

The analysis showed that marketers of Montessori construct specific academic and parental identities, reflective of neoliberal gendered and classed values, through their online promotional texts. In the websites, preschools position themselves as providers of schooling skills that will meet presumed parental expectations of independent, autonomous, future leaders. This, however, is done alongside a cleverly constructed reassurance for parents that their children will be in very well-resourced "homelike environments", where they will be safe and protected whilst learning the skills to be become "school ready" (Wardman et al., 2010, p. 250).

This dominance of neoliberal values was also evident through the analysis of the images in the website. Predominantly, the children depicted are boys, mostly white (90%), and able-bodied, often photographed whilst completing tasks independently and expressing a sense of self-accomplishment and satisfaction. Neoliberal marketing experts, thus, utilise specific images, texts and messages for a specific aim, which is to discursively produce what in Foucauldian terms is "specific truths that systematically form the objects about which they speak" (Foucault, 1969, pp. 49; and 135-140). As already found by scholars including Gottschall et al. (2010), Drew et al. (2016) and Wardman et al. (2010), the photo-realism used in all digital multimodal texts normalises and naturalises activities as real, shifting focus away from their function as constructed and idealised (Wardman et al., 2010). Such materials offer a promise of future success and happiness to prospective parents, reinforcing neoliberal arguments and discourses that, by selecting a private, Montessori preschool, parents are choosing optimal outcomes for their children (Davies & Bansel, 2007). In addition, they are also ensuring the instillation of specific desirable characteristics that, in today's education market, can only be acquired through the appropriate educational choice (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 6).

Every word, every promise, every example was studied and designed to market the Montessori method, and subliminally touch a chord with those parents who recognise themselves as (or at least aim to be) proper, informed, responsible parent. Parents are told that they have the power, freedom and responsibility to play the crucial role of consumer of early childhood education services on behalf of their children. Such a role entails making vital decisions between different institutions based on what skills and characteristics they promise to teach and instil in children; characteristics which are deemed particularly desirable for future success in a neoliberal context.

6.5.6 Mothers as the target parent

Interestingly, the Montessori parent was never mentioned explicitly in online texts; it is an invisible subject, a discursive figure who, however, forms an essential backdrop to all the websites. And whilst while the target audience might be neutral middle-class parents (Campbell et al., 2009), who "are held responsible for making [smart] consumer choices to maximise their opportunities and those of their families" (Sellar et al., 2011, p. 38), evidence suggests that the messages were, in fact, manipulated to reach mostly mothers. As will be discussed further in Chapter Eight, the use of highly affective language and images in the websites clearly suggests a focus on the emotional affective power of branding. The language and images utilised in the websites were intended to appeal to the more emotional and vulnerable side of mothers, by tapping more directly into their roles as loving carers, as well as their gendered social capital (Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015).

The aim of such emotive language and photos was to reassure mothers that, whilst choosing Montessori would ensure that the academic development of their children, their children would also be nurtured and loved in a home-like, safe and caring environment. More than half of the websites analysed utilise these visual shots to transmit a sense of warm hospitality, and couple the images with words – such as nurturing, caring and loving – designed to promote the idea that children would not just be in a preschool setting, they would be in a home-like environment (preschools C and F). This is particularly evident in websites C and F, where children enjoy a "caring, nurturing environment", and are promised to feel like they are "not part of a franchise, they are part of a family" (Preschool C). Such messages would certainly appeal more to mothers or female carers, who would possibly struggle already with emotions such as guilt and/or anxiety when leaving their children in the care of others. Similarly, by exploiting the anxiety of some parents to 'make the right choice' or 'be the good mother', some marketing messages were designed specifically to create a sense of urgency in parents, advising them to act swiftly.

In sum, what emerged from this analysis reinforced the onus on some mothers to be responsible and informed customers (Aitchison, 2006, 2010; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Reay, 1998a; Reay, 1998c; Reay, 2005b), whose responsibility to ensure the best educational opportunities for their children is not only paramount for their individual success, but also crucial for the welfare of their country. The enormous pressure put on some mothers to contribute to the prosperity and success of the nation, by choosing the best educational opportunities for their children, was a central theme throughout this analysis, with marketing messages strongly contributing to dominant discourses about parental responsibility, school choice and the neoliberal

(mostly masculine) child heavily present in most neoliberal literature on education. The social implications of these findings will be discussed at length in Chapter Eight, where all results of the study are combined and examined. Before then, however, is the last step in the research process, namely, the affective-discursive analysis of mothers' choice-making practices. This is undertaken in the next chapter.

6.6 Summary

The aim of this chapter was to explore how marketing regimes associated with neoliberal models of education contribute to the creation of specific environments which function as fertile grounds for particular discursive norms to flourish and circulate within some collectives of mothers. In turn, these norms give rise to powerful affective practices which move some mothers to choose a specific brand of preschool and invest in their children's future 'happiness and success', whilst simultaneously increasing entrenched social inequalities. The exploration took place through the discursive and affective analysis of six Montessori preschool websites, and revealed the construction of four distinct themes, reinforcing dominant discourses of choice and neoliberal subjectivities.

Central to the analysis was an exploration of the relationship between the Montessori brand and its defining features, and the way in which these affectively intensify the idealised representations of schooling subjectivities that some mothers expect/dream of when they choose this type of education. The analysis showed how the targeted manipulation of text and images used within the websites upheld and reinforced dominant discursive constructions, linked to specific subjectivities and designed to produce and contribute to the creation of specific affective flows. Through the strategic use of specific words and images, designed to stress the responsibility to foster preschoolers' cognitive development (Smyth, 2014; Wall, 2014), the themes expressed in the websites tend to portray idealised representations of children and parents, which are strongly classed, gendered and raced.

The next chapter concludes the analytical part of the thesis and investigates how mothers interpret and experience such representations. By carrying out an affective analysis of the parent questionnaires and combining the data obtained with the information from the previous analytical chapters, it explores mothers' affective flows in order to better understand how some mothers mediate and rationalise their choice to invest in a Montessori education, both financially and emotionally.

CHAPTER 7 CHOICE AND PARENTS' AFFECTIVE PRACTICES

What people feel may directly determine their decision making. (Zhao et al., 2021)

7.1 Introduction

The last two chapters have established some of the key elements of the field of preschool choice in South Australia. Chapter Five offered a socio-spatial analysis of how parents select a preschool and provided evidence that parents' capacity to choose is determined by factors such as class and social status, and that these are often closely related to geographical location. Chapter Six suggested that, in an increasingly neoliberalised market, advertising materials contribute significantly towards the establishment of specific discursive and emotional environments, which create the conditions for certain affective intensities to circulate and move mothers to make specific choices. The aim of this chapter is to examine parental choice making by exploring how some mothers exercise agency through their discursive-affective practices. By bringing together the concepts of affect and discourses, the chapter explores the way in which choice is mediated affectively, to raise greater awareness of how some mothers are moved into action. The exploration explicitly relies on a social relational understanding of affect to investigate the relational dynamics that unfold when two bodies (including material and representational bodies) intersect or interact.

The process is twofold; on one hand, the chapter "reads the questionnaires for affect" (Berg et al., 2019) and identifies emotion-bound vocabulary and discursive bodies which lead to the creation of shared emotional movements; on the other, it provides evidence of how, through such affective intensities, specific collectives are spoken into existence, and how they support and reinforce entrenched structures of exploitation through their affective-discursive practices. It is argued that, by embracing dominant neoliberal discursive norms, the Montessori collective exacerbates the positionality of those mothers who have less power/agency to choose, and that their practices result in boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion. By combining the analysis of the questionnaire texts with the information developed through the previous analytical chapters, the aim here is to excavate the political, classed and gendered entanglements of some mothers' emotional investments.

7.2 Brief review of the literature

This analysis takes places within the increasingly privatised and marketised preschool sector, where the advertising materials perused by parents (websites, pamphlets and other materials) are not only used as marketing tools to sell ECE services to potential and current 'clients'; they also tend to reflect (or resist) some prevailing ideologies in the broader early childhood political landscape (Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 51).

As previously discussed, dominant discourses about education and children's development in the current neoliberal context focus on the role of parents and children as consumers, and on the pressures on mothers to prepare children for school and for their future roles as active and responsible participants in the global economy. Through these discourses of marketisation, children are constructed as human capital and great importance is placed on their future economic worth and their potential contribution to the country's labour market (Moss et al., 2016). This is, in turn, mirrored in the language used in the materials parents access for information when they make their choices, and, it is argued here, is eventually reflected in their reasoning and in the way in which they rationalise their affective-discursive practices of choice.

7.3 Sampling

The same six preschools whose websites were analysed in the previous chapter were approached by email and invited to participate in this phase of the research. Four sites responded positively, one declined the offer, and one did not acknowledge the request. In total, 24 questionnaires (each featuring 20 questions) were returned and examined for this chapter. Participants had a choice to complete the questionnaire online (via a Survey Monkey link) or on paper, and all participants chose to respond electronically due to COVID restrictions.

The questionnaires included questions which could be broadly divided into three groups; the first group of questions related to the participants' socio-economic circumstances, as it was useful to better understand the demographic of the parents choosing Montessori preschools. The second group of questions explored parents' practices and reasoning during their choice process; questions thus related both to how they searched for a preschool and to how they made their final selection from the range of options. The last few questions related specifically to the parents' emotional state during their decision-making journey.

7.4 Methods of analysis (CDA, affective-discursive practices, reading for affect)

As discussed in Chapter Three, the literature most pertinent to the topics explored in this research attests to the fact that the affective and the discursive continuously intertwine in everyday life (Anderson, 2016; Berg et al., 2019; Ott, 2017; Rice, 2008; Wetherell, 2012; Zembylas, 2019b). Both affect and discourse, therefore, shape parents' identities and their decision-making mechanisms, and as such, they should be examined together, to produce a richer and more nuanced picture of how language and emotion connect when parents engage in the field of choice.

To this aim, the chapter combines two analytical frameworks: the first is founded in Fairclough's approach to critical discourse analysis (2003, 2015), already discussed in Chapter Three, and as such, it involves descriptive, interpretative and explanatory stages of analysis. The second framework draws from theories of affect — understood as a dynamic encounter between bodies. In particular, the methodology employed here employs Berg et al. (2019) technique of 'reading for affect' to analyse what Wetherell (2012) defines as parental affective practices. These are activities such as retrospective sense-making, the cultural interpretation of resources available to mediate affect, and the subject and identity positioning processes as well as to the stitching together of embodied states and meaning-making in flows of affect (Wetherell et al., 2018, p. 8). The chapter thus analyses parents' responses to the questionnaires, by reading them for affect (Berg et al., 2019) and exploring how some mothers' affective-discursive practices "fold or compose together bodies and meaning-making … by recruiting material objects, institutions, beliefs, pasts and anticipated futures" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 16) .

The result is a twofold analysis, which, on one hand, focuses on language and vocabulary, and their role in parents' meaning-making activities; and, on the other hand, also examines the relational and bodily dynamics of discourse and affect (Berg et al., 2019, p. 49). Findings are presented through a series of themes that have emerged, which can overlap and interweave, as they encompass both discursive affective elements.

Reading for affect involves identifying bodily relationalities within text, such as discourse bodies, by which collectives are spoken into existence, and then assigning bodily qualities to them (for example, the responsible mother OR the anxious or proud parent-consumer). In the analysis, therefore, affect is identified both through attentiveness to shared movements (a bit like flows or waves) but also through emotion bound vocabulary. Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) says that emotional language illuminates the affective dynamics in which bodies are enmeshed. However, this analysis

focuses particularly on what affect does in the context of choice, namely, how it increases or lessens some mothers' capacity to choose, how it moves to create collectivities, and how it flows within these collectivities to construct bonds, whilst also moving across society to exclude some people or bodies. The circulations of these affective flows, in turn, result in certain qualities being assigned to certain subjectivities, thereby exacerbating antagonisms and reinforcing systems of injustice.

7.5 Meet the (predominantly) mothers

When investigating the postcodes provided by participants and comparing them to the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) referred to in Chapter Five, the first thing that became evident was that all the ten postcodes cited in the questionnaire belonged to areas that fell between the 8th and 10th decile, with an IRSD score between 1019 to 1060. Therefore, the preschools attended by the participants' children were in areas with a high to very high socio-economic status, inhabited by families who have access to resources, money, and the Internet (in fact, every participant went online for their first search of a preschool).

Of particular importance for this research is the fact that, in a question where respondents were asked to rank the factors that led to their choice in terms of importance (from 1-5), cost was the *only factor* that did not get any fives as a rating among all participants (see Appendix 2). This reinforces what had already emerged in Chapter Five, namely that the parents who reside in the suburbs of Adelaide where the Montessori preschools are located (the least disadvantaged by the IRSD classification), have the benefit of constructing their class-identity within a broader context characterised by cultural, social and financial advantages. Therefore, this collective of parents is distinguished by a geo-identity which allows them the power and ability to choose without limitations.

In terms of family size, over two thirds of respondents belong to what can be categorised as small families ,having two children or less,[9] which can lead to speculations about the availability of resources to dedicate to only a small number of children. Further, the analysis of linguistic and cultural features revealed a variety of backgrounds, with some Chinese and Indian families participating in the survey, as well as some people of European background (Italian, Croatian and Greek) answering. In total, however, over 60% of the families were of Anglo-Saxon background (15 out of 24).

[9] 26% of families include three children, and only one family had four.

It is worth noting that, like gender and class, race is a key element in choice. However, as discussed previously, this is not a critical race study; therefore, due to limitations of space, I will not focus on the different ethnic groups comprising the small sample of participants. I am, however, at least drawing attention to the issue of race, as scholars recognise it as a vital element in the field of choice within a neoliberal education market, particularly in terms of access to resources (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017; Byrne & De Tona, 2019; Dowling & O'Malley, 2009; Elliott, 2006).

Ninety two percent of participants had tertiary qualifications, with 44% having completed an undergraduate degree, and 48% completing post-graduate qualifications. This very high level of education is another powerful indicator of the positionality of this cohort of parents, considering that, across Australia, only 12% of people, aged 15-74 hold postgraduate qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Only one participant had completed a diploma, and only one other had stopped studying after Year 12. Nearly half of the participants cited the importance of continuity with primary and secondary schools, which can arguably point to the notion that, for these families, early childhood education is considered an important beginning point of the children's didactic path, a central concept in dominant neoliberal discourse.

Last, as is indicated in Figures 7.1 and 7.2, 80% of parents were employed, either full time (40%) or part time (36%), with 4% currently on leave. Twelve percent described themselves as unemployed, and the remaining 8% answered 'other' to the current employment question. It is unclear whether they had chosen to stay home and attend mostly to domestic or child-rearing duties, or whether they were engaged in other activities, such as, for example, study.

Figure 7.1: Employment status

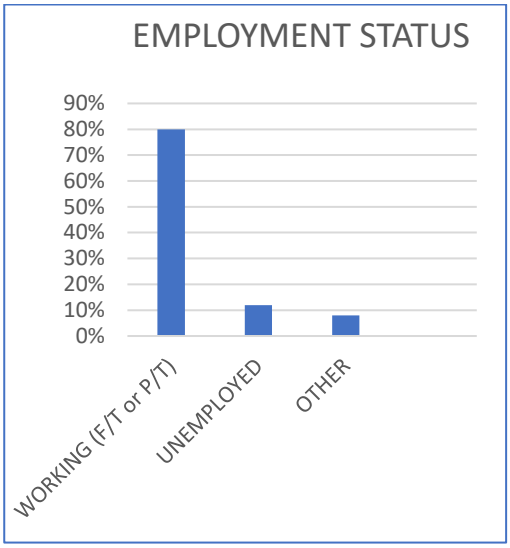
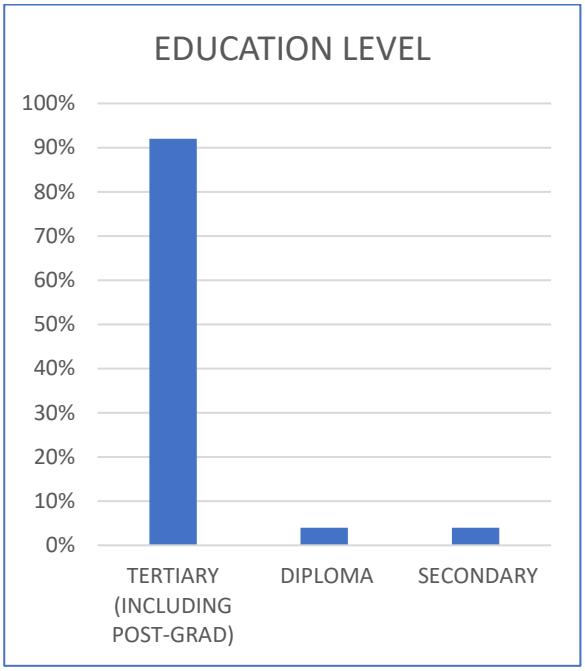


Figure 7.2: Education level



These findings are the very first important step towards providing a picture of who the 'consumers' of the selected Montessori preschools might be. They illustrate that the parents' subject positions in socio-economic relations locate them as being capable of particular emotional investments, which are instead denied to other 'bodies' of parents, situated in less advantaged positionings. From the responses, it can be deduced that these mothers are highly educated individuals, quite likely employed in professional jobs (given their level of education), and who consequently have access to money and resources. This grants them the benefit of choice.

Further, they form part of a relatively exclusive group of Australians (considering that, according to the ABS, just under 30% of Australian population held university qualifications in 2021), and this is a powerful indicator of their positionality in the Australian context of school choice. In affective terms, the way in which these parents are favourably positioned in social and economic relations situates them as a privileged collective, not only able to afford expensive education, but also free to be emotionally invested in their child's pre-schooling in ways that other parental bodies are not, due to their lesser social and economic circumstances.

In sum, the qualifications these mothers hold, the consequent professions they have, and their income set an important backdrop to the analysis, as they indicate a very advantaged situation compared to other parents in different localities. Arguably, these parents occupy an advantageous position within the Australian society; not only do they possess the freedom of not having to worry about issues such as expenditure, travel constraints, time and so on; they are more likely to possess

the privilege of not having to think about the meaning, power and implications of being privileged. This will become very important later in the chapter, when the findings are discussed in terms of affective intensities and their power to create boundaries and establish groups of exclusion and inclusion.

A crucial finding which emerged from this step of the analysis relates to the gender of the participants. When examining who completed the questionnaire, the numbers confirmed both existing research and the underlying assumption of this study, as only 4 participants out of 24 were males. As discussed throughout the thesis, this is not surprising as researchers have pointed out for decades now that, despite the undifferentiated notion of *parent* in the majority of the literature about parental involvement in education, it is mothers who carry the load of choice (Aitchison, 2006, 2010; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor et al., 2015; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2020; Reay, 1998a; Reay, 1998c; Reay, 2005b).

In line with existing studies, the analysis revealed that when examining the day-to-day participation of parents in their children's schooling activities (including choice of), it is primarily mothers who take on the main share of parental work (Bruckman & Blanton, 2003; Duncan et al., 2004; Fuller et al., 1996; Griffith & Smith, 1991; Hutchinson, 2011). For example, the four male participants in this study all stated that their decision to select a Montessori preschool was made jointly, with their wife (or partner). In contrast, out of the 20 women who completed the questionnaire, five made the decision to select a Montessori preschool by themselves, nine made the decision with their current partner (or father of the children), and the remainder consulted another family member or a friend. In addition, the majority of respondents who took the time to visit a website and/or peruse hard copy materials were women, and the ten participants who physically visited the preschools to gather extra information were also all females. Lastly, while women tried to respond in detailed ways, the males demonstrated a clear tendency to skip the more complex questions. This reinforces the notion that it is women who undertake the great majority of the school-related work in the home, and that mothers are positioned in existing discourses on parenting to "develop and deploy new repertoires of educational-oriented child-rearing competencies" (Proctor & Weaver, 2020, p. 46). For this reason, the remainder of the chapter focuses solely on the mothers' responses.

7.6 Reading mother questionnaires for affect

As explained in Chapter Three the Reading for Affect framework entails a focus on emotion-bound vocabulary in texts, and on the capacity of affect in discourse to align subjects not so much based

on conceptual and propositional knowledge, but rather in the registers of discourse bodies affecting and being affected. Reading for affect involves identifying bodily relationalities within text, such as discourse bodies, by which collectives are spoken into existence, and then assigned bodily qualities (for example, the proud Montessori mothers, versus the rambunctious childcare teachers).

Particularly relevant for this analysis is the underlying notion that the use of emotion words has serious implications for issues of power. In this research, power is the capability/privilege of having a choice and the social implications that it has in terms of creating 'otherness'. As Ahmed (2004a) explains, emotional language illuminates the affective dynamics in which bodies are enmeshed, and emotions "work to align some subjects with some others and against other others" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 117). Thus, by circulating "between bodies and signs, "affects move to create collectivities, construct bonds, and enhance some mothers' capacity to act, whilst at the same time excluding other groups or bodies of people by assigning certain qualities to them as 'the Other'.

As seen in Chapter Four, this approach consists of three main dimensions for analysis. The first involves identifying discourse bodies that are created in texts through associations of specific (emotion) words. This dimension of analysis, therefore, focuses on identifying emotion words and understanding to whom they are attributed, and, therefore, on understanding how bodies come to existence through these attributions (Berg et al., 2019, p. 52). Importantly, this dimension can emphasise not so much the bodily component, but rather the cultural component of an affection, which can be interpreted as "the demand for adopting a specific emotional repertoire or regime" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 55), or as was the case in this research, an emotional commitment to a specific set of social, cultural and political values and ideals (i.e. neoliberal).

The second dimension entails identifying and understanding how the different discourse bodies are connected or related to each other through affective dynamics of attractions and repulsions. In particular, as Ahmed (2004b) points out, this dimension focuses on the group dynamics that are presumably put into action through affective speech, and on the social implications of these dynamics . Finally, the last aspect of the analysis focuses on the materiality of texts: specific texts and language can take on bodily qualities and transform into *discourse bodies* themselves, and thus create a series of affective arrangements and transform relations in society (Berg et al., 2019). These three layers of analysis can intersect and occur simultaneously, as will be seen in the rest of the chapter, where the five themes that have emerged are discussed.

7.6.1 Mothers' affective engagement with neoliberal subjectivities

Berg et al. (2019, p. 54) showed how capitalising on emotions promotes affectively charged constructions of a subject positioning, giving way to an identification based on an affective basis, thus reinforcing a process of discursive inclusion and exclusion (Berg et al., 2019, p. 54). Further, they argued that, in the first dimension of analysis, it is not so much the bodily, but rather the social or cultural component of an affection that is emphasised. This became evident when examining the socio-cultural aspect of certain parental identities that have been constructed in neoliberal discourse, and to which have been attributed particular emotion words, such as, *good, proud, committed, selective*, and *caring* mothers.

The way in which certain desirable qualities (being a good mother means being responsible, careful and informed when making choices) have been assigned to those mothers — who find themselves choosing an early childhood education institution — is the first theme that will be discussed. This ascribing of feelings and emotions has, in turn, promoted the affective-discursive construction of a collective WE, which comprises those mothers who identify with such adjectives, and thus embrace specific choice practices (doing extensive research and being selective, for instance). For example, when discussing how they had they found the Montessori preschool their children currently attended, parents prided themselves on their research and selection methods. Responses such as: "I had researched Montessori well before choosing the preschool, and I had decided it was the best environment for our children", "I was quite familiar with the method", and "I knew a fair bit as I had read a number of books" are illustrative of a collective group of mothers who are doing research and being selective during their decision-making process.

Part of belonging to this responsible and informed collectivity also entails other emotional experiences, such as feeling the anxiety and nervousness caused by the pressures of making the right choice. Ahmed explains that while affects (as unqualified forces) and emotions (as the individual experience of an encounter with affective flows) can be theorised as separate, in everyday life, affects and emotions actually "slide into each other; they stick, and cohere, even when they are separated" (Ahmed as cited inAnwaruddin, 2016, p. 387)

So, while the methodological approach used here theorises that affect and emotion are separate phenomena, it also recognises that, in people's lived experiences, they often collide. This was evident, for example, when examining the last set of responses in the questionnaires, which dealt specifically with mothers' emotions during the decision-making process. While many mothers

described the process of choosing with positive emotional language such as: “it was exciting for me” and “it was pleasant and exciting”, others used more negative language and defined choosing as “quite stressful because of the uncertainty”; “I was slightly nervous”, “the process of waiting was stressful”; and “I found it anxiety inducing”.

These emotions are naturally part of a heightened state, resulting from both the excitement and the pressure surrounding the process of choosing for those who identify as a responsible and informed collective. Indeed, the burden of maximising children’s potential through the appropriate early childhood setting is a common cultural component of the neoliberal discourse, which tells us that, as accountable mothers, our choices are critical, as they have long-term consequences for the future success, not only of our children, but of our society as a whole.

In a context where early childhood is characterised as ‘the most important part of a child’s life’, or ‘the most crucial years in a child’s life’ in most educational discourses, and where early childhood education is constructed as an investment for the future, it is hard not to feel worried and succumb to stress and anxiety about our choices of preschool. Through an affective lens, this phenomenon is representative of the dimension of analysis linked to the materiality of discourse, whereby language and rhetoric transcend the purely textual form and become translinguistic phenomena within society (Berg et al., 2019, p. 55). They become discourse bodies in themselves, and thus gain the power to affect and be affected.

In sum, whilst in the case of this analysis, the specific emotion words used by mothers in their responses were not attached to specific actors (which has been found, for instance in other research on affect, where certain emotions had been ascribed to specific people), it could be argued that the emotion words emphasised the cultural component of an affection, namely, the emotional commitment expected from mothers, as well as the associated satisfaction and pride in being able to choose, alongside social pressures resulting from the (affective) pressures put on them by neoliberal discourses.

7.6.2 Mothers’ feelings and rationalisations about choice

The second theme that emerged in the analysis deals with mothers’ hopes and expectations of preschool education, and with the affective-discursive practices they engage in when rationalising their choices. Whilst this theme was particularly illustrative of the impact that the neoliberal discourse body has on mothers’ priorities and concerns when it comes to the function of early

childhood education, it also demonstrated how discourse bodies are related, by showing how, when a social collective develops bodily qualities, it can create dynamics of repulsion.

The most common wish for mothers was for their children to develop *school readiness*. In terms of language, phrases such as "learning to reason", "having a structured (school-like) day", "learning numeracy and reading skills", "getting used to the school environment", and "problem solving" was used in 75% of the responses. This type of vocabulary was closely followed in numbers by language directly linked to neoliberal discourses of independence, confidence, and autonomy. Very striking here was the absence of the concept of 'learning through play', which is such a fundamental tenet of early childhood education. Indeed, only *one* mother mentioned play as something they wished their child did in preschool.[10]

This theme revealed the direct connection between marketing messages and mothers' desires for those skills and characteristics heavily promoted by neoliberal discourses, thus highlighting the power of the materiality of discourse. These wishes and expectations were expressed, firstly, by using language that directly reflects discourses of individualism (education that promotes independence, responsibility, self-regulation, and so on), and secondly, through the reproduction of discourses about the role and quality of early childhood education. For example, when recounting the factors that were important in their final selection, mothers had clearly adopted and appropriated the language of neoliberalism, by mentioning, in order of importance: first, the Montessori teaching philosophy and method (often not because they knew exactly what it entailed, but rather because they had "heard about it through recommendations"); second, staff qualifications and skills (they needed to hold university degrees), their morals and values, and their attitude (they needed to look friendly, BUT in control of the children); the ratio of teachers to students (which needed to be "high" or "recommended by the guidelines"); and finally the size of both the classrooms and the setting in general (had to be small).

Pointing out this appropriation of language is central to the examination of mothers' affective-discursive practices for three reasons. First, it shows the power of intertextuality in affecting

[10] Language that related to emotional well-being was also important. For example, words like "learn to self-regulate emotions", "experience a sense of belonging", "feel happy and cared for", "nurturing environment", and "to have fond memories of preschool and school in general" appeared in 43% of responses. Similarly, social skills were a common hope for parents, appearing in 69% of the answers. However, it was not generally specified what types of social skills parents wished for, other than in three responses, where language such as "make friends", "how to communicate", or "to relate to/interact with others" was used.

individual subjects, who are reading and interpreting texts (in this case, marketing materials containing government frameworks and policy-papers language), and who are, in turn, using that very language not to just merely reflect social reality, but rather to construct it.

Second, using an affective lens demonstrates the bodily qualities of discourse and how, as a body, discourse can affect individuals and their emotional experiences (and move mothers to choose a Montessori preschool). By embracing the language typical of neoliberal discourses of schoolification, mothers were able to identify themselves with the 'good mother' persona, whilst simultaneously rationalising their affective choice of Montessori. For example, 75% of mothers used the words "I felt that my child would be learning a lot and be stimulated" or "he would become ready for school" to describe their decision-making process, whilst also drawing clearly on their emotional experience that the child "would be safe, cared for and loved" (which are explicit emotional words).

Last, the appropriation of neoliberal language reveals the strength of affect in discourse to create groups — or collectivities — of inclusion and/or exclusion. For example, by shifting the focus on those factors that mothers did *not* want and by concentrating on the vocabulary mothers used to describe what they did not want for their children, what became evident was the value-laden language used to create a very negative image of childcare centres. The Montessori preschools they chose were, in the participants' eyes, very different from "overpopulated CCC, with clearly not enough educators". Montessori preschools were often described as "small, clean and cosy", "with a structured and controlled environment", "with the teacher in charge", and where the staff are "in control, cohesive and skilled".

In contrast, other centres were described in undesirable ways, juxtaposing both the environment, structure and the teachers in pejorative ways. Comments like "the staff were too rambunctious" and "the children were dirty and out of control" were quite common among mothers not wanting their preschool to resemble a Child Care Centre (CCC). These classed comments will be examined later in the chapter, through a discussion of what affects do, in terms of assigning certain qualities to certain bodies. In turn, this validation of certain positionings and/or rationalisations allows some mothers to become part of collectivities which create bonds, whilst simultaneously excluding some people or bodies, thus exacerbating hostilities and injustices.

By appropriating the neoliberal, marketised language of promotional materials, mothers engaged in affective-discursive practices in ways that justify and vindicate their choice, which, in turn,

contributes to the affective sensorium of the neoliberal world of ECE choice. As Böhme says (cited in Ott, 2017, p. 16), "While atmospheres involve the flow of affective intensities across/among bodies within a space, the felt experience of those flows are rendered subjectively as emotions, which, in turn, are immediately enfolded back into the space as affective flows".

7.6.3 The affective power of educational branding

The theme of the affective power of branding focused attention on the materiality of texts in considering how specific linguistic material (choice of vocabulary, rhetoric, advertisement slogans, jingles, and so on) is formed and reproduced within discourse, and how, in turn, this results in affective arrangements. For example, comparing the language and vocabulary used by mothers in two separate questions, the first relating to what they knew about the Montessori method before choosing the preschool, and the second relating to what they observed after their child(ren) started to attend the preschool, it became evident that the 'language of neoliberalism and marketisation' was being appropriated over time.

By being immersed in the Montessori context, mothers who had admitted to knowing nothing or very little about this educational method earlier had started to appropriate the language used both in the websites and by the educators (Berg et al., 2019, p. 56). For instance, when originally asked about the reasons why they had chosen a Montessori preschool, rather than a public kindergarten, only seven mothers (out of twenty) had answered that it was due to their affinity towards the Montessori method. Out of these seven mothers, three had 'some or little' prior knowledge of the approach ("it builds independence and confidence" and that "it teaches learning reasoning and structure", "different age of children, use of different material aids, and "it's a hands-on method'), and the other four stated that they had done some research about it before choosing the centres. Nine mothers admitted to knowing absolutely nothing.[11]

The data provided evidence that there was no use of Montessori-specific language in any of the responses to the initial questions, and what emerged was that the great majority had chosen these settings because they had been either recommended by friends, or because of their reputation. However, when mothers were asked what they were observing and liking about the preschool in a later question, those same participants who had claimed to "have minimal knowledge" or "to know absolutely nothing" about Montessori, started to use vocabulary which is distinctive either of the

[11] Some people answered with *general statements*, such as "its different", or "I knew the general philosophy" (without explaining) AND others had *wrong convictions*, such as that its focused on nature – which is much more specific to the Steiner or Reggio Emilia approaches).

Montessori method or of the neoliberal discourse. They had started to appropriate the language that was used either in the setting or on the websites to make meaning and construct knowledge about the Montessori approach.

For example, one mother who had admitted to having "minimal knowledge", answered that she noted that "they focus on the individual child and their interests, they have high level of respect, and use the *work cycle*" (Mother 3, emphasis added). Similarly, other mothers who "didn't know anything at all" or "had no knowledge at all" prior to enrolling their child, noticed a "a large focus on the individual child, their personal independence and responsibility" (Mother 11); that "children are taught to be independent", "have freedom to choose", and that "the learning is individually tailored" (Mother 12); or that they are "using practical life skills" (which is a typical Montessori learning area) (Mothers 8, 12, 17). Mother 12 also noticed the focus on "the core areas of numeracy and literacy, science and culture". Finally, many responses included language such as "structure, strong sense of the self, attempting things for themselves, growing confidence and learning", which are all important elements of the larger neoliberal discourse on schoolification of early childhood education.

This theme not only demonstrated how discourse bodies affect individuals in their constructions of reality; it also showed the power of discourse in creating affective arrangements and emotional alignments. The Montessori method is often cited in descriptions of individuals who, having learned in Montessori settings, have grown up to be famous and successful people (for example: author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, well-known chef Julia Child), or founders of internet companies such as Amazon or Google (i.e. Jeff Bezos, Larry Page and Sergey Brin). Montessor is often described as an 'elite' educational approach, with British royalty and/or various celebrities openly advertising that their children attend such settings (France-Press, 2016). As such, Montessori is often positioned as a famous educational brand or logo, thus carrying certain connotations in terms of emotional promises of success and importance for those mothers who choose it. Yet, parents do not necessarily know what the actual approach entails, and what is specific or unique about that way in which it is theorised and/or put into practice in the classroom.

Some participants in this research were an example of this; they admitted to choosing a Montessori preschool either because of its reputation, or because it had been recommended by friends. And when they visited the setting for the first time, more than half admitted to only paying attention to the appearance of the environment. This was very interesting because, while they claimed in their

responses that the most important factors affecting their choice were teachers' qualification, ratios of teacher to student, size of the classroom and so on (all words belonging to the neoliberal discourse body affecting them), when it came to judgement, their actions reinforced and supported the neoliberal notion that what is important is the *aesthetics* of institutions (not so much the essence), as previously discussed by scholars (see, for example, Gottschall et al., 2010; McDonald et al., 2012; Symes, 1998; Wardman et al., 2010).

In sum, an affective analysis of how mothers engage with discourses of marketisation and educational branding demonstrated that, through their practices, mothers perpetuate this 'maintenance of the image' culture, whilst also actually actively constructing Montessori education in ways that fit that image.

7.6.4 The establishment of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion

The establishment of boundaries is a powerful example of how effective the intertwinement of language and affect is in creating discourses that determine social positionings and relations, particularly in terms of exclusion. The analysis focused on responses that dealt with factors affecting mothers' decisions and particularly on those elements that influenced them not to choose a particular setting. What transpired at first sight was the first analytical dimension of affect in discourse, namely, its potential to "align subjects and to provide a framework of alignment that is not so much grounded in conceptual and propositional knowledge, but rather in the registers of affecting and being affected" (Ahmed, 2004b).

This alignment was created in two ways in the mother's responses. First, through the establishment of a collective WE (the collective body made of good, responsible, informed mothers, who *can* choose a specific type of education, and one which carries a judgement of being superior in quality), versus the other, in this case, those mothers (deemed morally inferior) who are presumably content with the "overcrowded, chaotic, dirty centres" (according to twelve separate responses).

To belong to this collective, one must be emotionally committed to values such as independence and responsibility, and must understand the value of school readiness. One, therefore, must embody the affective-discursive subject positions provided by the dominant neoliberal, hegemonic discourse (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 53). This WE, therefore, does not include those mothers who, potentially, cannot afford a choice, and send their children to what are viewed as "understaffed and chaotic centres". Through its bodily qualities and potential to affect, therefore, this collective WE

creates and reproduces certain dynamics of repulsion (by othering the mothers who are not committed to the same moral values of independence, autonomy, etc).

The second way in which the alignment was created was through the materiality of discourse itself, where, for example, the language and vocabulary of the 'schoolification' of ECE became a discourse body in itself, thus possessing property to affect and be affected. As previously discussed, according to this dimension of analysis, language surpasses the written form, and words and sentences are transformed so that, for example, slogans and jingles are no longer just advertisements, rather they become discourse bodies in themselves. As can be seen in the Table 7.1, the language utilised to promote school readiness, as well as the words used in ECE discourse, have been embraced and adopted by mothers, thus gaining a materiality which allows them to affect.

Table 7.1: Language comparison between the collective WE and the collective Other

The Montessori collective WE	The collective other
desire for a small, cosy, clean place	"too many children, not enough order, and not enough control"; "dirty places with lots of children"
children learn in a "controlled and structured environment"	"with lack of control of children and a lack of structure", "a chaotic mess"
good teacher-child ratio	"clearly understaffed"; "not adhering to government ratios"; "clearly didn't have time for all the children"
teachers must seem "cohesive, in control, skilled and calm	the teachers are too "rambunctious"
Children learn school curriculum"; "children benefit from individual teaching methods"; "learn about literacy and numeracy"; "preparing them for school"; "learn problem-solving and to reason"	"children looked disengaged"; "children play too much"

As demonstrated here, when used by a social collective with bodily qualities, language, is critically important in establishing the characteristics of the Other and creating dynamics of repulsion (Berg et al., 2019). Even when people are unaware of this, by utilising certain words and vocabularies, they contribute to the reproduction of existing discourses, thus also reproducing and reinforcing existing systems of exclusion and inclusion through, for instance, the application of moral judgements to certain situations that are actually systemic and thus outside of people's control. This will be discussed more in detail in Discussion chapter of the thesis.

7.6.5 The implications of affective-discursive practices on the purpose and quality of ECE

The last theme deals with the role of affective-discursive practices in constructing the function of early childhood education, as well as its definition of quality. What emerged from the analysis was the notion that, to be deemed a 'quality' preschool by participants, a setting needed to fulfill a set of specific criteria, which coincidentally reflected and reproduced dominant neoliberal discourses about quality education. Language relating to school readiness, individual and autonomous learning, literacy and numeracy, teacher-student ratios, and teachers' qualification and accountability was prevalent in nearly every response. The idea that teachers' skills and knowledge and individualised curriculum are the only determinants of quality education are part of the larger neoliberal discourses of schoolification, accreditation, reliability, etc., and ignore a whole range of other crucial factors that impact the quality of education (such as funding, location, socio-economic status of families).

The focus on teacher's skills and qualifications, as well as the strong emphasis on student to educator rations are very important within an analysis highlighting both the productive function of discourse, and the power of intertextuality. This phenomenon was already noted in Chapter Six, where a semiotic-discursive analysis revealed that individuals are being affected by the neoliberal discourse body and are appropriating the language they see in the websites. This is representative of the way in which mothers, as subjects/agents, are reading marketing materials containing words and vocabulary presented by government policies, and then using that same language to construct their reality, thus reinforcing affective flows.

On an affective level, this appropriation at times happens without mothers considering the larger context within which such constructions occur, or the consequences that such reproductions have on existing societal structures. An example of this was the strong importance that mothers placed on small size and "appropriate ratios" as determining factors in their choices. These numeric values often seemed to be associated with descriptions of educators who "really cared and loved the children", "taught the children one-on-one" and "created a safe and engaging environment". Yet, these kinds of individual qualities and characteristics often have more to do with structural relations within a setting, than with individual qualities of a teacher. For instance, it would be interesting to witness the behaviour of those caring, loving, and engaging educators, if they were observed while working in what was deemed by mothers as "an overcrowded childcare", where they might perhaps work longer hours, whilst receiving less money and less support.

Further, whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss what constitutes quality in early childhood education, it is worth mentioning in an affective-discursive analysis as it arguably shows how the role and purpose of preschool have fallen trap to materiality of the neoliberal discourse body, which affects mothers (the collective WE) by making them think that their choices of a 'quality' Montessori preschool reflects their moral superiority and thus separates from those who simply accept preschool programs offered in other centres.

In turn, mothers' perception of what constitutes quality, and the choices that result from this perception, directly affect the role and purpose of preschool education. By embracing neoliberal discourses which focus so strongly on school readiness, the crucial early childhood practice of play-based learning has been gradually devalued, and the long-established practice of following and reinforcing children's interests and strengths has been fundamentally threatened (Brown, 2015). Instead, the neoliberal approach has reduced the purpose of preschool to preparing the children for the future by making them literate, independent, and capable of solving problems autonomously. In this context, learning outcomes that do not match those identified as part of universal curricula are arguably not celebrated or addressed, leading to what Giroux (2015) had described as the dangerous and threatening homogenisation of knowledge.

In summary, by identifying as a collectivity of selective choosers, and embracing the discursive norms and subjectivities available to them, these mothers are reinforcing dominant discourses of exclusion through an affective belief that they are making the best possible choices for their children. However, through their choices, they unintentionally perpetuate and reinforce underlying systemic injustices, and contribute to an image and understanding of society which positions the most structurally disadvantaged mothers as individuals who are morally at fault, rather than victims of an unjust socio-economic system.

7.7 Summary

The principal focus of this research is to explore the effects of neoliberalism and marketisation on South Australian preschools, and on parental choice-making in relation to preschools. In particular, by combining the concepts of affect and discourse, the research aims to investigate the ways in which some mothers understand and participate in the dominant neoliberal discourses of choice and how they affectively navigate the subjectivities that are constructed and sustained through them. Borrowing from Wetherell (2012)'s notion of affective-discursive practices, and capitalising on Berg et al. (2019)'s concept of body and its relational and dynamic aspects to analyse mothers'

responses has allowed me to overcome the conceptual divide between discourse and language on one side, and affect on the other. Examining the "relational affective dynamics between discursive enunciations and the discourse bodies that emerge from these enunciations" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 57) has permitted me to understand how social and discursive bodies are created and transformed through linguistic and material elements, and how these bodies offer individual subjects the opportunity to construct specific collectives, establish boundaries, and consequently embrace or exclude certain groups. In turn, this examination of the interaction of the bodily and affective dimensions of discourse has allowed me to study issues of power and social justice within the Australian preschool sector in a much more complex and nuanced manner.

In conclusion, by utilising the reading for affect approach, the research looked for and found emotion words, metaphors and analogies which involved bodies, vocabulary that indicated subjective feelings and experiences, and the materiality of discourse (whereby words and sentences gain a materiality and are given bodily power), and highlighted how affective relationships between different bodies are established through language. It explored not just explicitly described emotions, but rather the way in which affective forces move through mothers, intended as a collectivity, to develop and shape ideas and concepts that dictate how they think of themselves as subjects, and how they act in the establishment of boundaries that exclude others, who they deem as not part of their collective body.

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored how preschool choice is mediated within contemporary Australia through relations of gender, class, and discourses of neoliberalism, but also through affect as a productive force. The study has drawn on feminist poststructuralism to view choice, not simply as the desire or property of unfettered individuals, but as a cultural product shaped by various legacies and social relations, which an affective-discursive lens has helped to expose. From this perspective, preschool choice is fashioned through systems of representation (such as texts and images) but is also shaped by the affective practices in which individuals engage. The thesis has explored how affects pass through bodies (broadly conceived) like waves, becoming entangled with other structures, and moving such bodies to act in certain ways through a kind of emotional governance. The thesis has observed how bodies are not only *affected* by the emotional terrain of preschool choice, but also affect the field through their engagement in its emotional economy.

Using a combination of qualitative tools, the research has asked: How are parents influenced in their choice making? How are mothers, as target consumers of education, constructed through discourses of preschool choice? And what are the social implications of preschool choice? Moving on from the rational model of choice, the research has looked at these questions through a richer and more nuanced analytical approach, one which has also paid attention to parents' identity-formation practices, and to their emotional and affective routines. In this chapter, I return to the key research questions and utilise them as a framework to highlight the study's key findings.

8.2 Question 1: How are parents influenced in their choice making?

The research has provided evidence that choice is a very complex field, strongly determined by a multitude of factors. Key amongst these are the broader social and cultural structures within which we exist, the discursive circles and positions to which we have access, and the affective flows which circulate within them. Chapter Five argued that social aspects like gender, class and race often intersect with geographic location. Combined, these elements allow us a specific positionality in society, which, in turn, determines the discursive norms and subjectivities to which we can or cannot gain access. Therefore, the power of this positionality lies in its influence on the capacity to choose. The less constrained parents are, the more choice they have.

Further, the discursive norms and subjectivities that derive from specific positionalities are closely linked with affect. This is because, by embracing/inhabiting them, and by accessing the dominant discursive norms that exist within some collective bodies of parents, we are influenced in the social bonds and relations that we form, both amongst ourselves, but also towards others. In turn, such social exchanges and encounters allow for the surfacing and circulation of specific affects, resulting in the creation of boundaries and groups of inclusion and exclusion. And these affective forces or waves can work so efficiently precisely because they find fertile ground amongst parents who have already embraced certain discursive and collective bodies.

Within the field of choice, the identity of parents is not a fixed construct, but rather the product of continual and dynamic reshaping, often linked to the emergence of specific dominant discourses and affective practices. Further, as will be discussed further in Section Two of this chapter, the research has also illuminated the powerful impact of marketing techniques used by providers in today's neoliberal advertising regimes, which can become highly effective tools in influencing parental choice precisely because of existing discourses of identity formation and subjectivities linked to consumption and affect.

These findings are not new; scholars including Campbell et al. (2009), Campbell and Proctor (2014) and Preston (2018) have already argued that, in Australia, the private and independent sectors of education enrol a disproportionate number of students from the most advantaged backgrounds (Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013, p. 218). What is different in the current findings, however, is the level of education which is being affected by these dynamics. So far, research into school choice and school markets had highlighted this difference in enrolment numbers in the secondary sector. This study suggests that, in recent years, the 'neoliberal creep' has also reached the Australian preschool sector (Viggiano, 2019) , and that a specific type of parent body — the professional, middle-class mothers' body — is enthusiastically embracing market mechanisms that promote (pre)school choice policies.

However, on any given occasion, the choices that we make depend not only on our capacities for decision making, but also on the situation that we face and the particular dispositions for acting in various ways that we have acquired (i.e. on our positionality). And both that situation and those dispositions enter into our decision-making process via our mental properties (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 201), as well as via the messages that we receive from our environment. Elder-Vass (2012) explains that while these, at one level, remain biologically-based properties, at another level, they are the

product of our experiences, because our neural systems, our brains, alter in response to our experience. Our cultural, social and affective environments, therefore, directly impact on our choice-making. In other words, "our decision making, is both socially constructed and neurological" (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 220).

The opinions that we have about our situation, for example, depend both upon our sensory perceptions of that situation, and upon our categorical beliefs. And the dispositions that we have to behave in various ways are a product of our past social experience, "partly a sub-conscious product, absorbed as habitus from our experience of normative pressures that depend on our social position, and partly a product of decisions we have made about the best way to act in various circumstances" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 201).

Consequently, the actions that some parents take — through the choices they make — are multiply determined by interacting causal powers, including the causal powers of norm circles and affective forces, operating indirectly through the mental properties they produce in them. Their 'power' to make choices between conflicting pressures and desires is therefore the result of a range of influencing forces. Parents' sense of subjectivity is a key factor here, affecting the choices they make, but so are other elements, such as the discursive and normative pressures in their social context, and their awareness and understanding (or lack thereof) of the "levels of enforcement of these different practices in the various groups that form [their] social environment" (adapted from Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 202).

In affective terms, therefore, some parents' subjectivities impact directly on which collective bodies they can access or become a part of. In turn, the normative pressures within these bodies affect directly how they act. For example, only some mothers — through their privileged positionality — have the ability to access discourses of choice, which in turn allow them to participate in the 'Montessori body of parents'. They thus form their subjectivities based on the dominant discursive norms embraced by the Montessori collective, and through the power granted to them by their positionality, they feel the 'right' to judge other mothers who are more constrained in their choices, and deem them 'morally bad' or 'less caring'. Through this construction of 'the Other', such mothers — and the collective body they belong to — engage in the affective economy of preschool choice. Therefore, as some mothers (as a parental body) are affected by the specific discursive norms and affects circulating in some bodies, they also affect the field of choice through their behaviours and

attitudes, in a circular manner. This cyclical dynamic and the social implications of this affective economy of choice are discussed in detail in the last section of the chapter.

Some scholars have argued that affect can range in magnitude in terms of how much a body (broadly interpreted) can affect another body (Hage, 2002; Wise & Velayutham, 2017). An interesting finding in this research related to the importance that parents placed on word-of-mouth or recommendations during their choice-making process. While every participant admitted to using the internet for their initial search/location of the preschool, 74% percent said they relied only on word of mouth as the most useful tool when it came to the actual selection (final decision). Specific linguistic materials (in the sense of other people's opinions and recounts of their experiences) transcended the purely textual to become a very influential discourse body in itself, practically eliminating the role of other linguistic resources (such as online and hard-copy materials).

This example is useful for discussing two points: first, a discourse body can "bind other bodies and transform affective relations in society" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 55); and second, the degree to which a person is entangled in a reality contributes to the intensity of his/her relation to the social and symbolic fields within that reality (Hage, 2002, p. 193). In terms of affect, the Montessori parents are a collective body; they draw their discourses from dominant mentalities, from words of mouth and others' recommendations (which are in turn influenced by existing discourses) and are moving in mass, thereby influencing and affecting others by creating or increasing already existing social divisions. When these mothers buy the reputation of the Montessori establishment, they are reinforcing their privileged positionality, and therefore boosting their own reputation in their circles. In turn, this reinforces and feeds into the affective cycles, whereby specific forces, like waves, affect some people to act in specific ways, making them part of a specific affective environment which, in turn, affects others.

Therefore, while our capacity to be agentic subjects exists, the kind of subject or agent that we become is the outcome of our social interactions, especially the discursive norms and affective flows to which we are exposed. The amount of freedom we have in practice to pursue our own desires, for example, rather than subordinating them to social expectations, depends upon our social position and the prevailing norms regulating that position — gender norms being a prime example. What kind of subject we think we are, and thus which positional norms we find ourselves expected to conform to, is also the product of a series of social, discursive and affective interactions (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 202).

I highlighted this entanglement of various bodies (biological, discursive, political, social) in the continual emergence of choice in Chapter Seven, where I discussed how the Montessori body of parents is producing or reinforcing existing discursive bodies (about neoliberal education), and how affect has already formed the basis of this work. For example, I suggested that, even if the majority of mothers who chose Montessori know little about the actual method, they have been moved to choose a Montessori option (based on their subject positionality within classed/gendered social relations, which enables them the power of choice), through their engagement with advertisements and word of mouth, which itself carries a powerful affective charge that moves through social circles. In turn, they also engage in neoliberal discourses in ways that justify and vindicate that choice through co-opting and reproducing the marketised language of Montessori. In this sense, affect and discourse work in a cyclical manner: they influence each other, but also produce and reinforce each other, and in doing so, they contribute to the affective sensorium of the neoliberal world of ECE choice.

8.3 Question 2: How are mothers, as target consumers of education, constructed through discourses of preschool choice?

Question 1 explored the way in which positionality, the broader structures, and affect interact to influence parental choice of preschool. What emerged during the research is that discursive constructions, reinforced through advertising regimes which tap into people's emotions, play an important role in the field of choice. The analysis suggest that the marketing messages contained in the websites can be so effective in influencing choice, precisely because they find a fertile ground within which to do their work. It is argued here that, while such fertile ground is the result of neoliberal discourses of responsibility and choice, its power derives from the fact that it permits the circulation of affective flows, produced through idealised discursive constructions (or subjectivities) accessible only by some parents.

The discursive identity(ies) of the 'responsible', 'independent' 'parent-consumer, discussed in Chapter Two, are of particular importance in an analysis which interprets choice as an affective environment, within which individuals engage in certain routines and practices aimed at reflecting and maintaining specific values and moral qualities. These routines and relationships are important because they often reflect a desire to portray specific representations of responsible, actively-involved parents. These parental figures are frequently invoked in the neoliberal literature about individuals' responsibility to foster their preschoolers' cognitive development (Smyth, 2014; Wall, 2014) and invest in it for their future happiness.

Such identities are social processes of identification in which "human beings interpret themselves or are interpreted by others as acting as certain kinds of people in certain contexts" (Gee, 2001, p. 108). It follows that parental subjectivities are created and negotiated as a result of social norms, encounters, routines, interactions and narratives, and that they are situated in, and reinforced through, particular conversations and cultural discourses rather than individually fixed (Karlsson et al., 2013, p. 213). This study identified two main subjectivities through which mothers are constructed. On one hand, dominant discourses depict early childhood as the 'most important period in a child's brain development, forcing parents to take on the identity of 'independent and responsible consumers', by fostering their children's independence and future success through institutions that focus on the schoolification of ECE. On the other hand, social pressures and norms about mothers' role as the 'caring, loving and attentive parent', often reinforced through the use of emotional language, result in some mothers having to adopt the role of the choosing parent, thus having little alternative but to engage in the affective economy of choice.

These particular neoliberal subjectivities are directly linked to discourses about accountability and choice, particularly in the field of preschool education, which is now widely recognised as the foundation for future success (Karlsson et al., 2013; Pianta et al., 2009; Smyth, 2014; Sylva et al., 2003). According to these discourses, parents should be 'informed and responsible consumers' and 'wise decision-makers' (Angus, 2015; Bast & Walberg, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; Burgess et al., 2015), who demonstrate their willingness to benefit from their freedom of choice, and to contribute to the country's well-being by being particular about what preschool they choose (Karlsson et al., 2013). Good, responsible parenting, therefore, entails making careful decisions between different institutions on the basis of certain characteristics (Karlsson et al., 2013).

Further, from an affective point of view, the very act of choosing becomes mandatory for those parents wanting to portray the identity of good parents, as discourses surrounding choice often contain emotive words such as 'attentive', 'caring', which position parents in situations of worry and apprehension. The anxieties and moral pressure that these discourses put on parents and caregivers have been discussed by scholars including Campbell and Proctor (2014), Angus (2015) and Campbell et al. (2009). Similarly, Karlsson et al. (2013) argued that parental choice and marketisation have put such pressures on parents that they are left with "no choice but to choose (p. 209).

The findings emerged through a discursive-affective analysis of the messages contained in six websites of Montessori preschools and of the responses to a questionnaire for parents. The

investigation showed that some mothers' subjectivities are constantly being negotiated, mediated and formed through the encounter between affects, the reproduction of discursive identities, and material/immaterial relations. In particular, the websites provided evidence that the two main maternal subjectivities promoted through them constantly intertwine with other neoliberal discursive circles and bodies that mothers need to navigate. The messages could therefore be divided into two main categories, the first promoting neoliberal norms and subjectivities, and the second fostering mothers' caring roles and affective engagements.

8.3.1 Messages reinforcing neoliberal norms and subjectivities

The first group of messages that parents hear constantly by perusing the websites is 'we will deliver you a perfect neoliberal child (boy) by the end of preschool'. This is not only reflective of dominant discourses and political formations, but also becomes part of the discursive norms embraced by the Montessori collective. These messages related to all the promises made to parents about helping their children become strong, independent, capable individuals. The language in this category was designed to reinforce discursive norms and subjectivities of 'homo economicus', the free and independent chooser, who maximises her children's potential, both at home and through her schooling responsibilities, and guarantees for them a successful future (Proctor, 2015; Proctor & Aitchinson, 2015; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Proctor & Weaver, 2017).

Websites consistently reassured mothers that their children would develop all the necessary skills to be successful academically, thus fitting perfectly within the neoliberal child stereotype. Through promises such as: "We will foster your children's independence, develop their concentration and positive self-esteem, and provide challenges built on children's strengths" (Preschool B), and "We promise to develop your child's full potential, by instilling a life-long love for learning and helping them to achieve the best educational outcomes" were found across all websites (Preschool A, C, D), mothers could rest assured that their duty as responsible consumer would be fulfilled.

These statements were often supported by either experts' quotes or scientific data, aimed at confirming the alleged superiority and efficacy of the Montessori method. Examples of this included: "Dr. Montessori's insight and understanding of child development have been enormously influential all over the world" (Preschool E); "Research indicates that 91% of children read better by age 6; that maths scores are better in 5-year-olds; and that creative essay writing is more advanced in children who attended a Montessori preschool" (Preschool F); "The Method is a highly regarded and widely

recognised educational philosophy (Preschool D); and “Montessori is the single largest pedagogy in the world with over 22.000 schools and centres” (Preschool C).

Such quotes and technical data, it is arguable, were used not only to support mothers’ rational conviction that Montessori would provide the best education for their children. They would also ease mothers’ fears and anxieties about fostering their children’s potential and guaranteeing them best future outcomes. So, whilst reinforcing mothers’ identities of ‘homo economicus’ and the ‘responsible consumer’, necessary for neoliberal regimes of choice to function successfully, the websites also used language and images designed to strengthen mothers’ emotional responses and affective engagement. This is discussed below.

8.3.2 Messages tapping into mothers’ affective engagement

The second group of messages focused on the affective importance and power of branding. The language and photographs utilised here were intended to appeal to the more emotional and vulnerable side of mothers by tapping more directly into their roles as loving carers. The idea here was to reassure mothers that, whilst choosing Montessori would ensure that the academic development of their children, the learning would occur in a “warm, safe and supportive environment”, where “the child’s needs are valued and respected” (Preschool F). Four out of the six websites contained statements alluding to the home-like environment of these preschools, and words designed to capitalise on emotions (Berg et al., 2019) were used frequently in these messages. For example, both Preschools C and F described themselves as “a home-away-from-home” and a “close-knit, caring community”, and assured “We are not a franchise; we are a family”. These messages would certainly appeal to mothers or female carers, who would possibly struggle already with emotions such as guilt and/or anxiety when leaving their children in the care of others.

In a similar vein, by exploiting the anxiety of some parents to make the ‘right’ choice or be a “good mother” (Nichols et al., 2009, p. 65) some marketing messages were designed specifically to create a sense of urgency in parents, advising them to act swiftly. This was done, for example, by urging them to complete instant online enrolment forms, or at the very least to register expressions of interest through online waiting lists. Phrases like “we are accepting expressions of interest now” (Preschools A and D), “Hurry, places are strictly limited - Gain priority by calling now” (Preschools E and F), or “Register today” (Preschool C) fall into this category. Some centres even encouraged parents to “book a tour” (Preschools F and A) with one website (A) offering a “live chat” function,

where parents could converse online with an “educational expert”, ask questions and obtain immediate responses.

In sum, the analysis showed that the websites employ a combination of implicit discourses of class, culture, race and gender, and emphasise two different subjectivities in order to attract specific customers. On one hand, they reinforce neoliberal constructions of autonomous and independent individuals (both mothers and children), and promote values necessary for neoliberalism to function. On the other hand, they do so whilst also appealing to mothers’ more sensitive and caring side. This attempt to maintain a balance between the rational and the emotional in promotional materials has already been highlighted in a study by Meadmore and McWilliam (2001), who discussed the idea that a key imperative for education business is flooding promotional materials with notions of excellence and quality, even starting from the preschool sector, whilst, however, inextricably linking academic achievement to a sense of warmth and homeliness (p. 34).

In sum, the research has suggested that marketing messages have substantial power to shape and influence choices by creating specific affective forces and allowing them to flow within and between collective bodies. This is possible, at least in part, because the ground-work has already been laid by dominant discourses and by the existing structures. Specific ideologies and constructions have been promoted and reproduced within discourse circles, allowing for specific subjectivities to be formed. In turn, discourse bodies have reinforced such subjectivities and norms, allowing for affective flows to surface and circulate.

By reproducing dominant constructions and by tapping into mothers’ emotions, the messages contained in the websites influence how some mothers interpret and construct themselves, thus influencing their choices. In turn, such choices have serious consequences for our society, in that they contribute to existing systems of segmentation and injustice by creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion between those who can choose and those who cannot. The last part of the chapter deals with the social implications of choice.

8.4 Question 3: What are the social implications of preschool choice?

The aim of this research was to increase our understanding of how some parents choose a preschool in a highly marketised early childhood education environment. Through different stages of research, the study has offered evidence of how choice, interpreted as an affective environment, reinforces a system of geographic, classed and gendered inequality. Holloway and Kirby (2020) argue that

neoliberalism, through its processes, results in contingent market forms that offer social mobility for some, but ensure the social reproduction of enduring regimes of power. Similarly, Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) describes the way in which affect can create boundaries or 'walls', which limit or facilitate our social mobility. When we are in a position of privilege, we are possibly not aware of the limitations imposed by such walls. However, when we find ourselves outside, they can create a feeling of exclusion, of not belonging. Similarly, the exclusion can be created by those inside the walls enjoying the position of power and privilege. This final section suggests that ignoring the systemic issues that create and maintain disadvantage places those families who cannot choose in a very unjust position, which is, in turn, reinforced by those who are able, through their privileged position, to enjoy the benefits of choice, and create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through their affective practices.

The research began with a socio-geographic mapping of the locations of Montessori preschools in urban Adelaide, which highlighted the importance of positionality (intended in a geographic and socio-economic sense), and of the powers that it produces in terms of choice. The geographic analysis provided evidence that some parents — interpreted here as the collective group of Montessori mothers, differentiated from other parents in the ECE market by their social class, geographic location and gender — are moved to make a specific choice which is not permitted to others by their positionality and by their lack of access to specific discourses. In other words, some mothers not only cannot afford private education, but also cannot even consider it as an option, partly because they do not have access to the dominant discursive norms constructed and reproduced within the Montessori collectivity, and partly because of specific affects that circulate within their bodies (both individual and collective).

This stage of analysis revealed that nearly all of participants in this study were middle-class parents, mostly employed in professional or managerial roles, and largely tertiary educated. This is reflective of other studies, confirming the power of class in the field of choice (see Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Healy, 2021). The mothers in this study were practically unconstrained in their choices, thanks to their positionality in the current social and economic system of choice. Arguably, if they had to consider factors such as transport or cost, their freedom and their agency would be much more limited, as would be their access to specific discursive circles, norms and subjectivities. This freedom from constrictions, therefore, allows them a particular type of power, not only to choose, but also to deem others who cannot as somewhat morally inferior or poorer in their parenting skills.

The research continued with an examination of the websites and parent questionnaires, which revealed that, through the power offered to them by their positionality, some parents engage in affective and discursive practices which reinforce and perpetrate systemic injustices. Returning to the notion of walls suggested by Ahmed (2004a, 2004b), the research highlighted what seemed to be a lack of recognition of privilege amongst the participants. All participants displayed a lack of awareness of the fact that they are part of quite an exclusive group of Australians in both economic and social terms (for instance, only 30% of the Australian population held tertiary qualifications in 2020 and none of them were concerned about cost as a deciding factor), and their circumstances are a powerful indicator of their positionality in the context of school choice. Through their positionality (which is linked not only to their qualifications and the consequent professions, but also to their cultural, social and geographical positions), these parents occupy an advantaged position, which grants them significant powers of choice.

According to social constructionist theory, our social environment influences the language we use to make meaning of the world; but it is not independent of the world it attempts to describe. Our perceptions of the external world are influenced by our pre-existing concepts and by what is introduced to us through broader structures. In the case of choice, this also includes advertising regimes. However, as with discourse and affect, this is a dual process, one in which, when we start to belong to a collective, we jointly develop and embrace values and concepts that tend to reflect our interpretations and produce reliable ways of mediating our choices and actions. In the case of this research, such collective actions result in social divisions by creating groups of inclusion and exclusion, thus reinforcing an already classed and gendered system characterised by entrenched inequalities.

Such reproduction of segmentation happens through discursive norms and circles and through affective flows. However, the analysis showed that it also occurs specifically through language, as words provide us with the tools to express our meanings, thus shaping how we may do so. For example, Chapter Seven showed how the specific language used by the mothers in the questionnaire responses reproduced and reinforced parental constructions dominant in neoliberal discourses of choice and risk. When describing ‘other centres’, some mothers appropriated and used language which related to the reputational risk management and image maintenance practices used by educational institutions. Further, within this very uneven terrain, they borrowed the language of standards and morals and transposed it to make sense of systemic deficits, such as “inequitable ratios” or “understaffed, overcrowded centres”. Through the appropriation of typically

neoliberal language, possibly replicated from the websites and from existing discourses, these systemic shortcomings became moral failings in the eyes of the privileged parents. As such, the flaws shifted to being located within the individual, rather than being a product of a neoliberal system, which produces policies promoting systemic injustices.

These micro-practices of social power, in which some parents engage as social agents, result in a classed and unjust system of choice, and exacerbate already existing inequalities. Such practices could be understood as oppressive, but that would imply an understanding of the Montessori body as active agents, who actively and knowingly engage in unfair practices. This is probably not the case. However, these practices reinforce Foucault's understanding of truth not as a matter of fact or fiction but as the product of the power relations that sustain it.

Further, these practices reinforce other scholars' arguments that, within the contemporary individualistic, competitive, educational marketplace with its rhetoric of 'doing the best for your own child', the middle classes will always utilise their economic and cultural resources to ensure the continued reproduction of their children's educational advantage and it is mothers who are at the front line, ensuring the hard work of reproduction gets done (see in particular Reay, 2005b, p. 114). Current choice practices, therefore, reinforce the claim that middle-class parents are seeking to "escape the perceived risks of schools with many children from deprived backgrounds" (Field et al., 2007, p. 65), thus reproducing social class divisions (Ball, 2002; Taylor & Woollard, 2003) through familial social and cultural networks.

In sum, adding the affective element to what would have otherwise been 'just' a discursive analysis of mothers' responses to the questionnaires allowed me to explore parental choice through a collective lens, and to show how specific emotions and sensations do not only emerge within the individual, but rather are socially produced affects, created by the interaction of an individual's emotions with the societal structure they inhabit. A social-relational approach to affect, therefore, permitted me to illuminate how affective flows move us to form solidarities and/or antagonistic social relations, based on beliefs and value systems proposed and reproduced through dominant discourses (the questionnaires provided evidence of this).

Further, it showed how this focus on individuals' parenting responsibilities, aimed at alleviating a host of social ills by maximising learning opportunities, ignores the classed underpinnings of parenting linked to broader structural factors that "may hamper individuals' ability to fulfil good parenting expectations" (Smyth, 2014, p. 16). As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) found, under

neoliberalism schooling serves as a mechanism for social selection and sorting, in which a mentality of survival of the fittest unleashes competition among individuals (p. 3). This research showed, through an exploration of what specific affects do in the field of choice, that this competitive attitude has extended also to early childhood education, thereby changing its moral footing and leaving those with less power to choose in an even more disadvantaged position.

8.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings of the research and their implications in terms of social justice. In affective terms, this research has provided evidence that some parents can readily assume the 'homo economicus' identity required by market theory (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 85), and become part of specific collectives of privileged individuals. The research showed how, within and between these collectives, particular flows of affects can happen because the discursive norms and subjectivities that neoliberalism needs to operate successfully are reinforced and transmitted not only through broader political, social and economic structures, but through advertising regimes designed to tap into people's emotions.

The analysis of the websites revealed two types of advertising messages, all reinforcing discursive identities constructed and propagated by neoliberalism, while the parent questionnaires showed quite clearly that some parents' (mothers) capacity to choose can have insidious social consequences. Through their positionality, some of the participants' sense-making and meaning making practices has serious social implications on society, when these parents, arguably without realising it, but allow themselves a sort of justification when they judge 'the Others' by positioning them as somehow morally bankrupt, unhygienic, out of control, and so on. It is a form of violence and a deficit of society.

By interpretating affect as a socio-relational force, the research investigated how affective flows move through and between different collectivities (collective bodies), which form when individuals embrace and/or reject specific discursive norms and the subjectivities proposed within them. This approach helped to illuminate how some parents are moved, as consumers of education, to make specific choices which result in the exacerbation of entrenched social divisions and systemic injustices, particularly when the preschool market is interpreted as an affective environment. This in turn, serves the purposes of neoliberal governments, whose main concern is to privatise social goods like education

CHAPTER 9 THE DANGEROUSLY TEMPTING POWER OF CHOICE

9.1 Introduction

Societies worldwide are undergoing significant change. Growing inequalities, global pandemics, extreme weather, the rise of reactionary populist governments, wars, economic crises, mass migration, and unemployment all contribute toward mounting social unrest. At a time when education systems could, and should, contribute towards social equity and stability, neoliberal imperatives in Australia, as elsewhere, continue to intensify divisions between society's most and least enfranchised. This thesis has explored the neoliberal phenomenon of school choice as it extends to Australia's preschool sector. It has drawn on tools from feminist poststructuralism, discourse analysis and affect studies to better understand, not only how preschool choice is constructed and how certain parents are drawn into its affective economy through a form of emotional governance, but also how parents as a classed and gendered body affect the field of choice. Put differently, the thesis has investigated how Australian parents are both affected by, and affect, Australian preschool choice.

The thesis relied on three separate research phases: a socio-economic mapping; a website analysis; and the examination of a parent questionnaire. In Chapter Five, a geographic mapping and a socio-economic examination of all the Montessori preschools in Adelaide and their geographic locations, provided a socio-spatial analysis of the demographic context for Montessori preschools in South Australia, and discussed the important relation between the various factors that influence how specific identities are created, and how such identities affect choice. Chapter Six focused on the investigation of six websites, and showed how the visual and textual elements utilised in them aimed to resonate with specific subjectivities, meanings and symbolic values (Maguire et al., 1999). The analysis illustrated how these elements are used tactically to anchor specific meanings in the viewers/readers, and speak directly to their desires and aspirations. This reflects the study's underlying assumption that all meaning is produced from the interaction between discourse bodies. By viewing the website, therefore, parents and caregivers construct and reconstruct meaning from images and texts in light of a variety of factors. These can be past and present experience, the parents' material reality, their social and cultural positionings, and, importantly, their emotions, aspirations, and desires. Chapter Seven explored the ways in which mothers engage through their roles as consumers with the dominant concepts and practices evoked by discourses of choice. Through an affective analysis of 20 mothers' responses, the chapter explored choice as a complex

phenomenon, and illuminated the role of affective practices as crucial element framing parental choice. Finally, Chapter Eight discussed the research findings in relation to the original questions.

This chapter draws the thesis together. It returns to the central research questions, and distils the study's findings, by pulling together some of the materials generated through the different research phases. The study suggests that preschool choice is a highly classed and gendered field, impacted on by a variety of factors which determine who has a choice. In such a complex context, parents' agency is strongly influenced by three main elements: discursive norms and positionalities, boarder social and economic structures, and affects. This thesis proposes that neoliberal policies have resulted in the emergence and circulation of specific affective forces, which compel some parents (often middle-class mothers) to engage in the affective economy of choice, and that through such engagement, these parents are moved to act in ways that have profound social justice implications for our society.

The chapter offers three separate yet interrelated framings for the interpretations of the findings. These are: choice, positionality, and agency; choice, discursive subjectivities, and constructions of childhood; and choice, parents' affects, and the reproduction of segmentation and inequalities. The framings are used as an organising framework for the chapter, which is divided in four main sections. The first three sections are designed to present some concluding thoughts about the implications of choice, while the final section deals with the limitations of the thesis and considers possible future research directions.

9.2 Section One: Neoliberal choice regimes, positionality, and agency

Parental choice is a very complex field, characterised by the intersection of many different factors. None, however, has more impact on parents' capacity to choose than the position they occupy in society. This study has provided evidence that positionality not only determines who can choose, but also that, by the very act of choosing, some parents engage in the affective economy of choice. The power granted to these parents by their positionality, therefore, allows them to act in ways that reinforce entrenched systemic inequalities and result in groups of exclusion or inclusion.

However, what emerged through the research is also that, whilst promoting discourses of consumption and freedom of choice, neoliberalism is in fact reducing people's agentic power. Whilst this is not a new finding — Rose (1999) and Saul (2005) pointed out the limitations imposed on individuals by neoliberal policies a long time ago — what this study has illuminated is the way in

which individuals' agency is also limited by the emergence and circulation of specific affects, and how these affects are mobilised by socio-economic factors.

In poststructuralist terms, agency is defined as the "capacity to recognise the constitution of ourself, and to resist, subvert and change the discourse themselves through which one is constituted" (Davies, 1991, p. 51). Whilst embracing this definition, this study also suggests that our agency is also mediated by the existence of specific affective forces which move us to act in ways through a sort of emotional or affective governance. For example, the participants in this study, albeit being a relatively small yet arguably representative section of the middle-class population of Australia, showed that the ways in which they engage with preschool choice is the result of both affective and discursive forces operating on them.

Every participant, albeit to different extents, utilised typically neoliberal language that conveyed their engagement with a competitive neoliberal outlook (Ball, 2002) and with theories of consumer-based consumption (Campbell et al., 2009). Similarly, the majority of mothers (16 out of 20) indicated varying degrees of awareness regarding the representation of "early childhood education as a vital way to ensure the control or mediation of 'future success' and 'status or privilege'" (Swartz, 1997, p. 189). Importantly, all respondents, albeit in different forms, demonstrated an eagerness to engage with choice in a highly affective way. This was evident not only through the use of emotion-bound language ("choosing was exciting but also stressful"), but also through the way in which collectives were spoken into existence, and then assigned bodily qualities ("the caring parents", "the good and responsible mother", "the staff is cohesive, in control and calm" or "the teachers are rambunctious"). These examples are critically important in affective terms, as they highlight how language, when used by a social collective with bodily qualities to refer to another collective, results in the establishment of 'the Other' and creates dynamics of repulsion (Berg et al., 2019).

The analysis of the materials gathered through this research has provided evidence that, by tapping into parents' emotions through broader structures, such as advertising regimes, neoliberalism reinforces some parents' need to recognise themselves and identify with specific discursive subjectivities. For example, by embracing specific marketing messages, and investing in the affective economy of the Montessori brand, some mothers — operating as a collective body — feel somewhat entitled to judge other parents in less advantaged positions. The language used in the questionnaires, for instance, suggested that these mothers allowed themselves to criticise other parents because of their choices (to send their children to "dirty, crowded childcare centres"),

effectively creating boundaries of exclusion between themselves and 'the Others', and positioning those Others as somehow morally corrupt or lesser parents. Arguably, then, some mothers are acting under the pretence that they are operating freely and exercising their agency when they are repeating inculcated patterns of discrimination.

These issues have been the subject of criticisms within the literature for decades, with scholars including Dahlberg (2003); Rose and Elicker (2008); Rose (1999) and Saul (2005) pointing out that the neoliberal conceptions of competent and autonomous individuals have become just another way of governing subjects (Dahlberg, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). The affective analysis confirmed that some neoliberal discursive representations operate in subtle ways, leading parents to gradually own such discourses, at times without consciously being aware of this process. This is a typical feature of dominant discourses, whereby people automatically and subconsciously feel increasingly pressured to belong to a specific social system that produces specific knowledge and meaning.

Such pressures are exacerbated even further through the affective flows that emerge from a sort of emotional governance typical of choice. For example, partly through the perceived need to be good and caring mothers, partly through the perceived urgency to prepare children for their future schooling, and partly because of the numerous references to idealised qualities potentially instilled in children, the burden on parents to choose the 'right' brand of preschool (Montessori) was easily perceived throughout the analysis. The investigation revealed that the way preschool choice is mediated and shaped relies a lot on factors such as appearance, friends', or family's recommendation and/or word of mouth, which are arguably more affective than practical factors.

Ball and Vincent (1998) have previously highlighted the high value placed on such emotional elements, but their study focused on high schools. This research suggests that, even as early as the preschool year, some mothers not only buy into discursive norms and subjectivities without even noticing, but also, they do so because they are driven by affects. Such powerful affective forces, therefore, "impact on the way in which subjects are governed, but also on the way in which they see and understand themselves, their lives, their opportunities and desires" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 250). By investing in the affective economy of the Montessori brand or Montessori collective, these mothers believe they are fulfilling their assigned discursive roles of responsible consumers, when in fact, they are also succumbing to a sort of emotional governance.

The analysis of the materials suggested that, under current neoliberal circumstance, parents' agency is strongly mediated not only by discursively constructed norms, but also by powerful affective forces. As Karlsson et al. (2013) pointed out "it is actually parents themselves, who gradually start to identify themselves and position themselves as a result of the social and moral pressures produced by such discourses" (p. 214). These parents' agency is further reduced when they get drawn into the affective economy of choice through a form of emotional governance. As Ball and Vincent (1998) explained, when choosing curricula, parents are not necessarily dealing with detailed or objective knowledge about how the curriculum might be enacted. Rather they may well be dealing with the affect and connotations associated with the brand.

In sum, in the current preschool market, individuals are led to believe that they have a lot of freedom and agency through discourses of consumption and choice. Whilst parental choice is enabled through its construction as the good, proper, right, rational option, and is founded on the notion that being selective equals doing the best for your child, this research revealed that, in fact, parents' agency is strongly mediated not only by the broader structures and the dominant discursive norms, but also by the circulation of certain affects. These affects, like waves, move across collectives of some parents (in advantageous positions), pushing them to act in certain ways, which can result in the reproduction of entrenched inequalities and discrimination. Such emotional governance of choice tugs on parental heartstrings and fears, and presents choice in rational terms, casting shadows over its socially deleterious consequences. Thus, the benevolent imperative and façade of choice enables its fluid reproduction, and contributes to the reproduction of entrenched disparities.

9.3 Section Two: Choice, discursive subjectivities, and constructions of childhood

The subject of parental choice of preschool had received little attention in the research so far. This study has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the role that affect plays in the field of preschool choice. Through an exploration of how parents' discursive-affective practices play out in a highly marketised context, the study has illuminated some of the implications of neoliberal economic policies on the preschool sector. It has provided evidence of some of the negative consequences that the power of positionality can have in terms of deciding who can and cannot partake in the affective economy. While these implications have been reviewed, there is another issue that emerged during the investigation and which requires attention, namely, the particular construction of children, and of early childhood education and its purposes, under neoliberal governance. The next section highlights some of the concerns connected to this, such as the

interpretation of children as human capital or the schoolification of ECE, and discusses their implications .

Neoliberal discourses about parental identity and positionality do not only impact on choice. They also have powerful and direct social consequences on how we construct children. Earlier in the thesis, I referred to existing concerns about the homogenising effects of neoliberalism on early childhood education (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Sims, 2017). Some of the scholars raising these critiques, for example, are fearful that the strong neoliberal focus on individualism, consumerism and competitiveness will hamper children's capacity to play collaboratively, collectively and meaningfully (Gould & Matapo, 2016). Through the affective and discursive examination of both the websites and parents' responses, this study has reinforced such concerns, particularly in relation to children' development of social and human skills. The language in both the websites and questionnaires suggests this. The exploration revealed that words such as 'social', emotional', 'collaboratively', and 'collectively', as well as any mention of 'learning through play' or 'play-based activities' appeared very rarely (if at all) in the websites. For instance, the noun 'collaboration' only appeared in one website and, when it did, it was positioned in a list of other desirable qualities such as discipline, concentration, independence and orderliness, which had little to do with children's play or socio-emotional development (preschool B). One preschool mentioned that through a yoga program, "social development is encouraged through group play" (Preschool A); however, this was the very last in a list of skills offered, and appeared almost like a tokenistic effort.

Similarly, Preschool D did mention the presence of "play-based learning", but only in passing, in the *Home* tab describing all the centres belonging to the provider, and upon clicking on the specific 'Montessori preschool' tab, the language shifted to highlight school readiness. Preschool F referred to play only once, again in the general Homepage, and only in a context where the children can 'play outside', almost as if to imply that inside the 'class-room' they work and learn, whilst outside they can play.

Linked to the lack of social and emotional development, another issue emerged during the research process, which relates to the neoliberal positioning of children. The materials gathered suggest that, under neoliberal policy, children are often interpreted purely "in terms of their ability to contribute to national and global economies" (Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 55). This idea surfaced especially in Chapter 7, where three separate themes suggested that the neoliberal identity of 'parent-consumer' is closely related to interpretation of the child as human capital (see Sections 6.6.1, 6.6.2,

and 6.6.3). The analysis of the questionnaires revealed a strongly gendered construction of the child (nearly always a boy), painted as a responsible and autonomous individual, whose early learning is to be interpreted as an investment in the future. Every preschool in the analysis promised to instil fundamental neoliberal characteristics in the children, and to develop them into self-sufficient, free and independent individuals. These typically neoliberal representations of the child as a responsible, autonomous and self-regulating individual were the most dominant, both in terms of images and language used across all the websites, and by the participants.

Whilst it is true that independence, organisation and responsibility are all positive values in work ethic, what could arguably emerge is a construction of the child who is seen as a compliant and disciplined future worker, interpreted mainly as a human capital resource, to be moulded and prepared mostly (if not solely) for the future economic well-being of the country. I discussed in Chapter 6 the possible mis-translation of the child as a worker, not a player, and as future producer of social and economic good. My concerns align with Brown's (2015) contention that the neoliberal focus on preparing children for school (and eventually employment) operates in contrast to the long-established early childhood practice of operating from children's interests. In addition, other scholars have noted the dominant presence of such constructive identities across countries that have succumbed to neoliberal ideals (see, for example, Campbell-Barr & Nygard, 2014; Hunkin, 2016, 2018; Penn, 2010), and which have undermined all other discourses (and policies) built on notions and ideals of accomplishing the public interest through collective action (Connell, 2012, 2013; Connell et al., 2013).

Scholars have argued that these changes result, in great part, from the policies of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Smith et al., 2016, p. 125), which sees early childhood merely as a site for economic investment for future outcomes and purposes (Brennan, 2007; Moss, 2013b; Penn, 2010; Smith et al., 2016). For example, Gould and Matapo (2016) examined the lexicon of ECE discourses relating to children and parenting practices in the current neoliberal paradigm in New Zealand, and maintained that the identities of the "empowered child that problem solves, analyses and reflects are actually created to fit into the neoliberal work force", where children are interpreted as economic investments (Gould & Matapo, 2016, p. 56). Similar concerns have also been raised also by O'Flynn and Petersen (2007), who stated that in a society where there are such high expectations from schools and parents, students are at risk of becoming over-engineered.

Under the ideology of neoliberalism, education has been redefined as the ability to compete with other schools and countries through testing, and improvements in education standards are seen as leading to economic prosperity (Redden, 2019). Redden (2019) pointed out that the using terms and concept such as 'benchmarking', 'quality control' and 'national testing' to measure efficiency and productivity "demonstrates the degree to which governments now equate educational policy with business models" (p. 18). While this is already problematic at higher levels of education, it is arguably highly detrimental in early childhood, as it contrasts and defeats the intended purpose of ECE.

This study has provided evidence that Australia's commitment to a neoliberal model of education begins as early as preschool. However, the whole premise of neoliberalism, which equates numeracy and literacy with the country's economic success, is resulting in the neglect of ECE settings that promote social justice and caring for others, and foster happiness among children. As other scholars have already pointed out, evidence shows that by focusing on testing and auditing so heavily, the current education system is leading to growing inequalities and segmentation (Connell, 2006, 2013; Power, 1997; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013; Ravitch, 2010; Redden, 2019).

Over-engineering children and construing them as human capital is resulting in an educational approach which, rather than achieving equity in academic outcomes and access, is arguably leading us as far away from equity as possible. This interpretation of children as human capital is directly linked to neoliberal constructions of the (good) mother-consumer, positioned as the individual with the power and responsibility to further her own interest and well-being, as well as that of her families and nation, through her skills, competencies and (apparent) freedom of choice (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). In this context, mothers "must capitalise on every possible learning opportunity for their children" (Smyth, 2014, p. 16), by taking on an economic identity and benefiting both their families and the state.

However, not all mothers can. This resonates with arguments by Connell (2012, 2013) who claims that neoliberal agendas have undermined all policies built on concepts of the public interest through collective action, to favour and promote notions of success through individualism and competition. Further, it aligns with claims made by Sims (2017) that frame children's learning as an investment in the labour market of the future positions the underlying cause of inequality as the fault of children and families who have "failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them" (p. 4). The

next section discusses some social justice implications of a neoliberal regime of choice through the lens of affect.

9.4 Section Three: Choice, affects, and the reproduction of inequalities

This research is founded on the notion that affect encompasses both the capacity to affect, and to be affected. Affective forces, circulating between bodies, are one of the factors that determine how we are 'moved' to act in certain ways in today's neoliberal market, where the imperative to make the right choice creates a highly affective and emotional environment. By embracing specific norms and discursivities (like the Montessori parent), some mothers are making sense of their choice by justifying their investment in a 'brand' preschool, in the same way they might justify buying an expensive brand of clothing rather than clothing from a cheaper department store. Through such consumeristic discourses, the Montessori parent is not only constructing and positioning themselves in a specific spot; they are effectively separating themselves from 'the Other', whom they deem as somewhat inferior. Therefore, their construction of preschool choice, and the 'Othering' processes that result from it, have repercussions in terms of how it situates other, less fortunate parents, who must opt for a public centre.

The questionnaire responses demonstrated this construction and positioning of 'the Other' clearly. And while most parents were aware of their highly emotional state during the process of choosing, reporting positive feelings of excitement and/or joy, what was interesting was the lack of understanding of how such emotions position them within the field of choice. When parents described feeling "clam and happy" or "excited and hopeful", they did not realise that they could experience such positive feelings precisely because of where they were comfortably situated in society, having the privilege of being a choice maker. So much of the collective affect circulating in the Montessori body is due to these mothers being very comfortable financially, and therefore having the power to choose and benefit of making these exclusive choices. In this context, the underlying stress of poverty and hardship that might be experienced by those parents who are unable to choose, completely disappeared.

The research therefore suggests that, by being unaware of their privileged position and reproducing dominant discursive norms, these mothers are perpetuating a system entrenched by divisions and inequalities. Further, by identifying with specific parental subjectivities' arguably 'imposed' on them by socio-economic structures and advertising regimes, they inadvertently reinforce an educational model where brand consumption has become paramount, thereby reproducing an increasingly

uneven socio-geographical terrain. As other scholars have already noted, websites (interpreted as advertising tools) act as one of many mechanisms that contribute to the segmentation and differentiation of an emerging market-place of school options (Drew et al., 2016; Gottschall et al., 2010; Wardman et al., 2010; Wilkins, 2012; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). I propose that, in the preschool context, this is especially possible in the absence of high-quality information or knowledge, which results in specific affective forces being able to move families to make decision based on vague understandings about the 'reputation' or 'feel' of the preschool.

These findings align with discussions by Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) who examine issues linked with the "inability/incapacity of parents as consumers to determine quality, because of misinformation — reinforced by advertising systems — which focus on selective knowledge (pp. 82-87). Most participants in this study had very little or no knowledge of the Montessori method, but bought into the brand, not because of objective or practical reasons, but because the brand reputation and the messages contained in the websites appealed to their need to maximise their advantage. Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) argue that the problem of 'information asymmetries ' is symptomatic of a deeper problem with markets in early childhood education and care, namely, the fact that markets require the adoption of new identities or subjectivities by parents as buyers. As such, they must adopt the mantle of homo economicus, seeking to maximise their own advantage in the exchange process in which, as already noted, the child has no active role, being merely the object whose care or education is a commodity that needs to be bought (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 85).

9.5 Contribution and Significance

Nearly all existing studies on the implications of neoliberalism for education have been conducted either in childcare, or within the higher or compulsory levels of education. This thesis has provided new evidence in terms of tracking and highlighting how choice rhetoric is impacting those settings that cater specifically for children's education in the year prior to commencing school. In this sense, the thesis has contributed to filling a gap in the existing literature about the effects of neoliberal policy and regimes in early childhood education.

Moving beyond the 'rational' or pragmatic model, and bringing into focus the affective sphere of choice, this study has broken new ground by generating new insights into how parents are moved by specific affective forces to make their choices, and what the social implications of such movements are. The affective-discursive analysis was enriched through two main discursive tools:

first, a poststructuralist understanding of truth as the product of power relations; and second, a feminist interpretation of the way in which issues of class and gender are often silenced in discourses of choice.

The findings from the research suggest that the naturalised infiltration of choice into ever younger years of education signals that the creeping of neoliberalism is advancing quickly into ECE. Using six preschools as a case-study, the thesis provided evidence that some parents choose a Montessori preschool not necessarily for its curriculum and pedagogy, but rather as the signifier of certain neoliberal characteristics (Doherty, 2009; Johnson, 2000; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2009; Whitehead, 2006). These patterns of marketisation, typical of neoliberal discourses of choice, could explain the recent growth in the numbers of settings that offer a Montessori approach in Australia mentioned earlier in the thesis. In a similar way, such an increase might also be a symptom of the globalisation of choice, a phenomenon that Ball and Nikita (2014) explored a decade ago, promoting education researchers to look at choice in a framework of global mobility, and related to new kinds of social class identities and interests.

9.6 Limitations of the Study

The research encountered three main limitations. First, the study took place in South Australia and involved an in-depth study of Montessori preschools as a possible example of the growing effects of marketisation on this specific sector of early childhood education. In addition, the study only centred on class and gender as key elements in the field of choice, and used them to excavate parents' individual and collective emotional investments in paying for Montessori preschool. In this sense, the thesis has revealed the construction of distinctly classed/gendered themes which are discussed through the chapters. And whilst the research also revealed race as another fundamental element in choice discourses (as manifest, for example, by the dominant presence of white, Anglo-Saxon children in the website analysis), a racial focus was missing in this study, which I realise is a limitation. Therefore, the findings cannot be considered as generalisable to all social groups of our society, nor to all geographical regions of Australia. Arguably, however, similar studies, whether in other states or other parts of the world, could produce similar results, contributing to this study's findings about the consequences of marketisation on the preschool sector.

A second critique could possibly relate to the size of participant sample, which admittedly was quite small, with only twenty-four parents completing the questionnaire. However, the approach taken in this research is of qualitative and exploratory type; it is different, therefore, from a large,

quantitative text analysis. This is an important distinction, which lies not only in the size of the data generated, but also — and especially — in the extent to which the analysis entailed different levels of reading of the same materials. In addition, it could be argued that the sample used here is representative of a larger group of families that are able to access choice freely, as demonstrated by the analysis on Chapter 5. Focusing not only on a linguistic/discursive analysis, but also on an affective interpretation of the materials allowed for a much richer and more nuanced examination of the elements at play during a complex and emotional process such as choice of preschool. Therefore, the rich discursive-affective analysis produced a nuanced illumination of some of the social implications of choice, and allowed me to explore how some of the social divisions that result from neoliberal educational policy are being intensified and perpetuated by parents' actions.

Last, due to COVID-related regulations, I was not able to offer participants the option of completing the questionnaire by hand. Some of the limits of online surveys have been pointed out in the research, with a common critique being that participants addressed via the internet cannot be defined or described, due the lack of personal characteristics available online. It is argued, therefore, that findings from online surveys cannot be generalised and may therefore mislead. From an affective point of view, it could also be argued that the online distribution of questionnaires significantly reduced the 'materiality of discourse' (Berg et al., 2019). Through "the ink of printed letters" (Berg et al., 2019, p. 6), participants could have decided how to use the space given to them, as well as how to manipulate their writing to accentuate certain ideas. For example, they could have underlined or highlighted some sentences of particular importance to them, or capitalised specific words which struck a chord for them; they could expand their answers outside the 'designated answer boxes or spaces', and so on. This could have arguably provided extra evidence of how specific affects moved through the questionnaires, thereby enriching the analysis.

9.7 Future Research Direction

This thesis has illuminated some of the implications of preschool choice, particularly in terms of increasing social segmentation amongst groups of parents who can and cannot choose. It has not, however, provided any recommendations for how to reduce such negative consequences due to limitations of space. Nevertheless, some questions relating to social justice have emerged, which could serve as research inputs in academia. For example, within the existing structures of privilege, how can we overcome existing social disparities and guarantee the fair and even outcomes for all Australian children? How can we make parents aware that their choices are exacerbating inequities?

And if they were aware, would they change their choice behaviours? And how can we manage the affective flows emerging within current choice regimes so that they do not result in further segregation and groups of exclusion?

Lastly, how can we foster an ECE model that is less concerned with producing future workers, and more focused on building genuinely human virtues and kills, like collaboration and empathy? We should reflect on the meanings and consequences of supporting a structure which is focused mostly on academic performance, rather than on the social and emotional development of the individual, and which starts as early as preschool. What does this mean for the future of Australian education? It might be too late to change the higher levels of schooling, already so committed to neoliberalism, but we must find new ways to guarantee that the commitment to ensure equity in the economic, social and political life of the nation is served by the current education policy and practice (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), at least in the early years of children's lives, and particularly for those children occupying the most disadvantaged positions in society. These issues require critical and urgent attention and, as such, should be addressed by future research projects.

9.8 Conclusion

Australian education is an ideal setting in which to explore neoliberal marketing practices, as Australia has enthusiastically embraced the neoliberal policies characterised by managerialism and performativity (Ball, 2003). Nearly 35% of Australians attend private/non-government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b), and research has shown that institutions have become increasingly competitive as they deal with issues of public ranking and the advancement of parental choice (Connell, 2013). This is particularly true of urban settings, which is where school marketing and choice have become most apparent (Forsberg, 2018; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). The gendered implications of these moves are clear: those affected most acutely by the retraction of government support for early childhood education are the women who work in the sector as well as the primary carers of children who are not positioned to choose a private alternative, namely, women from structurally marginalised settings (Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Campbell et al., 2009; Proctor & Sriprakash, 2013).

Founded in a social-relational approach, the thesis has assumed that while discourse constitutes the structure of the relations between words, affect constitutes the structure of relations between feelings. Further, it has argued that acknowledging how those relations intertwine, and exploring how such entanglements move parents to act in certain ways, can produce a much richer and more

nuanced understanding of preschool choice in South Australia. Using a combination of qualitative data generation and analysis tools, the study has explored the power of positionalities and (dis)advantages that a highly marketised ECE environment can grant to some women, and not to others, and has offered a portrait of the ways in which the neoliberalisation of preschool in Australia constitutes a critical feminist issue (Fernandez et al., 2004; Ganley et al., 2018).

Through an affective lens, the thesis has exposed the way in which some parents embrace and reinforce discursive norms and bodies, allowing for the surfacing and circulation of specific affects that move them to choose a Montessori preschool. The research illuminated what these affective flows can do to different groups of parents who are positioned less favourably in the selection process, by creating social boundaries and reinforcing segmentation. As Fraser and Honneth (1998) noted: "markets do not make social distinctions disappear, they regulate interactions between institutions, such as the family and education" (p. 58). Increasing choice mechanisms has not been the answer to increasing access to 'quality education', as in current educational landscape such interactions perpetuate existing class and gender inequalities.

Notwithstanding the fact that, in 2016, for the third time in less than a decade, the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments reaffirmed their commitments to achieve *Universal Access* to quality early childhood education, inequality in access to ECE remains a persistent challenge in Australia.[12] While this study has not offered any solutions to this issue, it has provided evidence of the way in which the current plan of action continues to favour the interests of some families at the expense of others. The thesis has argued that the misguided concept of choice, flourishing under a veneer of fairness, keeps contributing to the reproduction of systemic disparities and groups of exclusion. If Australia wants to grant educational access as a *universal and inviolable right of all children*, it needs to do better. And this can only happen if future governments start focusing more on promoting and enacting real social justice policies, and less on political rhetoric and empty promises.

[12] The first time was in 2008, when the Governments embarked on a reform process to improve issues related to governance, quality and equity in the ECEC sector has this acronym been used previously? If not, you would need to write it out in full.. Amongst other things, a key aim of the reforms was ensuring affordability for all Australian families, through the establishment of the National Partnership Agreement. The second time was in 2016 when the respective governments reinforced their commitment to this goal.

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Appendix 1: Invitation to Participate

QUESTIONNAIRE INFORMATION SHEET (for *parents*)

Project title: Choosing a Preschool in South Australia: Understanding parental Decision-making.

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Description of the study

Through a case study of six Montessori preschools, this project explores how neoliberal policies have affected those South Australian sites offering preschool programs to 4-year old children in the year before they begin compulsory school. The intent is to better understand how neoliberalism is impacting upon preschools in ways similar to other levels of education. The research investigates the relationship between the processes of privatisation and marketisation and parents/caregivers' choice of preschool. For example, it tries to answer questions such: How do we know what's the `right' choice when we are choosing a preschool? What sources of information do we trust? And do advertising and marketing affect our choices? In this project, I am inviting you to talk about the process of deciding on your child's preschool. I would like to know more about how you went about selecting and choosing which site you wanted your child to attend.

Purpose of the study

This project has five main objectives:

1. To better understand how neoliberal practices of marketisation and privatisation have affected South Australian preschools.
2. To investigate how parental/caregiver identities are shaped within in a neoliberal ECE context.
3. To examine the role of 'identity' in parent/caregiver decision-making about preschools in SA.
4. To examine the extent to which marketing messages affect and influence parental decision-making processes.
5. To investigate how preschool owners/directors interpret and negotiate neoliberalism and its impact on preschool education.

What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to fill out a questionnaire which shouldn't take more than 15-20 minutes. You have the option to either complete the questionnaire online (), or to receive a paper copy and once completed to place it in a collection box at the preschool (providing physical distancing regulations have been lifted or allow for such interaction). Questionnaires can be completed at any computer with Internet access, or at a location of the participant's choice (for instance the preschool) if a paper copy is required.

What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?

Although you may not benefit directly from this study, the sharing of your experiences will offer an important contribution, by adding to the existing research about the impacts of neoliberal policy on education. More specifically, this research will provide a unique, focused insight into the experiences and affective domain of both parents/caregivers and professionals, who operate within the field of early childhood education.

Understanding the effects of marketisation and privatisation on South Australian preschools, particularly in relation to parental choice and the emotional factors affecting this, could lead to better understanding of the effects of economic policies on preschool education nationally. These policies ultimately highlight the social justice implications of the neo-liberalisation of ECE in Australia and can potentially influence future policy in education.

Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?

No, we do not need your name and you will remain anonymous. Any identifying information will be removed, and your comments will not be linked directly to you. All information and results obtained in this study will be stored in a secure way, with access restricted to relevant researchers.

Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?

The researcher anticipates NO risk from your involvement in this study. The only inconvenience envisioned is that deriving from the donation of your time. If you have any concerns, please raise them with the researcher.

How do I agree to participate?
Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions, and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without effect or consequences. A consent form accompanies this information sheet. If you agree to participate please read and sign the form and place it in the collection box provided.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, outcomes of the project will be given to all participants via email.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, and we hope that you will accept our invitation to be involved.

This is research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 1930)

For more information regarding ethical approval of the project only, the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on (08) 8201 3116, by fax on (08) 8201 2035, or by email to human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Project Title: Choosing a Preschool in South Australia: Understanding Parental Decision-Making?

INSTRUCTIONS

This study seeks to better understand how parents/caregivers of South Australian preschoolers decide on a preschool, and how they feel about the process. Please clearly mark all appropriate responses with a tick. If a correction needs to be made, please place a cross through the error and mark the correct response. If you have chosen a paper version of the questionnaire, once you have completed it, you can either place it in the collection box at your child's preschool marked *Choosing a Preschool* or return it via mail in the provided stamped and self-addressed envelope. **Thank you!**

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. Gender of person completing the questionnaire:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other/unspecified

2. Your educational status (*Please tick to highest level)*

- ☐ Completed Year 10
- ☐ Completed year 12
- ☐ Completed trade certificate
- ☐ Completed Diploma or equivalent
- ☐ Completed undergraduate degree
- ☐ Completed post-graduate degree
- ☐ Not applicable

3. Your Current Employment

- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Studying Full Time
- ☐ Studying Part Time
- ☐ Working Full Time
- ☐ Working Part Time
- ☐ On Leave
- ☐ Other

4. Number of siblings of your child:

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4 or more

5. Languages other than English spoken at home *(Please complete)*

……

6. Post Code *(Please complete)*

……

7. Would you describe your choice of preschool:

☐ Your sole decision (if so, go to the next section)

How would you describe the relationship to the person with whom you shared this decision?

II. RESEARCHING THE PRESCHOOL

1. How did you search for a preschool AND how useful was that method on a scale of 1 to 5? *(tick more than one if relevant*)

☐ Online	1	2	3	4	5
☐ Hard copy materials (e.g. brochures/pamphlets)	1	2	3	4	5

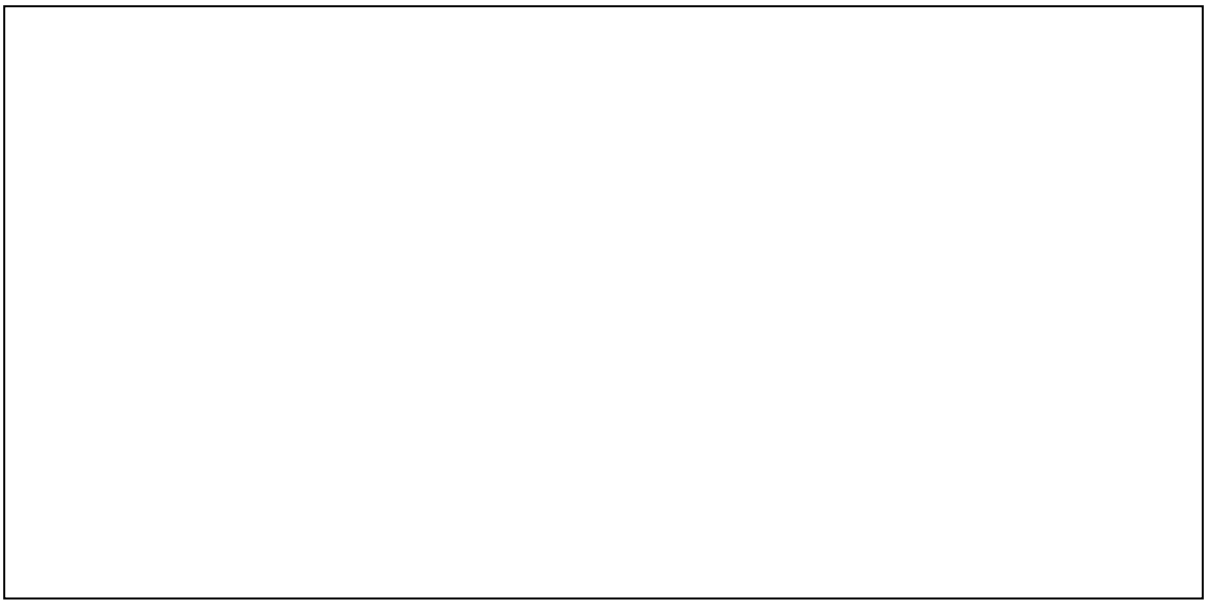
☐ Word of mouth 1 2 3 4 5

☐ Other (please explain): _____

2. How did you go about evaluating between preschools for your child?

3. While looking at the promotional materials, what impressed you most about this preschool?

4. Were there any preschools you *did not want* your child to go to? If so, please explain:



III. CHOOSING THE PRESCHOOL

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how important were the following factors in your choice? (please circle your answer)

1. Appearance and state of the environment and equipment (furniture, outside space, activity areas, light, openness and so on)	1	2	3	4	5
2. Proximity to home or work	1	2	3	4	5
3. Siblings already attended/ing	1	2	3	4	5
4. Connection with future primary (secondary) setting	1	2	3	4	5
5. Costs and Availability	1	2	3	4	5

6. Friends and/or family recommendation 1 2 3 4 5

7. What other factors were important in your decision?

IV. PARENTS AS CONSUMERS OF PRESCHOOL

1. What do you mostly hope/want your child to gain from their preschool experience?

2.. What did you know about the Montessori method before you enrolled your child in this preschool?

3. Can you tell me a little about the Montessori method you are seeing in the preschool your child is now attending?

4. What is your idea of 'quality' in preschool education?

5. Can you tell me how you felt while you looked at the advertising materials or the website OR while you visited the preschool(s) you were considering for your child(ren)? (*Feel free to tick more than one)*

□ calm and happy	□ I felt worried and anxious
□ hopeful and excited	□ I liked the photos
□ my child would learn a lot and be stimulated	□ I could not relate to the pictures
□ my child would be safe, cared for and loved	□ sad and worried
□ other (please explain below)	

6. How would you describe the process of choosing? (was it stressful, pleasant, exciting?)

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME! YOUR TIME AND YOUR CONTRIBUTION ARE GREATLY APPRECIATED.

Appendix 3: Parents' Consent Form

CONSENT FORM for PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(for parents)

I…….. hereby consent to participate in, as requested, in the Information Sheet for the research project,

Choosing a Preschool in South Australia: Understanding Parental Decision-Making

1. I have the read the information provided in the Information Sheet;
2. Details and procedures of any risks have been explained to my satisfaction;
3. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference;
4. I understand that:
    a. I may not benefit directly from taking part in this research;
    b. My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time;
    c. While the information gained through this study may be published, I will not be identified and individual information will remain confidential.
5. I will participate in this study by:

□ completing the questionnaire online; OR

□ completing a paper copy of the questionnaire

SIGNATURES

Participant…… **Date**……...

I certify that through the Information Sheet I have explained the study to the participant and consider that he/she understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher' Name ……Valentina Bertotti

Researcher's Signature …….. Date…….