

ADAPTED DELIVERY: HOW CHILDCARE WORKERS AND PARENTS PRODUCE
CARE IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF CHENNAI

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From inception to completion, this dissertation consumed four years of my life, and I must emphasize that it truly took a village to bring it to fruition. Two of those years were spent in India conducting fieldwork and surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic hit us in 2020, about one month after I started my fieldwork. Just as I was getting into the swing of things, meeting interlocutors, organizing focus groups, and conducting interviews, I was put on hold. This hold lasted for a year, and I was only able to return to fieldwork in early 2021. My fieldwork research was further suspended several times for different lengths of time, including during the second wave of the pandemic when my research assistant was infected with COVID-19 and had to be hospitalized. I emphasize the challenges to convey my deep gratitude to everyone who has provided me with the strength to endure this project (which at times I contemplated dropping). Most crucially, if it were not for my partner, who lived with me during this time, I would have left India right when the pandemic started, and this project would not have happened. Nallasivan is the person we should thank for the completion of this dissertation.

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Patrick's mentoring and intellectual stimulation is what makes one a true scholar. He pushes you to think deeper, differently and extremely theoretically. What is really rewarding is that Patrick always seeks to find good in all situations, even the bad ones. In the pursuit of knowledge, Patrick motivates you to identify and theorize about the configurations of sociality that can improve people's well-being. In other words, Patrick propels you to discover the conditions that lessen inequality. This is highly aligned with my own value system and goals in knowledge production. Thus, there could be no better advisor, mentor, and friend for me!

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INTRODUCTION

Many renowned scholars have long argued and demonstrated that the highest return on investment that any government can make is in early childhood interventions (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, and McLanahan 2005; Richter et al. 2017; García et al. 2019). Childcare programs are also high on the global development agenda. According to conservative estimates, nearly 250 million children, or one in three children worldwide, may not reach their developmental potential due to extreme poverty or stunting (Black et al. 2017). Childcare programs are thus crucial to prevent and minimize such risks, but scholars emphasize that to enhance children's development, governments need to ensure that such programs are accessible and high quality (Drèze 2006; UN 2015; Britto et al. 2017; Berlinski and Schady 2015).

Compared to other forms of childcare, state-provisioned or subsidized services can go furthest in equalizing access and lessen socio-economic inequalities across groups (Morgan 2005). Public childcare is also among the most significant welfare measures that shifts some care responsibilities from families and mothers to the state (Fraser 1995). In doing so, it challenges unequal gender relations in both paid and unpaid work (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007; Poeschl 2008; Bianchi and Milkie 2010).

While the widespread benefits of public childcare are obvious, and although countries around the world have created new childcare programs, we know surprisingly little about how such programs operate and what shapes their quality in the Majority World¹ (Samman et al. 2016; Yoshikawa et al. 2018; Draper et al. 2022). In particular, we lack evidence and theory to understand

¹ In this dissertation, I utilize the Majority World as a substitute for the commonly used term “the global south.” While contested like other terms dividing the world into two parts, the Majority World is preferred because it signifies countries where the majority of the world's population resides, in contrast to Minority World (developed, industrialized or high-income countries) (Alam 2008).

how quality of public childcare can be attained in places where such services are needed most—rapidly urbanizing places, characterized by resource scarcity, social exclusion, and weak state capacity (Rao 2010; Auerbach et al. 2018; Berlinski and Schady 2015).

This dissertation seeks to tackle these issues using the case of India. With over one third of children stunted (36%), India has some of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world (IIPS and ICF 2021). Scholars are still grappling with the “Indian enigma”—the perplexing issue of why children in India are shorter than those from economically poorer countries (Ramachandran and Deshpande 2021). In 1975, the Government of India established a comprehensive program to fight malnutrition and high infant mortality called The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). The ICDS is now the world’s longest running and largest free universal early childhood care and education program. It serves 82 million children under age six across the country through 1.3 million childcare centers called *anganwadis* (AWCs)² (Chakrabarti et al. 2019). While the scheme is open to all children, the focus is on economically disadvantaged children. The ICDS follows a holistic life-cycle approach, starting with nutrition and health interventions for adolescent girls, tracking them through to adulthood and pregnancy, childbirth and then moving onto their children. Anganwadis are staffed by two female workers, a teacher and a helper who provide informal pre-school education, supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring and health check-ups for children ages 2-5.

Despite receiving significant criticism that the program suffers from problems in design and poor implementation (GoI 2011; Gragnolati et al. 2006; Biswas and Verma 2009; Saxena and Srivastava 2009; Palriwala and Neetha 2011), the scheme has been recognized for its positive

² The Hindi term *Angan* means courtyard and conveys the concept of ‘bringing services to children’s doorsteps’ (Rao and Kaul 2018).

contributions towards improving children's health and nutritional status, reducing children's mortality rates and the prevalence of malnutrition (NCAER 2001; NIPCCD 2006; Kaul 2002).

Most importantly, scholars and policy-makers note that the program has not been implemented evenly, and provision of services and their quality varies widely across and within states (GoI 2011; MWCD 2015; CIRCUS 2006; NIPCCD 2006; Kaul et al. 2017). These evaluations report high variations in nutrition provision, presence of staff, quality of early childhood education, meals, infrastructure (e.g., building quality; toilet and water facilities); equipment and resources and so on. In short, service delivery varies in almost any parameter. In many places, rather than providing comprehensive early childhood care and education, anganwadis serve at best as nutrition centers (Kaul et al. 2017).

Studies attribute state-level variations in welfare provision to macro-level factors like political commitment and institutional capacity or their interplay (Sinha 2006; Saxena and Srivastava 2009; Verma, Gupta, and Birner 2018; Sundararaman 2006). However, these factors do not fully explain the variations that persist *within* the states. The literature on economic and social development outcomes in “developing” countries has predominantly focused on national, cross-national, or sub-national analyses, deploying theories of developmental state, state capacity, good governance, or mobilization of civil society (Centeno et al. 2017; Deolalikar, Jha, and Quising 2015; Evans and Heller 2015; Agarwala 2013). This scholarship, while highly significant, has not examined inequalities in welfare provision at the local unit, where welfare is actually delivered. In short, we lack explanations for why quality of public services, like childcare vary even when these higher-order factors of politics and bureaucratic capacity are held constant, or why some groups continue to experience disadvantage and exclusion even in the “best-scenario” cases in diverse contexts (Diwakar G. 2014; Lewis and Diamond 2015).

Despite the supposed standardization of services at the state and district levels, literature reveals significant variations in ICDS childcare provision even within states, districts or cities (Chudasama et al. 2015 for Gujarat; Malik et al. 2015 for Delhi; Kaul et al. 2017 for Rajasthan, Telangana, Assam; Kosec et al. 2015 for Bihar; Velayutham 2013 and Ramamoorthy, Patil, and Joseph 2017 for Tamil Nadu; Jain et al. 2020 for Madhya Pradesh). These studies document how centers vary in operating hours, in workers' knowledge about guidelines and behaviors, teaching activities, children's feeding, health checkups, immunizations, and in center's infrastructure, including amenities, educational materials and equipment.

There is little research on what drives these variations, as if there is a tacit acceptance that unevenness in childcare provision is inevitable due to significant capacity constraints. How childcare is delivered is ultimately in the hands of frontline workers and research suggests that multiple factors matter for their performance, including individual, workplace and community factors (e.g., John et al. 2020; Kosec et al. 2015; Verma, Gupta, and Birner 2018). Yet they do not specify the processes by which these factors produce systematic variations in childcare quality.

These vitally important yet unexplained differences in anganwadi functioning drive the empirical question of this dissertation: ***why does the quality of public childcare services, which are ostensibly standardized, varies significantly at the neighborhood level?*** This question touches on many important theoretical issues, but its central focus is to unravel the conditions that promote quality of childcare services in contexts characterized by resource constraints, high inequality, and limited institutional support.

The provision of high-quality childcare services at scale is a challenging task due to the complexity of services offered and the numerous issues faced at different administrative and political levels (Yoshikawa et al. 2018). At the macro (and meso) levels, public childcare

implementation requires political commitment to fund and sustain childcare programs, capable Weberian or deliberative bureaucracy, and engagement with broad sections of civil society to reinforce bureaucratic effectiveness (Evans and Heller 2015; Mangla 2022). At the micro level, or the last mile of service delivery, frontline workers are the most important “variable” who shape the kind of services people actually receive. If they are to seek quality in service delivery, they need to be competent, professional, and have the autonomy to adapt policies to better suit the communities they work with (Ryan and Deci 2000).

The ICDS provides comprehensive multicomponent services that are much more complex to implement than universal technical solutions like distributing low-cost vaccines (Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews 2013). Delivering a package of health, nutrition and early education services cannot be mechanized, such services are labor-intensive and require domain-specific expertise, contextual knowledge and numerous discretionary face-to-face interactions (Rao and Kaul 2018; Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). Monitoring and measuring the quality of childcare is also challenging, as children cannot evaluate them, parents may overestimate quality or lack knowledge about what constitutes it (Bassok et al. 2018). Meanwhile, direct monitoring by supervisors may not be possible (Bruns, Macdonald, and Schneider 2019; Yoshikawa et al. 2018).

In the case of ICDS (but also in many similar programs), one undertrained, overburdened and underpaid caregiver is responsible for providing all these multi-purpose services (Rao and Kaul 2018). It is thus essential to understand how these workers carry out multiple tasks and provide high-quality childcare under such constraints. As scholars show, the effectiveness of individual teachers is the single most important school-level factor in determining children and students’ learning and development outcomes (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff 2014; Hanushek and Rivkin 2010; Foundation For Child Development 2020; Burchinal 2018).

I argue that in my case—the south Indian city of Chennai—the macro-level factors, such as political commitment and bureaucratic capacity, reinforced by citizen demand, led to a widespread provision of accessible childcare services (Rajivan 2006; Srinivasan 2015). However, these factors have not been sufficient to ensure that childcare quality is uniform at the childcare center level. To account for these variations, and to understand under what conditions high-quality childcare services are *produced*, I focus on state-society relations in the neighborhoods of Chennai. Notably, scholars examining state-society relations typically focus on how state structures at the national (or increasingly subnational level) are embedded in civil society (Evans 1995; Heller 1999; Evans and Heller 2015; Mangla 2022).³ This dissertation takes this literature forward, by revealing how micro-dynamics of state-society interactions at the neighborhood-level are crucial to the success of public services. In so doing, it also contributes to a growing scholarship on ‘bureaucratic embeddedness’ in political science (Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks 2017) and ‘the social life of the state’ in political sociology (Annavarapu and Levenson 2021).

My findings reveal that variations in the quality of childcare services result from power relations between frontline agents and residents within a given neighborhood. Each neighborhood is a particular social space, where residents are characterized by class and caste distinctions, granting them different forms of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Specifically, demands for better care can be made when residents possess economic capital that signals their expectations for childcare quality through credible threats of exit from unsatisfactory services or sometimes through collective claims-making. However, compared to better-off areas, due to multiple deprivations and constraints many poor neighborhoods lack both options.

³ Embeddedness refers to the dense interactive ties that connect “the state administratively and politically to civil society” (Evans and Heller 2015).

Despite the crucial role of care workers for children's well-being, ICDS teachers are underpaid, overworked, and lack support from their authorities, which hinders their ability to provide quality care and may incentivize them to deliver only the bare minimum. Moreover, because institutional supervision of care work is rather weak, teachers have a certain level of discretion in caregiving. Considering high caste and class inequalities in Chennai and India as a whole (Vithayathil and Singh 2012; Singh, Vithayathil, and Pradhan 2019; Bharathi et al. 2021), with little professionalization of workers to overcome them, the delivery of services is bound to be inflected by teachers' cultural beliefs about caste and class.

I argue that under these conditions, the extent to which teachers seek quality in care provision is first shaped by their perceptions of parents' social status and their expectations for care. These perceptions are a function of *place-based caste and class distinctions*. Second, how teachers respond to parents' expectations for care is mediated by their professional identities. Whether they see themselves as educators, social workers or task implementers informs their decision to go the extra mile or seek to minimize their effort in caregiving.

My findings bring relational theories of agency and action into practice to reveal when and how the state can deliver high-quality public childcare. I argue that when citizens pressure frontline workers to perform better by signaling their demands and expectations, and provided the frontline workers are competent and proactive in responding to these demands, the state can provide high-quality complex services like childcare. This in turn builds citizens' trust in state institutions and creates virtuous cycles of high-quality service delivery. However, when the frontline agents are passive and withdrawn from their institutional objectives, and citizens either submit to or exit unsatisfactory services rather than demanding improvements, it leads to low expectations and a vicious cycle of low-quality services.

THE CASE OF CHENNAI AND TAMIL NADU

I situate my research in Chennai, the capital of southern Indian state Tamil Nadu. Given Tamil Nadu's historical success in promoting nutrition and childcare interventions, one might expect that its childcare centers would exhibit relatively low variation in their functioning. But even there, multiple institutional constraints and rapid urbanization has made it challenging for the state to cover large populations and ensure uniform quality of childcare.

In Tamil Nadu, public welfare programs and services have contributed to some of the best social development indicators in India, including population health and educational attainment, often second only to Kerala (Sinha 2016; Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan 2021). All major social sector programs, including healthcare follow a universal approach, providing free public education, healthcare and public distribution system (PDS) providing subsidized foodgrains, whereas many other states use targeting for benefit provision (Sinha 2016). Historically, many frontline providers who come from the same backgrounds as the populations they serve, such as lower caste or poor rural communities, have raised awareness about people's entitlements, making them more responsive and willing to work even in remote areas (ibid; Srinivasan 2015). Dipa Sinha (2016) also reports that according to a large household survey conducted by Public Affairs Committee, Tamil Nadu was at the top in providing quality of public services among 24 states.⁴

The achievements in social development services and outcomes, can be attributed to a long history of political mobilization of lower castes in the name of "Davidian identity," which induced sustained political commitments and investment in universal social policies and expansion of crucial public services, including childcare, education, and healthcare (Srinivasan 2015; Singh

⁴ Public services included were drinking water, healthcare, road transport, public distribution system, primary schools and childcare system.

2015; Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan 2021). Thanks to Dravidian mobilization compared to other states, Tamil Nadu has also ensured more equitable access to public services and human development outcomes across caste groups (Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan 2021).

Thus, it is probably not surprising that Tamil Nadu stands out as one of the best-performing states in effectively delivering ICDS childcare services in India (Drèze 2006; Rajivan 2006; GoI 2011; Drèze and Khera 2012; Srinivasan 2015). Compared to other states, in Tamil Nadu ICDS often outperforms others in numerous indicators, such as a wide network of centers, longer working hours, better infrastructure facilities, quality of nutrition, greater staff training, their regularity, higher salaries and regular payment (CIRCUS 2006; Srinivasan 2015).

Tamil Nadu has a long-standing history of providing nutrition programs, with public provision of meals for children dating back to 1920. The Justice Party introduced mid-day meals in some government schools long before nutrition was a priority on the central government's agenda (Rajivan 2006). Later, in 1956, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu piloted free school noon-meals in Chennai and then expanded them to other districts. But it was only in 1982 that the program was significantly expanded and upgraded to a "Nutritious noon meal scheme" by the Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran (known as MGR), who has become well-known as the "champion" of noon meals programs (Harriss 1991). Under MGR's leadership the program was both highly visible and immensely popular. His party—All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—functionaries were actively involved in supervising its implementation across the state, leveraging the scheme to mobilize vote banks and consolidate a personal cult (Moses 1983). The program was successful for several reasons: it visibly contributed to children's well-being, demonstrating the government's concern for the poor, while also providing

employment opportunities for many women (Harriss 1991). Thus, the political investment in nutrition paid off in many domains (Narayan 2018).

In the 1970s, Tamil Nadu began running the central government's ICDS program. And a few years later the state launched its own innovative nutrition program on a pilot basis called Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Program (TINP). The program came about through serendipity.⁵ In response to a solicitation letter from the World Bank aimed at garnering interest in a children's nutrition program, every state in India had the opportunity to opt-in for funding. However, only Tamil Nadu expressed interest. Although its Social Welfare ministry was initially indifferent to the proposal, an enthusiastic bureaucrat seized the opportunity, propelled by his concern for nutritional issues. He took the lead and rallied support from various counterparts to realize the program. The program focused on children ages 0-3 and was gradually expanded across the state. It operated through village nutrition centers staffed with highly trained women nutrition counselors. They traveled door to door in their villages to promote healthy behaviors and nutrition of pregnant women and newborns. TINP was carefully planned and implemented, deemed a success and a contributor to large-scale reduction in malnutrition (Heaver 2002; Narayan 2018). Later on, TINP was merged with the ICDS. TINP was important because after the merger, the program retained numerous centers and its functionaries. This afforded the state an advantage in establishing a comprehensive network of childcare facilities.

Similar to mid-day meals, the ICDS have also been a politically significant program. The two main Dravidian political parties—the aforementioned AIADMK and its main rival Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)—often won elections based on their promises to enhance the childcare provision. Resultantly, the political implications of the program have further incentivized

⁵ Author interview with retired social welfare official who was the initiator of TINP program mentioned in the story.

even greater accountability of an already efficient administration (Rajivan 2006; Sinha 2016; Narayan 2018). The public provision of food created expectations of smooth functioning, so a drop in performance was observed and questioned (Narayan 2018). Anuradha Khatri Rajivan (2006) calls ICDS “the sandwich program” because of the unique combination of political pressure from above and from below through public expectations. By the turn of the millennium, Tamil Nadu’s spending on nutrition alone was more than all the other states combined (Narayan 2018).

Over the last several decades, Tamil Nadu has made many investments in the ICDS making its program and anganwadis (or palwadis in Tamil and hereafter, used interchangeably with AWC) surpass those in other states in numerous aspects, including infrastructure, regularity, range of services, training of workers, and the quality of nutrition, to name a few (Narayan 2018). It pioneered various childcare components, including the provision of more nutritious meals, early education, and the identification of disabilities in children at early stages. For example, the ICDS administration in Tamil Nadu created a menu where each day children are provided with a different type of hot-cooked meal, and they are served eggs three times a week. In contrast, even today palwadis in many northern and central Indian states do not provide eggs (Bhatnagar 2018).

It was also one of the first states to promote early childhood education. In consultation with childcare experts, the ICDS administration in Tamil Nadu developed a play-based curriculum, including monthly themes and weekly and daily activity plans detailing how teachers should engage children in developmentally stimulating activities (MWCD and NIPCCD 2013). Palwadis also operate the longest hours in the country: the official working day is six hours (as opposed to four in other states). Beyond services, the state, and especially the capital Chennai, has upgraded palwadi infrastructure, renovating buildings, establishing toilets, tap water, fans and other basic

amenities. Most buildings are *pucca* (solid and permanent structure, built using cement), with proper tiles, roofs, tap water and toilets (Ramamoorthy, Patil, and Joseph 2017).

At the time of this research there were 1,806 AWCs across Chennai. According to the National Family and Health Survey in 2005-06, palwadis had a high geographic coverage, they were accessible by 90% of children living in slum, non-slum and poorest locations (Gupta, Arnold, and Lhungdim 2009). This coverage was significantly higher than that in other mega-cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, or Hyderabad as well as smaller sized (tier-two) cities (ibid). According to a retired UNICEF expert in Chennai, the years between 1990 and around 2000s marked a ‘golden period’ for palwadi services. Enthusiastic bureaucrats in the municipal corporation, and especially active IAS officers sought various improvements in childcare provision.⁶ During this period the municipality collaborated with the UNICEF on providing toys and training teachers to conduct Montessori classes in select centers.

However, despite having established a well-structured and relatively functioning network of palwadis, where most teachers show up to work and deliver food, evidence suggests that quality of services is uneven across neighborhoods. Many research, activist and journalistic reports and my own findings indicate very poor conditions in certain centers, such as lacking facilities, food and teaching, especially in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the city (ActionAid 2010; Velayutham 2013; Omjasvin 2023; Ramakrishnan 2022; Aditi R 2018; Sampath 2018).

Chennai is facing challenges in providing uniform quality in public childcare services, because of various factors, such as the increased workload of teachers caused by the expansion of ICDS services, inadequate support for staff and resources, as well as the additional pressures of urbanization. In recent years, the ICDS programming has been extended by both the Tamil Nadu

⁶ Author interview with a retired Unicef, an international organization officer, Chennai, July 29, 2019.

government as well as the central government. For example, in 2018, the Indian Government launched the *Poshan Abhyaan* scheme to accelerate the reduction of children’s malnutrition. The scheme demands significant time from frontline workers to conduct home visits, awareness events, reporting and frequent growth monitoring. Tamil Nadu itself has done additional nutrition programming for adolescent girls. Yet, despite increasing work demands teachers continue to receive little training, low wages, and often face various infrastructure and staffing constraints.

While Tamil Nadu teachers and helpers receive among the highest wages and benefits in the country, given their high workload and responsibilities, they continue to be highly underpaid and overworked (Center For Policy Research 2018). They are not on the government payroll but are considered honorary part-time workers. Relative to other comparable government employees their salaries are among the lowest, their workdays are long, and with little professionalization, they juggle multiple tasks, such as childcare, reporting, and counseling mothers at the same time.

Moreover, as one of the fastest growing cities in the world, Chennai has become home to 8.6 million people (Gowri et al. 2008), a third of whom live in informal settlements often referred to as “slums” (Saharan 2019). The rapid urbanization and growth of informal settlements, which are socially diverse, are putting immense pressure on workers to provide services to a large number of disadvantaged beneficiaries living in substandard housing (Auerbach et al. 2018). Chennai represents trends witnessed in cities across the Majority World: rapid population growth, challenging delivery of infrastructure and services, and institutional complexity (Ren 2018; Auerbach et al. 2018).⁷ What these developments imply is that while Chennai has been successful in establishing relatively well functioning childcare centers, urban growth and informality complicates service delivery. This suggests that there is likely a wide spectrum of center quality,

⁷ Settlements—often referred to as “slums”—are areas of at least 60-70 households of poorly built congested tenements usually with inadequate infrastructure (GoI 2011).

ranging from those that exhibit relatively high standards to those that show significant deficiencies. Collectively, the organizational constraints combined with challenges posed by urbanization underscore the need to examine how teachers can deliver quality care in these demanding conditions.

PALWADI OPERATION

Workers' tasks. The palwadis are run by two female employees: a teacher and a helper. Since their inception, the Indian government has referred to these employees as anganwadi workers and helpers, but in Tamil Nadu, they are commonly known as teachers. Each palwadi caters to around 25 children, and typically less. The centers are open daily from 9 am to 3.30 pm. Teachers have to follow a particular routine: in the morning for about two hours, they have to follow ICDS designed syllabus and conduct some basic learning activities: rhymes, story-telling, games and physical exercises. A helper follows instructions from the teacher and her primary tasks are cooking, cleaning, feeding and supervising children. Helpers can also pick up and drop off children from their home. Around noon staff serve hot lunch meals, after which children are put to sleep on the mats on the floor, while teachers start their reporting work using phone-apps and paper registers. On certain days each month teachers conduct growth monitoring (measuring height and weight) of all children under six in the neighborhood, distribute supplementary nutrition to children and pregnant women, and conduct various awareness meeting for mothers, families and other programming related to nutrition and public health. A large portion of teachers' time goes into collecting data about the local population and reporting on it to the block office. Teachers maintain 11 registers and use ICDS designed mobile phone applications to document their intake and distribution of supplies, children's growth data, and other activities carried out in the center. Teachers are also tasked with extra duties, such as giving polio drops, carrying out census and

other surveys, participating in election work and collecting information in relation to schemes for women and children. When the government requests teachers to work on surveys and elections, their daily activities with children take a back seat. While teachers provide different types of services, I focus on how they deliver childcare. In general, teachers report significant stress and dissatisfaction with the workload and consider it inadequate based on the pay they receive (Sreerekha 2017).

Supervision. Teachers and helpers from a particular area are grouped into clusters of about 25 palwadis, which then are supervised by one supervisor. Supervisors have to visit each palwadi for unannounced inspection about once a month. In practice, they do not manage to visit all the centers and tend to skip the ones they consider working well. Due to vacancies one supervisor may have to monitor more than double of their allocated palwadis (about 50). This makes it impossible for them to visit all centers each month. During the visit, supervisors check if a palwadi is open, inspects its records, food quality, cleanliness, interacts with children to understand their speaking skills and basic cognitive abilities, and writes a monthly report about the working of each center. This report includes the supervisor's personal observations and recommendations. Every staff member has a government issued mobile phone with the ICDS application where teachers enter data about their beneficiaries and upload pictures of their activities with children or mothers. These are then checked by both supervisors and other block-level clerks. Phones are the primary tool for supervisors to monitor and communicate with teachers.

The next level of management is the project officer, who sits in a block office and manages a geographic cluster of 100-120 palwadis. Given this large number of centers, project officers can visit each palwadi only about once in two or three months. In short, direct supervision of palwadis

is rather weak, supervisory staff are stretched out over many palwadis and the closest monitoring that palwadis experience is by the beneficiaries themselves.

Childcare users. In 2019-20, in urban Tamil Nadu 49% of children ages 36-71 months went to palwadis for early preschool education and 67% received any type of services (health, nutrition or preschool) (IIPS and ICF 2021b). In terms of caste, Scheduled Castes are most likely to use palwadis for preschool (67% report using palwadis), compared to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (55%) and Others (50%) (ibid).⁸ In Chennai, mothers who use palwadi services are typically homemakers, or daily wage workers in the informal sector, though there are exceptions. Many of their households earn less than Rs10,000 Rs per month (~US\$140 dollars). This is much below the average income of about US\$420 dollars of an urban household. Mothers who use palwadis often lack proximate family or kin support for care. Thus, for them palwadis provide a valuable childcare service.

An interlude on caste

Given the centrality of caste in this dissertation, a brief explanation of the caste system is warranted. In India, caste is a complex multifaceted structure consisting of innumerable distinctions and hierarchical ranking of endogenous groups which compete with each other for social superiority. At the bottom of this caste hierarchy are Dalits (literally “broken” or “oppressed”), previously known as untouchables, which the Government of India officially calls as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and offers special treatment in the form of reservations in education, public sector employment and legislation.⁹ As Nathaniel Roberts (2016) notes, the divide between

⁸ Data on caste not disaggregated by location.

⁹ The term ‘Scheduled Caste (SC)’ as well as ‘Scheduled Tribe (ST)’ originate from the Constitution Order enacted in 1950, which designates specific castes and tribes for special treatment, including reservations in legislation, public sector employment, and government-run educational institutions (World Bank 2011). While ST groups experience similar discrimination to SCs, due to their negligible presence in Chennai, my research focuses mainly on SCs and other groups.

Dalits and non-Dalits is the most prominent and distinctive division among castes, and cannot be reduced to the numerous divisions between individual castes. The distinctions between non-Dalits accord some level of privilege or respect to each sub-caste. By contrast, the division between Dalits and non-Dalits is founded on the deliberate and organized degradation of the former group by the latter. The systematic oppression of Dalits is enduring, determined by one's lineage, and perceived as defining an individual's physical and psychological attributes, which are overwhelmingly negative in nature (Mosse 1996; Roberts 2016). In the caste hierarchy, intermediary caste groups above Dalits (SCs), are the Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and Other Backwards Classes (OBCs). In 1989, Tamil Nadu independently from the union government created a special MBC category within the OBC category as part of its affirmative action policy to ensure adequate representation of backward castes in reservation policies. The terms, SC, OBC and MBC are politically, economically and socially significant because they include caste names that receive reservations in legislation, public sector employment and government-run educational institutions. Although the general caste category, which includes some forward caste groups with Brahmins at the top, is the most advantaged group in the caste hierarchy, its members do not receive reservations based on their caste status. In Tamil Nadu, SCs constitute 23.7%, OBCs 45.4% and MBCs 23.6% and general caste only 3% of population (Ananthpur et al. 2022).

In short, while discrimination based on caste is highly condemned in public, many Dalits (similar to Scheduled Tribes) continue to experience exclusion, discrimination and usually exhibit worse human development outcomes compared to other groups (World Bank 2011; Still 2015; Borooah et al. 2015). Untouchability and discrimination against Dalits is still highly prevalent in villages (Shah et al. 2006), and even in cities Dalits face various adversities. They tend to live in the poorest areas and slums, engage in casual wage labor and domestic services, and various

cleaning jobs significantly more than other groups (World Bank 2011; Still 2015). Even when standards of living improve for Dalits, they do so at a much slower pace than for other groups and as a group Dalits remain severely disadvantaged economically (Heyer 2000; Heyer 2010).

WHAT MAKES FRONTLINE WORKERS ACCOUNTABLE?

Public childcare workers, who provide services in resource scarce and highly demanding environment, are a classic case of street-level bureaucrats as they inevitably use discretion and autonomy to develop routines to cope with daunting tasks (Lipsky 1980). Despite their pivotal role in implementing policies, frontline agents are typically undervalued, undercompensated, and often viewed as dispensable (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010). Nevertheless, these workers possess significant power in the last-mile implementation of policies, as they make decisions that directly impact people's lives, determining who receives what services and benefits. To explain how such workers use discretion to deliver services, scholars of organizations and bureaucracy emphasize various influences from within an organization (Brodkin 2012; Oberfield 2014).

The notion of classic Weberian bureaucracy assumes that frontline workers deliver services according to the rules and expectations of the state because they are professionalized and motivated by incentives, such as promotions and career opportunities. Meritocratic structures develop “bureaucratic ethos” which rewards competence, honesty and impartiality (Du Gay 2005). Rooted in this theoretical foundation, scholars in economics and political science have developed and tested various principal-agent frameworks to understand dilemmas of task delegation and bureaucratic behavior (Chaudhury et al. 2006; Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan 2012, 201; Gailmard and Patty 2012). This literature focuses on how principals, broadly speaking, can employ various incentive and monitoring schemes, such as higher wages, pay for performance or screening

systems in recruitment to induce agents to act in line with principal's interest and exert higher effort (Rose-Ackerman 1986; Dixit 2002; Pepinsky, Pierskalla, and Sacks 2017).

Akshay Mangla (2022) argues that while this literature emphasizes hierarchical and authority relations it cannot fully account for discretion at the frontline. Principal-agent models fail to address the multiplicity of tasks and several hierarchies of accountability that are inherent in some cases of public provisioning. The nature of bureaucracies in the Majority World is also such that frontline workers are responsible for numerous policy rules and tasks which they juggle in extreme scarcity conditions. Moreover, supervision and formal mechanisms of accountability are often weak or ineffective (Lotta et al. 2022). Inevitably, in such contexts "street-level" discretion is amplified (Mangla 2022 citing Kapur and Mukhopadhyay 2007; Dasgupta and Kapur 2020).

Where formal systems of monitoring and incentives are weak or insufficient, scholars have turned to other organizational features, such as professionalization and bureaucratic norms. In cases where monitoring of frontline workers is dispersed or periodic, professionalization can instill intrinsic motivation. Two notable cases are Herbert Kaufman's (1967) forest rangers and Judith Tendler's (1997) community health agents. Kaufman examined what motivated forest rangers in the United States Forest Service, who were dispersed across the US, far from their central headquarters in Washington DC to comply with the rules rather than act in self-interested way. He finds that the most important factor for bureaucrats to conform to organization's goals was their willingness to do the work and capacity. The motivation to be a forest ranger was identified through recruitment. The organization recruited workers early, while they were still in high school, but at a later stage it discouraged candidates from applying by explaining the drawbacks of the job, such as low pay and hard work. In so doing, it selected only those who truly loved outdoors and being

in the forest. The rangers' capacity was built during intensive training and several years of apprenticeships. These two processes ensured that rangers internalized organizational values and voluntarily conformed to rules without needing strict supervision.

In another pioneering study of government programs in northeast Brazil, Judith Tendler (1997) explored how community health agents were able to provide exceptional preventive health services despite the prevailing norms of patronage and corruption. One of the crucial factors was again the hiring process that was transparent, competitive, and meritocratic. The selection process followed by intensive training instilled a sense of “calling” and accorded honor to the job. State's involvement with civil society organizations and public campaigns also mattered for inducing greater awareness and monitoring of health agents by communities themselves. These and more recent studies emphasize that frontline agents tend to work in more ‘client-oriented’ ways when organizational structures promote clarity of goals (Meyers et al 1998; Aiyar and Bhattacharya 2016), flexibility in job roles (Schorr 1988; Honig 2018a), meritocratic recruitment, and professionalization among workers (Tendler 1997; Zarychta et al. 2020).

Building on these ideas, more recent literature promotes the notion of bureaucratic norms that can motivate agents to work beyond narrow self-interest in places lacking capacity and formal accountability (Crook and Ayee 2006; Mangla 2015; McDonnell 2017). Bureaucratic norms are informal rules and practices that influence the collective understandings and behaviors of public servants (Mangla 2022). These norms guide interpretations of policy and course of action in implementation. By examining primary education in northern Indian states, Akshay Mangla identifies two types of bureaucratic norms. The “deliberative” norms help attain better education outcomes by fostering problem-solving orientation among education officials and allowing them to adapt policies according to local context and promote citizen participation. The “legalistic”

norms encourage rule-based orientation and strict interpretation of policy which over time leads to lower quality services.

The ICDS departs from both the ideals of meritocratic bureaucracy and deliberative bureaucratic norms. Officially, the ICDS seeks candidates based on certain demographic characteristics: teachers need to be women, with at least high school degree (10th standard) (helpers need 8th standard), they have to be mothers, have to meet certain age criteria, and if there is quota to be filled, meet a particular caste requirement. They get additional points if they are from the same area as the center for which a teacher is recruited. Historically, the ICDS has targeted widows and single mothers to provide employment opportunities for disadvantage women. Yet in practice jobs have largely benefited higher caste women with social connections and cultural capital (Gupta 2012).

Once teachers are recruited, teachers receive little training and professionalization. They are given 25-day teacher training focusing largely on technical aspects of nutrition and health, and task implementation, with very little training on childcare and high-touch aspects of care work. The ICDS hires married women with children, whose experience in raising their own children presumably makes workers well equipped to handle and take care of *any* children. Being mothers, teachers are supposed to know how to console a crying child or how to clean their ‘bottom.’ Yet taking care of one or two children of your own is very different from looking after 25 or more toddlers who are someone else’s kids.

The organization also offers few incentives and career opportunities to induce effort. The majority of women want childcare jobs to support their family financially, but having a government job also bestows some prestige, employment security, and some benefits (e.g., medical, festival). Occasionally the government grants pay raises and the teachers’ union can fight for some benefits,

but these actions are not tied to performance. Teachers can be promoted to supervisors only after 20-30 years of service. Even then, given the small number of supervisors required, the chances of promotion are slim. Monitoring consists of a small cadre of supervisors who oversee teachers' work mostly through phone calls, text messages, and monthly visits. The institution expects that teachers should be motivated by the salary itself, the prestige of having a government job, and the "social mission" orientation of childcare work. However, once recruited, teachers compare themselves to other workers who hold positions at a similar level in the government and develop a sense of unfairness. The job entails many responsibilities, high workload and stress, which they view as unjustified for their low pay (GoI 2011). Thus, theories that focus on organizational influences which are uniform for all teachers cannot explain why childcare quality varies across neighborhoods and why some teachers exert much more effort in care provision than others.

Moving away from organizational accountability mechanisms another strand of street-level bureaucrat literature focuses on how frontline workers' knowledge about policy, attitudes and beliefs shape their discretion in welfare provision (Maynard-Moody, Musheno, and Musheno 2003; Riccucci 2005; Watkins-Hayes 2009; Portillo 2012). Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2009) operationalizes these elements as professional identity, which guides workers' systematic routines and practices. These identities are self-conceptions of how frontline workers view their occupational role, their institution and their tasks. Professional identities can emerge when organizations fail to create shared and uniform understandings of how workers should perceive their role. The ICDS fits this description, and professional identities play an essential part in my argument. However, I will elaborate more on how they operate while unpacking my argument in the next section. Still, I suggest that professional identities alone do not tell us how their operationalization may be patterned by larger community characteristics in which frontline

workers are embedded. To address this, I will extend the theory of professional identities by incorporating place-based dynamics in my argument.

Literature on state-society relations and bottom-up accountability offer another mechanism by which bureaucrats are held accountable, thereby influencing public service delivery (Fox 1994; Evans 1997; Tsai 2007; Kruks-Wisner 2018). This scholarship analyzes a variety of strategies by which residents monitor and bargain with the state to attain public goods and services. A large literature emphasizes the role of political networks and brokers (Chatterjee 2004; Harriss 2006; Coelho and Venkat 2009; Crook and Ayee 2006; Auerbach 2019; Björkman 2021). Partha Chatterjee's (2004) framework differentiates between 'civil society' and 'political society' to explain how citizens, based on their class position, interact with the state in India. He argues that as violators of the law (e.g., through illegal squatting or stealing electricity) slum dwellers engage in "vote bank" politics to realize their rights to welfare. Meanwhile, as law abiding citizens, middle-class residents demand rights and welfare through legitimate civil society associations. Numerous empirical investigations have examined Chatterjee's claims, revealing various ways of how residents of informal settlements engage with popular politics (Harriss 2006; Jha, Rao, and Woolcock 2005; Berenschot 2010; De Wit and Berner 2009; Das and Walton 2015).

Adam Auerbach (2019) takes a comprehensive look into popular politics of urban slums in India and uncovers the key mechanisms through which their residents secure improved access to public goods. Based on ethnographic and survey data in mid-sized cities of Jaipur and Bhopal he finds that the degree of provision of public goods, such as paved roads, streetlights, tap water or sewer connections can be explained by levels of political organization within settlements, and their integration in larger party networks. Slums with dense networks of party workers, where a large number of them live and operate within the settlement, competing for resident following and

patronage, are better placed to demand development from the state than those with sparse or absent networks of party workers. The density of party networks is in turn determined by the population and ethnic diversity of settlements. In short, many urban scholars in India highlight brokers as key players of urban life, who bridge the gaps, be it material, institutional or informational gaps, thereby erasing the delineations between states and societies (Björkman 2021).

In contrast to political patronage, neighborhood associations are the dominant means by which middle-class make claims on the state (Fernandes 2006; Coelho and Venkat 2009; Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2009; Auerbach 2017; Harriss 2006; Lama-Rewal 2007; Anjaria 2009; Baud and Nainan 2008; Kundu 2011). These studies suggest that when demanding public goods, like water supply, sanitation, safety or maintenance of worship places, middle-class turns to resident welfare associations which coordinate directly with relevant government departments or engage them through petitions, phone calls and personal visits. As these neighborhoods tend to be more developed and well-serviced their concerns have revolved around land use norms, protection of property and safety—issues that are very different from those of informal settlements. Unlike their economically poorer counterparts, middle-class residents distance themselves from local politics, and disengage from protests or demonstrations (Coelho and Venkat 2009). Scholars (e.g., Kundu 2011; Fernandes 2006) critique the emerging forms of urban governance that channel the collective actions of wealthier residents towards a “consumer-citizen” needs and approaches. When neighborhood associations seek to “sanitize” public spaces, they tend to discipline the urban poor instead of supporting their struggles for better housing and public services.

Scholars also indicate that distinctions of activism between class differentiated neighborhoods are overly simplified, and that both poor and better-off exhibit features of “political” and “civil” society (Kamath and Vijayabaskar 2009; Coelho and Venkat 2009;

Ranganathan 2013; Lemanski and Tawa Lama-Rewal 2013; Auerbach 2017). For example, Karen Coelho and T. Venkat (2009) document how in Chennai, slums, low-income and middle-class neighborhoods can invoke each other's "tools" to engage the state. They find that low-income neighborhoods use civil society methods, such as registrations, elections and letterheads to demand officials' attention on road conditions, water and drainage as rights-bearing citizens. Simultaneously, they find that in middle-class areas associations were marked by internal conflict, support for political parties and electoral activism—features of political society. Less prominent and studied in the literature, are non-governmental organizations that can also act as intermediaries either enhancing or worsening bureaucrat performance (Cammett and MacLean 2014).

Summing up, this literature offers valuable insights into how citizens can achieve better welfare goods and I draw on it when building my argument. However, I argue that it cannot sufficiently explain why childcare quality varies across neighborhoods because quality of care varies even when intermediaries are present. Several issues complicate bottom-up accountability in childcare delivery. Despite the presence of associations, brokers or political intermediaries in many places, they typically do not involve themselves in matters related to childcare provision. First, childcare provision may be considered a "mother's issue" that not everyone has an interest in. Second, assessing quality is much more complex and involves many considerations than evaluating basic services like water, electricity or sanitation (e.g., electricity or water is either there or not there). Finally, care services involve nuanced power dynamics between teachers and parents. Demanding better quality childcare requires people to believe in the government's ability to deliver it, and complaints may lead to potential repercussions, such as retaliation against children or loss of benefits altogether (Kruks-Wisner 2018; Gaventa and Barrett 2012). Given these conditions, bottom-up activism does not hold sufficient weight to explain disparities in care provisions. In the

next section, I lay out my argument and highlight the significant empirical and theoretical contributions of this dissertation.

THE ARGUMENT

Variations in childcare quality

Assessing the quality of childcare services is challenging because it involves evaluating various intricate and multifaceted aspects. Childcare quality is commonly measured using “process” and “structural” aspects of care (Vandell and Wolfe 2000; Burchinal 2018). Structural quality refers to the childcare environment and includes aspects that can be objectively determined, such as staff/child ratio, group size, teacher qualifications, curriculum and physical infrastructure. Process quality pertains to experiences of children and staff, and is captured by interactions between caregivers and children and among children. Process quality is the most crucial for children’s learning and development, but it can be challenging to measure and improve (Burchinal et al. 2015; Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020). Process quality reflects the extent to which teachers are responsive and sensitive with children, conduct stimulating activities and promotes independence in learning and development (Hamre 2014). Measuring process quality requires lengthy observations and training, and there is still not enough consensus on which specific aspects should be assessed to measure children’s developmental outcomes (Burchinal 2018; Foundation For Child Development 2020). The structural factors indirectly affect children’s outcomes through their presumed impact on process quality (NICHD ECCRN 2002), though research suggests that structural indicators alone (e.g., teachers’ education and training; staff-child ratio) can also have some direct influence on children (Foundation For Child Development 2020).

Scholars suggest that while many childcare programs in the Majority World may be considered very poor quality by Western standards, effectiveness of such programs on children’s

learning can be considerable, and thus quality should be assessed using situationally appropriate methods (Myers 2006; Aboud 2006; Moore, Akhter, and Aboud 2008; Rao 2010). In places where maternal education is low and children live in socially disadvantaged environments, even the minimum input provided by programs that include food provision and some early stimulation seem to make a positive difference for young children (Rao 2010).

No studies systematically examine the relationship between the quality of palwadis and children's development outcomes in Chennai (or elsewhere in India to my knowledge) (but see Vikram and Chindarkar 2020). Most studies evaluate palwadi performance at a district or state level based on structural, easy-to-measure indicators of what the ICDS is mandated to provide (e.g., facilities, availability of materials, distribution of meals and other benefits) (e.g., Ramamoorthy, Patil, and Joseph 2017). Few assess the process aspects of care, such as caregivers' responsiveness and sensitivity in their interactions with children. Thus, by documenting caregiving practices this dissertation offers new insights about the quality of "process" aspects of care in India. By doing so, it also adds to the literature on early childhood development which primarily concentrates on quantifying interactions and their impact on children's development through the use of indicators.

In this study, my goal is not to conduct an evaluation of palwadi quality but to examine why interactions between teachers and children vary across places. I focus on aspects of care that are important to parents, align with the ICDS mandates, and address the basic needs of children, which are well-established as crucial for their development. Neuroscience research argues for holistic approaches to children's learning and development, recognizing the interconnectedness between children's physical and intellectual well-being, as well as their socio-emotional and cognitive development (OECD 2006). This means that child development necessitates a safe and

nurturing environment, which promotes children's nutrition and health, as well as their cognitive and physical growth, and socio-emotional well-being.

Following this, I focus on caregiving practices across four developmental domains including: 1) nutrition and feeding, 2) toileting, 3) early learning activities and 4) maintenance of center cleanliness. Caring for these basic needs, which are crucial for children's healthy development, varies the most across neighborhoods. In a country where malnutrition is pervasive and persistent, children's feeding is paramount. In Chennai, 20% of children are stunted, 18% are wasted and 22% are underweight (at all India level the respective estimates are 36%, 19% and 32%) (IIPS and ICF 2021a; 2021b).¹⁰ Adequate nutrition is essential for children's brain development (Georgieff 2007; Prado and Dewey 2014). Malnutrition at early ages influences many other outcomes over the life course, such as attention, educational achievement, adult productivity and income (Black et al. 2017; Victora et al. 2008). Therefore, focusing on what and how children are fed in palwadis is important, particularly in areas where malnutrition rates are disturbingly high.

Furthermore, investigating children's toileting, hygiene, sanitation and overall cleanliness of the center is also important because poor sanitation can cause infections and diseases, such as diarrhea and malaria, which can impair children's cognitive development and academic achievement (Fernando et al. 2003; Patrick et al. 2005). Given the protracted problem of open defecation in India (Coffey and Spears 2017), examining children's toileting and sanitation practices can provide valuable insights into whether and how palwadis promote safe sanitation and reduce health risks and infant mortality (Cutler and Miller 2005).

¹⁰ In Tamil Nadu state as a whole 25% of children are stunted, 15% are wasted and 22% are underweight.

Finally, children's early stimulation and learning activities are also linked with their cognitive attainments globally (Britto et al. 2017; Garces, Thomas, and Currie 2002). While observing learning activities in palwadis was restricted due to Covid-19 pandemic, I still conducted some observations and interviewed workers about how they prepared and implemented preschool routines, such rhymes, songs, and physical exercises. Teachers' efforts in learning activities were often correlated with how they approached other childcare aspects. In sum, examining these childcare practices provides us a unique window to observe and understand first-hand how early interventions work, especially in contexts lacking resources and effective governance practices.

I will describe the variations in childcare practices across neighborhoods in detail in chapters 2 and 3, but here, I also briefly note some of the main disparities. The most striking variations in caregiving are related to children's feeding and toileting. Even though the lunch menu is determined centrally by the state-level office and all food items except for vegetables are supplied from central warehouses, the cooking and serving of food still varies by place. Specifically, it can vary in how well the meals are prepared, how many vegetables and spices are used, whether rice is well cleaned before cooking and so on. In terms of feeding, food can be given to all children to eat by themselves, or caregivers can feed children by hand. In some places, workers use spoons for children and in others they do not. Caregivers' participation in feeding and monitoring children can range from very active to non-active, including mere supervision or no participation at all. Importantly, due to their nutritional value eggs should be fed in the center but in many places, it is not done. In some places caregivers send eggs to be eaten at home.

Children's toileting is another care domain where practices vary significantly. In some places children are sent to urinate and/or defecate outside the center in the open, while in other places they use toilets. In some areas workers call on mothers to clean up their children when they

wet or soil themselves but in others they never do so. Some of these practices can be especially contrasting between better-off and poor areas. In the former, I observed that children are never let to pee outside whereas in the latter it is almost universal.

While many teachers struggle to find time for learning activities, in some neighborhoods, workers prioritize early stimulation by dedicating time to activities, such as story-telling, rhymes, songs, and teaching the alphabet. In other areas, these activities may be less frequent, more haphazard, shorter in duration or not conducted at all. Finally, while hygiene seems to be lacking in all centers, in some places (often in poorer areas) centers are less clean and messier (floors may be mopped only on some days, center is dusty) compared to others (often in better-off areas).

At either end of the quality spectrum, palwadis can vary greatly in terms of their appearance and the level of care they provide. In some places a palwadi can be very well maintained, full of play and learning materials. Teachers are caring, skillful in consoling crying toddlers and capturing their attention with stimulating activities. They also sit together with children and feed them by hand. Parents flock to such centers to admit their children from many surrounding areas. Meanwhile, in other areas, palwadis are very dilapidated, without tiles, toilets and water, lack sunlight and can almost resemble a slightly decorated prison cell. Children visit the center to only eat and go home, or they pick up the food and go eat at home. Teachers spend little time interacting with children, and do not conduct preschool activities. Such extremes seemed to be relatively rare, and in most places care practices and quality fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

The quality of childcare often varies depending on the class position of the neighborhood. Typically, better-off areas tend to receive better care than poorer areas, but this pattern is not always straightforward. In some instances, poor areas can receive good quality care while better-off areas may exhibit very low quality.

Explaining the variations

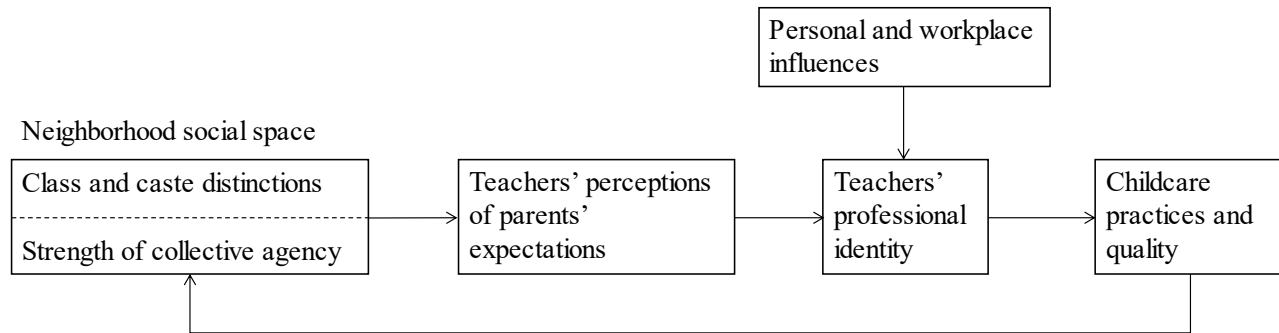
What gives rise to variations in the quality of public childcare across neighborhoods despite ostensibly standardized services? My argument and its mechanisms are depicted in figure 1. Before getting into the details of each building block that constitute the argument, I provide a very brief summary. Teachers utilize social markers of the neighborhood, including class, caste and collective agency characteristics to construct distinct perceptions of parents' needs and expectations. These perceptions inform teachers about what standards and quality of childcare is acceptable in the area. In poor areas, teachers tend to perceive lower-class and lower-caste parents as acquiescent to lower quality services. In better-off areas, teachers perceive parents as having higher expectations for childcare quality compared to poor neighborhoods.

Whether and how teachers act on their perceptions and adapt care quality to the neighborhood context is mediated on their professional identity. Due to their lack of professionalization, overwhelming workload, and low pay teachers construct diverse meanings about their occupational role. Teachers who view themselves as professionals (educators or social workers) are more inclined to deliver better care, especially when they perceive parents as demanding it. Teachers who do not cultivate a sense of professional identity and focus more on task completion (rule followers or survivalists) are less likely to seek quality than the previous group, even when they perceive parents as demanding quality. Teachers' professional identities are formed in response to organizational pressures, personal, workplace and neighborhood influences.

In contrast to teachers' perceptions of parents as acquiescent, poor parents, like their better-off counterparts, have similar desires for childcare and seek quality. Yet, lacking childcare alternatives and power to demand better care, parents in most poor areas engage in *pragmatic compromises*. That is, they compromise on certain aspects of childcare as long as they derive some

benefits that they value. Meanwhile, better-off parents use their economic power to attain better care through exit and voice. Residents of poor neighborhoods can also improve care quality by voicing demands, but it requires the neighborhood to demonstrate strong collective agency.

Figure 1. Summary of the argument



The social space: as seen by teachers

My argument rests on the notion of a neighborhood as a distinct social space. The social space is constituted by the built environment, residents' characteristics, such as caste, class and their social relations. I conceptualize these attributes as two dimensions of the social space (see figure 1). The first dimension emphasizes *place-based class and caste distinctions*, that is, residents' class and caste manifest through their housing, occupational positions, behaviors, sartorial and language styles. The second dimension captures social relations between residents and marks the strength of their collective agency. The interplay between the two dimensions shapes teachers' perceptions about residents and their expectations for childcare.

All places carry meaning, but the meaning of place tends to vary by individual's social position and relation to the place (Garrido 2013). The built environment and neighborhood's social cues inform how a person, depending on their social identity, should behave in a particular place. For example, Mario Small (2004) documents how in Boston, US, middle-class, predominantly

white residents avoid Villa Victoria housing complex, perceived as a poor, crime-ridden ghetto. But if they happen to cross it, they better not walk alone or walk fast and watch their back. Likewise, poorer, racialized residents of Villa Victoria avoid the surrounding wealthy South End area, where they feel unwelcome and discriminated against. Others have also noted how the stigma of ghetto becomes associated with black people (Anderson 2012; Wacquant 2008). Similarly, Elijah Anderson (2022) documents how black people do not feel they belong in white spaces.

Building on this large urban scholarship, I specifically adapt Marco Garrido's (2013) theory about how a sense of place contributes to segregating practices to how a sense of place shapes how frontline workers perceive and 'engage' with the place. I argue that certain types of places (marked by class and caste distinctions, e.g., slums or middle-class neighborhoods) elicit a certain set of states (or feelings) predisposing teachers to certain viewpoints and practices classifying residents into particular categories.

Many scholars have long argued that class and caste in India are tightly interwoven (Ambedkar 2014 [1936]), and especially so through place-making. In his analysis of how industrial capitalism became intertwined with caste in Bombay, Juned Shaikh (2021, 4) observes that with advent of modernity the domination of caste has been obscured by the language of class and place, such as slums and illegal settlements, resulting in "the effect of shrouding of caste in the cloak of class." Similar to many others, Shaikh challenges the belief that caste distinctions become less important when people move from villages to urban areas. Instead, he argues that caste and capitalism had a mutually beneficial relationship in Bombay during the late 19th and early 20th century. As people's housing was determined by caste, which determined their location and living conditions, caste was instrumental in shaping the urban spatial order. The entanglements of caste and class are thus imprinted in urban environment till this day (Bhan 2016). Research on

segregation in 147 largest Indian cities (by different measures of scale) bolsters claims that rather than weakening institutions of ascription urbanization replicates deep-seated village-like residential segregation by caste (Bharathi et al. 2021). Scholars also suggest that segregation by caste trumps segregation by socio-economic status (Vithayathil and Singh 2012; Sidhwani 2015; Haque, Das, and Patel 2018). Compared to other major states, in 2011 Tamil Nadu cities had among the highest levels of residential segregation by caste (Singh, Vithayathil, and Pradhan 2019). Numerous accounts document spatial exclusion based on caste and the challenges that Dalits encounter when securing housing (Dupont 2004; Thorat et al. 2015; Carswell, De Neve, and Heyer 2018; Banerjee and Mehta 2017; Limbale 2003).

Although the language of caste is delegitimized as unacceptable in the public domain (Fuller 1996), casteism persists through “other means,” such as discrimination based on attributes like dialects and speech or dress styles, or dietary restrictions (e.g., not eating meat/beef) (Pandian 2002). Because these “other attributes” often overlap with place, place is at once a manifestation of both class and caste. In his ethnographic work in a Dalit slum in northern Chennai, Nathaniel Roberts (2017) finds that slum dwellers talk about themselves as poor, and they emphasize caste oppression through the material underpinnings of caste, for whom “caste and class is just different sides of the same coin” (283). In short, the deep congruence between class and caste across space justifies my approach to fuse them into the social distinctions of neighborhoods (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2019). However, I pay attention to situations of incongruence, and explain cases where class or caste is more prominent than the other. In fact, in chapter 2 I will discuss one neighborhood where class trumps caste in facilitating better provision of care services.

Thus, in my argument I treat caste and class as two sides of the same “coin,” and contend that depending on whether they serve a poor (low caste/income) or a better-off (middle

caste/income) neighborhood, teachers interact with different types of parents and children. Drawing on these everyday interactions, as well as their cultural beliefs and widespread narratives about *slums* (or caste), workers construct distinct perceptions about residents, and their expectations for childcare standards and quality. In urban Tamil Nadu, the distinction between poor and better-off residents is often based on perceptions of ‘decency’ (Dickey 2016). Those living in poor areas (or slums) are often viewed as “indecent,” who are messy, unhygienic, ignorant and even careless, ultimately lacking moral value (ibid). In contrast, residents of better-off, middle-class neighborhoods are usually “decent” due to their perceived qualities of being neat, hygienic, organized and educated. These distinctions carry over to the types of childcare needs and expectations parents are assumed to have.

I demonstrate that in poor areas, teachers view parents as mostly needing a safe daycare to help mothers manage work and household chores. Therefore, poor parents are presumed to care less about many aspects of care. Specifically, in poor areas teachers invoke one or more of the three rationales about parents: 1) they believe that parents are acquiescent about some aspects of care, like how children are fed; 2) they construct certain tasks, like cleaning up children, as mothers’ responsibility, not their own; 3) they view parents as unconcerned about some aspects of caregiving, like cleanliness. Being overworked and underpaid, teachers use these rationales to justify lowering childcare standards and quality in children’s feeding, toileting, learning or maintaining center’s cleanliness.

However, these rationales are different in better-off neighborhoods. Rather, in the better-off areas, teachers perceive that parents desire more than just a safe daycare. Parents need childcare centers for educational and socialization purposes: to prepare children for school, to facilitate their language skills, to teach them habits and so on. Teachers perceive parents wanting developmentally

stimulating activities and nurturing environment. Unlike poor parents, better-off parents are viewed as less willing to compromise on lacking cleanliness, toilets, food quality or early learning. These perceptions about parents' demands tend to incentivize workers to seek quality more in better-off than poor areas. Teachers in better-off areas often spend more time and effort in children's feeding and learning activities, workers ensure children urinate in the toilet, clean them up themselves (rather than asking mothers to do so), and try to maintain higher levels of cleanliness. Yet, in the next section I will show that practices do not always follow perceptions and depend on teachers' professional identity.

I argue that variations in childcare practices are produced through everyday interactions between the social space of the neighborhood and teachers' professional orientations. Literature on childcare and healthcare workers in India finds that care workers often subscribe to practices of "untouchability" and discriminate against low caste members, specifically Dalits and their children (Diwakar 2014; George 2019). Yet, I suggest that caregivers' perceptions and actions are not always pre-determined by their beliefs (White 1992). Caregivers develop and solidify cultural knowledge about parents' needs and expectations by interacting with children, parents and larger community (Brown 1981). Teachers test "deviant" practices and gauge parents' reactions and responses to determine if certain caregiving efforts can be minimized. If they witness no response from parents, teachers can make certain practices routine. For example, if parents do not object to children being taken to urinate outside, teachers can normalize this practice to ease their cleaning efforts. The "rationing" of quality is also precipitated by workplace pressures, which allow teachers to invoke their rationales about poor parents to justify lowering childcare standards. Thus, repeated interactions can produce a mental model reinforcing pre-existing or engendering new

ideas about the place to shape how caregivers understand their role, deal with institutional constraints and adapt childcare services (Smith and Alpert 2007).

These distinct perceptions that teachers attribute to parents correspond to and extend two proximate literatures offering similar implications. First, a large literature on street-level bureaucrats shows how dominant cultural beliefs are often invoked to categorize clients based on their worth, thereby guiding frontline agents' routines and practices. Street-level bureaucrats in the US, such as police officers and welfare agents, often rely on racial, class and gender stereotypes to classify and judge clients on the basis of their moral worth (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Ernst, Nguyen, and Taylor 2013). Those who are deemed more “deserving” are more likely to receive welfare benefits or support, while “undeserving” receive minimal assistance and need to be more regulated and controlled. For example, research on cleaning services in the UK shows that to cope with the workload, staff invoke notions of “deservingness” to legitimize their approach to provide lower-quality cleaning services in poorer neighborhoods compared to wealthier ones (Hastings 2009).

Scholars suggest that street-level discretionary acts reinforce pre-existing social hierarchies, especially in the case of policing (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010). In the US, numerous studies show how police officers use disproportionately more proactive, aggressive, and surveillance-oriented tactics in communities of color, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged places, compared to predominantly White or advantaged communities (for review see Braga, Brunson, and Drakulich 2019; Gaston and Brunson 2020). While racist practices go beyond street-level bureaucrats to higher-level policy (Provine 2008), a key insight from this research is that frontline workers can customize their professional identity and work strategies, partly in response to the characteristics, including norms and expectations, of ecological

communities they serve (Rojek et al. 2012). I show that place-based perceptions operate not just in punitive but also in care work: they shape teachers' identity, their views and practices.

My findings resonate with a second strand of literature, which suggests that teachers' perceptions can function like “performance expectations,” involving preconceived notions about individuals' abilities based on their gender, race, and social class (Ridgeway 1982). Performance expectations permeate everyday social interactions and play a significant role in shaping the distribution of resources and opportunities across different groups. Education scholars have extended Ridgeway's concept to examine racialized performance expectations (Lewis and Diamond 2015) and ethnic expectations (Wallace 2023) in schools. These studies show that, compared to white students, educators tend to have lower expectations for academic performance of Black or Latina/o students in the US and of Black Caribbean youth in the UK (Lewis and Diamond 2015; Wallace 2023). Differential expectations lead educators to dedicate fewer resources, support and engage in differential punitive practices when schooling Black and (certain) minority students compared to their white counterparts. This speaks to the subtle and often unconscious form of prejudice or discrimination by what George W. Bush called “the soft bigotry of low expectations”.¹¹

While highly influential in demonstrating how bureaucrat and educator practices contribute to social inequalities, these literatures cannot sufficiently explain why practices of workers dealing with similarly situated groups may still vary by place (other than nation state). By interrogating teachers' workplace and institutional pressures and norms, I show that teachers' occupational identity mediates how they act on their beliefs about parents and their expectations. Prior to

¹¹ George W. Bush acceptance speech at the 2004 Republic National Convention:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57466-2004Sep2.html>.

discussing how professional identities matter for childcare practices, I will reveal the difference between parents and teachers' views on childcare provision. By doing so, I can then better explain how the social space also informs teachers' occupational role.

The social space: as seen by parents

I argue that in poor neighborhoods teachers tend to exhibit a *perception gap* between how they view parents' expectations and what their actual needs are. Teachers' perceptions about better-off parents are rather accurate, in that better-off parents seek palwadis for children's school readiness, and that they are unwilling to compromise on care quality. Yet, teachers' perceptions about poor residents are often biased, and do not reflect what parents actually value and seek from providers. I show that both poor and better-off parents have similar desires for childcare and want high-quality care. The majority of parents use childcare centers to enhance children's school readiness and socialization, but some also value nutritious meals or having a safe daycare that allows mothers to work.

In contrast to teachers' perceptions, I show that mothers are not acquiescent, but they are compelled to engage in *pragmatic compromises*. Because they lack power to attain better care, mothers are willing to compromise on certain aspects of childcare as long as they derive some benefits that they value. These pragmatic compromises are people's strategic actions or 'survival strategies' for coping with scarcity (Deckard and Auyero 2022).

To understand what triggers pragmatic compromises, I rely on Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) construct of the *field of power*, which provides a useful lens for examining power dynamics between parents and teachers. In the neighborhood social space teachers wield symbolic capital by controlling public resources—childcare services—which parents highly value and may depend on

for survival (or social mobility). This bestows power on teachers over parents. Teachers' discretion and judgment, as per street-level bureaucracy theories, represent essential expressions of state power wielded over the least powerful citizens (Handler and Hasenfeld 2006; Handler 1990).

But the degree of teachers' power depends on how they view parents and the capital they hold. The possession of economic, cultural or social capital can enhance parents' chances to attain or negotiate for better care services. The relevant capital can be economic (ability to secure alternative childcare), cultural (having agency and confidence to make claims on the *appropriate* childcare practices) and social (ties to other parents with similar childcare expectations who can back up each other's claims). Parents who possess all types of capital, or at least some economic capital, have greater power to demonstrate their needs, negotiate and attain better care. Parents who lack all types of capital have very few degrees of *strategic* freedom to demand better services.

Parents' action to secure better care depends on their realistic assessments of what they can do from the position they occupy. For example, in a poor area a mother with few economic or social resources and ability to care for the child herself, may compromise on workers' practices in feeding (e.g., child not fed eggs in the center) and toileting (e.g., teacher lets kids pee outside), if she believes that her child benefits from social interactions in the palwadi, or if she values having nutritious meals, or a safe daycare while she is at work. Compromises depend on what each individual value most.

The degree to which parents need to engage in pragmatic compromises depends on the bundle of their capital and strategies available to them. Following Albert Hirschman (1970), I argue that parents can attain better care through voice or exit, which are the key mechanisms for *bottom-up accountability*. With economic capital parents can afford alternative childcare and exit from unsatisfactory services. Thus, their advantaged position enables better-off residents to avoid

compromising on care quality. Exercising voice is a political and confrontational act whereby residents express their grievances, question workers and demand improvements in services. Although economic capital can facilitate claims-making, cultural and social capital can also be leveraged to make claims, even without economic capital. Voice and exit can also interact—when parents do not obtain the demanded improvements, they can exit. However, in poor areas, due to limited resources and alternatives for childcare, parents are more reliant on *palwadis*, and their exit option is restricted. As I discuss next, parents' demand-making ability is also highly constrained due to their powerlessness. Thus, lacking both strategies of exit and voice, poor parents are more likely to engage in pragmatic compromises than better-off parents. Still, I will reveal that sometimes claims can be actualized when neighborhoods exhibit high levels of collective agency.

To explain what hinders parents' voice and triggers powerlessness when seeking better care from the state, I invoke Steven Lukes (2004) three dimensions of power. The first dimension pertains to the overt decision-making power of the state and teachers to deliver care services based on their vision and policies. Parents have no decision-making power over policy of whether and how services are delivered. They can bargain with the state but it may require large-scale mobilization and collective action.

The second dimension is about non-decision making, that is, teachers hold power over the kinds of concerns that parents can raise. Workers can prevent and suppress certain grievances from arising. For example, when parents inquire about inadequate toilets or rice quality used for meals, teachers can explain that infrastructure issues, food supplies and quality, or even their capacity to conduct learning are beyond their control. Teachers argue (often correctly) that it is the higher authorities who decide on quality standards, and create rules and procedures for how to address structural issues. Yet the government's apparatus is slow and fixing infrastructure can take a long

time. Parents internalize this and drawing on their experiences with public services in general, come to believe that it may not be worthwhile to complain about something they cannot change quickly. The fact that parents also use childcare services for only about 1-2 years (in their view a short period) also dampens their incentive to complain.

Moreover, residents also believe that they cannot complain about childcare standards when the government provides services for free. If they paid for them, or if they used private services, parents are certain they would question workers and demand better care. Thus, when using free government services residents are socialized to believe that public services are almost inherently inferior to private, and that it is difficult to attain better quality (though not impossible). Besides that, power also operates through fear of repercussions and reprisal. Parents who are dependent on *palwadi*, fear that complaining can antagonize service providers and result in retaliation against children or denial of some benefits. Fears of retaliation for complaining about schoolteachers in India are also noted by others (Mangla 2022).

The third dimension of power is the most insidious as it affects the conception of grievances by residents altogether. Here power operates by molding the consciousness of citizens to believe that services are satisfactory. While I find that the first and second dimensions of power predominate the field, in certain cases parents do express satisfaction with the quality of childcare even though in some centers it is evidently below par compared to others. In these cases, parents tend to view that childcare they use now is better compared to when they were children themselves. They can also compare between a few providers in their area. Finally, the capacity to aspire and define one's needs may be especially suppressed among the most marginalized caste groups (Appadurai 2004; Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan 2021). When the general expectations of public

services are low, even small improvements and demonstrations of care may seem sufficient to warrant satisfaction.

Importantly, even though there are many issues that parents have little power to change, certain components of service provision are widely monitored and contested if not delivered. For example, the public expects that centers are open and functional, workers show up to work and serve lunch meals (John et al. 2020; Velayutham 2013). Palwadis have been popularized for serving mid-day meals to children and elderly for decades (Harriss 1991), and they are widely known as *sathu unavu* (meaning a place that provides food) (Rajivan 2006). Yet, many residents do not know that palwadis supposed to have “evolved” beyond serving as “feeding centers.” According to policymakers, palwadis are early childhood care and education centers that provide not only nutritious meals but also early stimulation and developmental activities for children, and they should take good care of children’s basic needs (GoI 2011). In short, while many parents have a strong sense of entitlement to food and *basic* functioning, they may not necessarily demand other aspects of care.

John Gaventa (1980) demonstrated how the third dimension of power can operate through manifestation in quiescence. He examined why, despite facing exploitation and extreme inequality, miners in an Appalachian Valley in the US appeared to be passive and accepting of their situation. This apparent quiescence was actually a result of their deep-seated powerlessness. I argue that many residents in Chennai are also powerless rather than acquiescent, as perceived by many teachers. Parents’ power to negotiate and demand better care is suppressed by lack of effective grievance mechanisms, fear of reprisal and to some extent by shaping people’s very wants and necessities (Lukes 1974). The constraints I identify represent the major obstacles to citizen engagement with the state, as observed globally. Based on 100 case studies of citizen engagement

in low-and middle-income countries, John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett (2012) find that the largest barriers for citizen engagement with the state is bureaucratic inertia, when people do not get any response from an institution, and repercussions or even reprisal against those who dare to voice grievances.

Despite many barriers for citizen engagement, I argue and show that parents are not always powerless and even if they lack economic capital, social and cultural capital can help them attain better care. This brings us to the second crucial dimension of the neighborhood social space, that is the *strength of collective agency*. A prominent feminist geographer Doreen Massey (1994) argues for a relational view of space in which social interactions and relations create and define spaces, which thereby influence the ways social relations get reproduced or modified. This relational lens is crucial to my argument, because it is the social life that makes neighborhoods particular social spaces with both opportunities and constraints for collective action. I define collective agency as residents' ability to make claims for better public services, including childcare quality. It manifests through everyday interactions with teachers, whereby parents express their concerns and demands about various aspects of childcare provision directly to workers. Collective agency also entails a belief that other residents have similar needs, demands and expectations, and that individuals will support each other when they exercise voice.

When all or most parents vocalize their preferences and expectations, they exert *bottom-up accountability* pressure through voice. They can challenge teachers' perceptions of parents as acquiescent and incentivize workers to seek quality. While this dissertation does not explore what factors promote collective agency in the neighborhood, I suggest that the presence of specific social elements is necessary for its development. These elements include history of successful civic

activism, social capital and cohesion, and/or effective intermediaries that can enhance residents' agency to make claims and or facilitate grievance redressal.

Success in past efforts to organize for claiming more public goods and services, such as housing, water connections, or roads can empower residents to continue making demands on the state for services like childcare. Having social ties and connections with the neighbors allows residents to gain knowledge about what other people think of services and share common grievances. Social ties can also help in monitoring the providers when parents are not around. Social cohesion is also important, for example, when a parent needs the support of neighbors to address an issue or conflict with palwadi workers. Furthermore, effective intermediaries, such as neighborhood associations, political party members or local activists, as discussed earlier, can use their power to engage with palwadi workers and advocate on behalf of residents. Their power derives from connections to politicians and other influential networks who can expose teachers' faults or misbehavior. I suggest that the presence and strength of these social elements conveys to teachers that parents have symbolic power to monitor workers and engage in effective claims-making. This can then induce teachers' efforts to improve care issues that are within their control.

In my study, I examine two poor neighborhoods where residents achieved better care through collective agency. This collective agency was fostered by a combination of factors, including historic legacies of citizen activism, strong social networks and effective intermediaries. However, in many other impoverished areas, parents faced multiple adversities, lacked social capital and there were few effective intermediaries that could empower them to challenge teachers' negative perceptions and provision of low-quality care.

Matthew Desmond and Adam Travis (2018) suggest that while social capital and neighborly interactions can help people cope with hardships, witnessing adversity also facilitates

the “recognition of collective suffering,” which in turn diminishes people’s political capacity (890). They find that many highly disadvantaged neighborhoods in the US lack political capacity to advocate for their community, because deprivation leads people to believe they have little capacity to work together. I suggest similar mechanisms may operate in other poor neighborhoods in Chennai where I observed low levels of collective agency.

Institutional supervision and exit threat

So far, I have established that because parents are viewed as acquiescent (which is usually not true) teachers in poor areas feel less bottom-up accountability pressured to seek quality care than their peers working in better-off neighborhoods. Because poor areas are more populous and there is a greater need for childcare services it is easier to attract parents. In better-off places, where there may be fewer children and where parents may have other childcare options, teachers need to put more effort to entice them to use their services. However, what are the consequences if teachers do not do so? What motivates them to exert effort, attract parents and prevent their exit? I argue that institutional sanctions can motivate workers only to some extent. Inadequate oversight and structural constraints lessen teachers’ accountability for low enrollments and care quality. In this context, teachers develop their own interpretations of their occupational role, which then informs their decisions on whether and how they address parents’ expectations.

Teachers are aware that low or declining enrollments can have consequences. First, workers are accountable for not wasting stocks that are distributed according to children’s enrollments. Having fewer children than allocated stock invokes inquiries by supervisors and monetary penalties. Yet, teachers can still circumvent these problems. Second, enrollments reflect on workers’ performance, which can be questioned if numbers are low. While supervisors rarely impose serious sanctions for poor attendance, they do exert pressure through other means, like

questioning and shaming, more frequent visits, and requests to cover additional areas. These tactics ensure that teachers are present, perform some tasks, and demonstrate to their superiors that they are at least “trying” to do something about enrollments.

Weak supervision and larger structural forces still allow teachers to avoid serious sanctions, even when enrollments reach very low numbers. The direct supervision of workers and palwadis suffers from understaffing and heavy workload of supervisors. Supervisors also lack effective tools to motivate or sanction teachers. There are few bonuses or promotions for teachers who work well, and awards are rare and few. Because hiring of teachers is mandated by the government, the ICDS officers cannot easily hire and fire workers. If a teacher is fired, another one needs to cover for the vacancy. This means deterioration in the quality of two childcare centers. In short, higher officials have few effective tools to incentivize performance.

Additionally, in the last few decades, as household incomes have risen, an increasing number of parents have been seeking out private kindergartens to fulfill their aspirations for their children’s education and future prospects (Donner 2018). This has resulted in a proliferation of private kindergartens. Despite struggling to make ends meet, some parents even take out loans to invest in their children’s early education. The municipality of Chennai has also started public kindergarten classes in government schools. As parents increasingly turn to these public or private kindergartens for higher quality of care, more structured early education and English language instruction, palwadis are unable to compete with these providers. These developments have contributed to significant reductions in the use of palwadis.

Parents’ withdrawal has become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a powerful incentive for teachers to seek quality to sustain children’s enrollments to avoid closer monitoring and questioning by supervisors. On the other hand, it is a structural issue to which teachers can

refer to justify why they have low enrollments. Taking these realities into account, supervisors are more forgiving when they feel that in their current state palwadis are unable to meet the demands of better-off parents. Thus, the formal rules of accountability cannot sufficiently account for why teachers' effort varies even within poor or better-off neighborhoods; why some teachers cannot deliver even when they perceive parents as demanding, while others do more than what parents might expect. I argue that teachers' professional identity is the missing piece that can explain this.

Teachers' professional identity

In this section I explain that whether and how teachers act on their perceptions about parents' expectations depends on how they view their professional identity. The street-level bureaucrats literature has established that some of the most influential factors on frontline workers' discretion are individuals' values, knowledge, and beliefs about their policy, clients and the work environment (Maynard-Moody, Musheno, and Musheno 2003; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Watkins-Hayes 2009; Riccucci 2005). To understand how frontline workers come to value what they do, and how it interacts with how they distribute resources, Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2009) advances the notion of situated bureaucrat. By examining caseworkers in two welfare agencies in the US, she demonstrates how bureaucrats' professional identities, that is, their perceptions of their occupational role and their social location—engender different frameworks through which they approach their job. Professional identities are self-conceptions informed by organizational cues and individuals' values, attitudes and beliefs constructed through their personal and professional experience.

Watkins-Hayes identifies two major professional identities. The first group is welfare agents called *social workers* who believe they are responsible for advocating for clients, and use their discretionary power to provide holistic services, striving to understand and address a range

of their clients' problems. The second group, *efficiency engineers*, defines success in timely processing of cases and approach services differently, focusing more on efficiency and complying with the rules. The concept of professional identity can help explain why teachers' actions and childcare practices may depart from their perceptions about parents' needs and expectations.

I identify four main prototypes of professional identities: *preschool professionals*, *social workers*, *rule followers* and *survivalists*. Teachers who view themselves as educators (I call them *preschool professionals*) are the most dedicated to meeting parents' needs and seek to enhance children's school readiness. Teachers who view their work as a social 'mission' to help children and mothers, embrace *social worker* identity and seek to provide a broad range of social supports to children and parents while not necessarily focusing on children's school readiness. These two profiles approximate an ideal type of teacher, who is competent, tailors activities to meet parents' needs and coordinates with stakeholders to solve problems on the ground.

Teachers who are *rule followers* derive their motivation from institutional supervision and prioritize implementing immediate orders from supervisors, like reporting over childcare. Finally, *survivalists* are the most demotivated, they feel withdrawn from the institutional mission and do only as much as needed to not get into serious trouble. They are also crafty in making excuses for their underperformance and tend to compromise on childcare quality to minimize their efforts. These professional identities can emerge in all types of areas, though I suggest that some identities, like preschool professionals, are more prone to develop in areas with strong and explicit pressure from parents to seek quality.

Professional identities and their key constituted part—teachers' sense of autonomy—can explain why some childcare practices vary even within poor and better-off areas. Autonomy refers to the freedom to exercise choice and control over one's actions and decisions in caregiving. To

some extent, autonomy is a function of teachers' professional identity. However, it is also influenced by supervisors, who tend to loosen monitoring for good performers but tighten it for poor performers. Consequently, teachers who are more professionalized have greater autonomy in care provision than those who focus on following immediate orders and/or 'survival.'

More professionalized teachers invoke autonomy to innovate solutions to problems in the field and adapt their work activities to meet parents' needs, leading to higher-quality care. In contrast, less professionalized teachers have a diminished sense of autonomy in care provision partly due to micromanagement when they are deemed underperformers. Paradoxically, because care work is loosely monitored in comparison to reporting tasks, these teachers may use their discretion to compromise the quality of childcare while still demonstrating accountability for more quantifiable tasks such as data collection and reporting.

Importantly, regardless of how teachers view themselves, bottom-up accountability mediates their performance. Preschool professional and social workers deliver highest quality care when residents exert pressure through exit threat or collective agency. Bottom-up accountability is also important for rule followers or survivalists. Teachers' ability to compromise on certain care duties is always curbed more in areas, where certain behaviors are highly unacceptable. For example, a survivalist cannot let children urinate in the open in better-off areas, whereas it may be more acceptable in poor neighborhoods.

On the other hand, without bottom-up pressures a social worker may deliver better care than rule followers or survivalists, but she may still overlook tasks deemed 'unnecessary' in her area, such as feeding children by hand or cleaning up children's soiling herself. Without bottom-up accountability pressures all workers will put in less effort, but survivalists will deliver the lowest quality services.

Taken together, I argue that the quality of childcare is shaped by teachers' perceptions of themselves, their residents, and their interactions with residents, and that it falls on a continuum from very high to very low. At one end of the spectrum, a survivalist working in a poor area with low levels of collective agency will deliver the lowest quality of childcare. On the other end, a preschool professional working in a better-off area with high levels of collective agency will deliver the highest quality of childcare. Depending on the combinations of teachers' professional identity and the social space of the neighborhood the quality of childcare will stand somewhere on a continuum between the two ends.

Workplace and personal influences

What gives rise to these varying professional identities in the first place? I draw insights again from Watkins-Hayes caseworkers in the US. She argues that different professional identities solidified after the 1996 welfare-to-work policy reform and related organizational changes.¹² Faced with conflicting organizational demands, messages and evaluation structures workers developed their own interpretation of their role and adopted distinct professional identities to fulfil it.

In the case of ICDS, organizational design is also paramount in creating fertile ground for diverse professional orientations. The institution has not invested in staff professionalization and/or supervision, overloads workers and supervisors with tasks, and offers meagre pay and few benefits. The introduction of a new *Poshan Abhiyaan* (Prime Minister's Overarching Scheme for Holistic Nourishment) in 2018 also doubled down on nutrition programming to combat high levels of children's malnutrition and improve utilization of palwadis. The scheme brought in mobile phones for data collection and monitoring of nutrition parameters. This created confusion about

¹² 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

which goals and activities workers should prioritize—whether it was data gathering and growth monitoring, preschool or other tasks (SP, Vaghela, and Pal 2022). Some of these activities took time away from teachers’ engagement with children and caregiving responsibilities, which were the aspects of the job that parents and teachers valued most. In sum, lack of clarity about goals, multiple demands and weak oversight allowed staff to derive their own meaning about their role and responsibilities.

Besides larger organizational dynamics, professional identity can be shaped by teachers’ personal and workplace influences. In addition to routine struggles in managing multiple demands, some workers face extraordinary challenges at work. These challenges include staffing issues, strained relationships with the helper, or higher-level officials, or major infrastructure deficiencies. Other negative influences could be related to teachers’ personal problems, such as heightened care responsibilities at home, family conflict, health or financial issues. These influences operate as constraints on workers’ time, ability and/or motivation thereby shaping teachers’ approach and orientation to work.

Another set of influences can be positive work or personal experiences and exposures. Teachers with external training or experience in education or social sectors may be more likely to derive intrinsic motivation and seek focus on the educational or social aspects in their work. Teachers’ professional identity can also be informed by the strength of collective agency and social dynamics of the neighborhood. Witnessing citizen activism in the neighborhood may induce workers to help residents and seek quality in care aspects that are important to them.

Yet, exposure could be negative too. For example, socialization in a certain setting, such as a village, could make it difficult for a teacher to adapt to working in a disadvantaged urban setting. In essence, professional identities are shaped by a multitude of factors. As circumstances

evolve and teachers acquire novel insights or confront new limitations, their identities may be redefined.

Citizen feedback

My main argument centers the interactions between the neighborhood social space and teachers' professional identities, but I also demonstrate how this interaction produces societal effects. The last mechanism in figure 1 points to the citizen feedback: how teachers work and deliver childcare (whether they seek quality or compromise it) feeds back into how parents and the public at large perceive government's provision of care. The social science literature, and particularly scholars of northern and central India have extensively theorized how state institutions influence citizens' view of the state, their everyday strategies and engagement (Corbridge et al. 2005; Kruks-Wisner 2018; Mangla 2022; Levenson 2021). Thus, scholars increasingly recognize that civil society is never passive and the state is always active, but more importantly, that the state and civil society are interdependent and mutually co-constitutive (Annavarapu and Levenson 2021).

How the state operates on-the-ground informs citizens' sense of entitlement and efficacy which in turn shapes whether and how citizens engage in claims-making for higher quality services (Kruks-Wisner 2018).¹³ For example, when parents witness poor government facilities and teachers persistently delivering substandard childcare, they come to develop low expectations for government's willingness and efficacy to do better. In turn, low expectations foster parents' withdrawal from claims-making, which leads teachers to perceive parents as acquiescent. This dynamic creates a vicious circle, where low expectations and withdrawal further entrench the status quo of low-quality services childcare, perpetuating a cycle of neglect and disillusionment.

¹³ Kruks-Wisner suggests that citizen claims-making is more likely with unequal public service provision, and less likely when services are uniformly good or bad.

On the other hand, a teacher who provides high-quality childcare and engages with parents in a friendly and inclusive manner can generate positive expectations and feedback from residents and the community. This can lead to higher expectations for quality in public childcare, and any decline may prompt questioning of service providers. Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner (2018) suggests that claims-making is more likely with unequal public service provision, and less likely when services are uniformly good or bad. My research indicates that residents make comparisons not just between providers but within the same provider or place over time. They compare how services were delivered in the past to the present. This means that even if parents see some centers doing better than the one they use, they might still think their center is good enough if they compare its functioning to the past, when it was much worse.

Finally, by observing teachers working honestly and sincerely, parents may be encouraged to voice their needs, make small donations, contribute to events, and help teachers in solving issues. Such feedback loop strengthens state-society relations and generates community resources that extend beyond childcare.

In summary, my central argument is that variations in childcare quality across place arise from a coalition of forces: teachers perceptions constructed through interactions with residents inform them about the standards of care quality parents expect, whereas their professional identity determines whether and how they actualize those perceptions. Literature on street-level bureaucrats tends to emphasize how workers tailor their routines and practices based on either their social and professional identities or on dominant cultural ideologies often associated with positive or negative characteristics of place. This dissertation establishes a connection between both sides of scholarship, enhancing our understanding of the social forces originating from both state and

society (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019), which perpetuate class and caste-based inequalities in care provision.

METHODS

I conducted 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork (February-March 2020, and January-December 2021) in 15 palwadis and their neighborhoods in south, north and central Chennai. Together with my research assistant, we conducted participant observations and over 200 interviews with childcare providers and users, including palwadi teachers (n=75), their helpers (n=16), supervisors (n=7), project officers (n=5), ICDS deputy directors (n=2), parents (n=84) and key informants (KIs) from the neighborhoods (n=17). I visited each palwadi at least three times and each neighborhood on average six times. In my interviews with teachers, I asked them about their work history, about their work routines and constraints, their relationships with beneficiaries and superiors. In the interviews with supervisors and project officers, I asked questions about incentives, supervision strategies, and difficulties in managing teachers. In interviews with parents who used palwadis I asked them about their expectations and experience with the palwadi and teachers. In the interviews with neighborhood informants (typically area leaders) I discussed their own and their community's involvement in solving problems related to palwadi and claims-making more generally. In each chapter I provide more details on the specific group I interviewed and interacted with.

Because fieldwork was conducted during Covid-19 pandemic, for eight months palwadis did not provide childcare though teachers conducted other activities, like distribution ration, growth monitoring and awareness meetings. During this period, in addition to interviewing I also conducted observations of teacher interactions with communities, and participated in their various tasks (growth monitoring, awareness-raising events, and beneficiary home visits). My

participation in and observations of childcare happened when AWCs re-opened to provide meals for children from September to December 2021.

Additionally, to understand what parents find important and how they assess quality I conducted focus groups. In summer 2019, I conducted 15 focus groups (FGDs) with palwadi users and non-users in various neighborhoods of Chennai (three of them are in my final sample of neighborhoods). The FGDs revealed that parents care about palwadi facilities, their conditions as well as how teachers interact with children and engage them in learning. When talking about facilities parents associate quality with hygiene and cleanliness of floors, kitchen area and especially bathrooms, fans, good ventilation, presence of informative posters for children (e.g., for letters and numbers), and play materials. When talking about interactions between teachers and children, parents emphasize stimulating learning activities like teaching alphabets, numbers, word meaning (e.g., colors, animals), rhymes, songs, and teaching English rhymes and words is highly valued because parents want children to learn English early on (which is limited in public schools).

Neighborhood selection. My dissertation is based on 15 palwadis and their neighborhoods, though in total I visited over 20 palwadis across Chennai. Meeting teachers without prior introduction or via introductions by their superiors did not allow me to establish trust and rapport, even though I had obtained an official permission for the study from the ICDS. Teachers believed I was there for an inspection and were not willing to talk about their work openly. Thus, I selected economically poor and better-off neighborhoods where I had some local connections, either through NGOs, my prior fieldwork or in a few cases through relatives of my research assistant. When introduced by a trusted person teachers were substantively more willing to open up and discuss the intricacies of their work. I did not select neighborhoods that are extremes: illegal squatter settlements and upper-middle-class areas because they do not have the presence of

palwadis. I use the term neighborhood to refer to an area that surrounds one palwadi. One palwadi is created to serve a population of 1000. This corresponds to others' measures of the analytical neighborhood unit which in India is defined as a census enumeration block containing an average of 700 individuals (Bharathi et al. 2021).

I classified neighborhoods by observable housing conditions and teachers' subjective assessments. Housing is the biggest asset that reflects wealth and in India it is also a more reliable measure of class compared to other measures (Bertorelli et al. 2017). I categorized neighborhoods into poor and better-off (see table 1). Poor neighborhoods are dominated by makeshift *semi-pucca* one storey houses (typically roof and/or floors are made from inferior materials, like mud; asbestos sheets, etc.) or it can be a resettlement tenement colony constructed by the government to house "illegal squatters". These are usually solid cement tenements with basic in-house amenities like water connection and toilets. Yet resettlement housing is usually poorly constructed, quickly dilapidates and the basic infrastructure is inadequate: drainage, water and sanitation problems are persistent. Better-off areas are dominated by multi-storey *pucca* houses (proper cement buildings) usually with all basic amenities inside the homes, though toilet units built outside apartments may be shared by a few households.

Most neighborhoods are regularized settlements, where residents face no eviction threats, though most people in poor areas do not hold land titles. There was only one settlement that is at the threat of eviction due to its proximity to a canal which the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board deems unsafe and unlivable, though people have lived in the area for over 30 years. This categorization of neighborhoods is not perfect as there is always some heterogeneity within both poor and better-off areas. As noted by Mario Small and colleagues (2010), poor neighborhoods are culturally heterogeneous, and so they can exhibit a range of behaviors and

outcomes. For example, in some poor areas people may have invested in better interiors or some other things before improving their housing.

Table 1. Neighborhood classification

		Neighborhood type	
		Poor (7)	Better-off (8)
Criteria	Observed Housing	Majority semi-pucca, one storey houses, some thatched houses or shacks; TNSCB tenement colony*	Majority pucca, multi-storey houses (no shacks or thatched houses and a few semi-pucca houses)
	Teachers' Assessment	Slum, “not decent”, “local language/slang”	Middle class; developed area; “decent”, “proper language”

My own classification of areas was matched by teachers' assessments, who used housing quality, the aesthetics of the environment and residents' speech styles to label their areas as *slums* or *middle-class* or *developed* areas. Teachers described slums as having narrow alleys and tiny houses with sheet roofs and shared or no bathrooms, while non-slums or middle-class areas had larger streets and multi-storey houses with bathrooms inside the home. Teachers (and others in the ICDS) described slum residents speaking without respect (in Tamil using a singular verb form, i.e., “come/go”—*va/po* as opposed to plural form *vanga/ponga* denoting respect). In contrast, non-slum residents were described as speaking with respect (e.g., used plural verb form, i.e., *vanga/ponga*). Based on these two matching classifications, in my study seven neighborhoods are poor and eight are better-off.

OUTLINE

The chapters of this dissertation are arranged to reflect the unfolding of the argument. The second chapter examines the neighborhood social space from teachers' perspective. It introduces teachers as the key agents who shape service delivery. I reveal how they construct perceptions about the

residents, their needs, and expectations for childcare across poor and better-off areas. I show how these perceptions help teachers justify how they adapt the quality of childcare to the area. I document such adaptations in children's feeding, toileting, learning and maintenance of center cleanliness.

The third chapter presents the view of social space from the parents' perspective. It shows that in contrast to teachers' perceptions of poor parents as acquiescent, these parents want good care but are powerless to attain it. The chapter proceeds by first delineating what parents actually want and seek when they use palwadis. I show that desires for childcare are not necessarily differentiated by class. Both poor and better-off parents use palwadis for children's socialization and school readiness. Yet, unlike poorer residents, better-off parents can demand better care using their economic capital which allows them to exit unsatisfactory services. Lacking childcare alternatives, parents in poor areas are more dependent on palwadis. This situation forces them to engage in pragmatic compromises. I also document how parents seek to attain better care but face significant constraints: they do not know where to complain, they fear retaliation against their children, and they believe government services are almost automatically inferior than private. This chapter suggests that power imbalance between parents and teachers contributes to teachers' construction of poor parents as "acquiescent," which in turn informs how workers approach care.

The last part of this chapter provides two cases where poor neighborhoods attained better childcare through collective agency. I discuss how various social elements within these two places combined to facilitate parents' claims-making without fear of retaliation. As parents voiced their demands, teachers came to realize that parents were not simply complacent, but rather assertive in their expectations. Teachers were aware that parents had either alternative childcare options or they could make their complaints heard by mobilizing collectively or through local intermediaries.

As a result, bottom-up accountability proved to be effective in motivating teachers to respond to the needs and demands of parents, provided parents' expectations were feasible to attain.

Chapter four unpacks the last part of my argument in two parts. First, it discusses the mechanisms of institutional supervision, and how they fail to ensure uniform provision of care. This aspect is crucial since, combined with other organizational demands and pressures, institutional dynamics collectively provide an environment for teachers to develop distinct professional identities. I discuss four "prototypes" of professional identities and their key component—teachers' sense of autonomy—which determines how workers approach caregiving. These professional identities, mediated by bottom-up accountability, are the key contributor to how teachers deliver childcare. They explain when and how teachers act on their perceptions about parents leading to variations in quality both within and across poor and better-off neighborhoods. Lastly, I discuss how institutional, workplace and personal influences shape the formation of professional identities.

The concluding chapter examines this dissertation's contributions to scholarship and implications for policy. My argument that connects neighborhood characteristics with frontline workers professional identity advances our understanding of state-society relations at the *micro-level*, accountability in complex care services, and social welfare more broadly. In terms of policy, I suggest that in contexts of high inequality and resource scarcity, program design elements, such as workplace demands, clarity of goals, and professionalization of workers is crucial, though insufficient. I argue that the last-mile implementation of public services requires significant professionalization and attention to address cultural beliefs associated with salient social identities that mark differences between places.

CHAPTER 2

The Social Space: As Seen by Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Revathi, the teacher of a *palwadi* (one of the small public childcare centers) in a south Chennai neighborhood, stood by the door, greeting each child as they entered the center. She lifted the smallest kids straight from the parents' arms into hers. She had prepared a box of toys for the children to play with. When about 20 preschool-aged children had gathered, she started conducting a few developmental activities for the kids. Over the next 45 minutes, Revathi actively taught the kids to sing rhymes and engaged them in physical exercises till her sari blouse stuck to her back with sweat. After this, she and her helper Maria made the children stand in line to wash their hands in a sink. Then, the kids were made to sit in a circle on the floor and were served a hot rice meal. Most children ate by themselves, but Revathi and Maria sat next to the smallest ones and fed them by hand, as is common in the state of Tamil Nadu in India.

This scene—of how children were greeted, engaged and fed—was just one, a more exemplary manifestation of how childcare is provided in about eighteen hundred Chennai's *palwadis*. Another center, located about 20 kilometers away, in a more “notorious” neighborhood in north Chennai presented a completely different approach to care. Preschool-aged kids and toddlers accompanied by a few older kids all carrying metal bowls came one by one to the center. A middle-aged childcare teacher named Sumathi sat on the floor, not paying attention to the incoming kids but focusing on writing something in her notebook. When about 20 children gathered, a younger woman—helper Neela—served a hot rice meal into children's bowls. The teacher momentarily closed her notebooks and clicked a picture of the kids with food in their

bowls, as if they were having a meal at the center. But after the picture was taken, the children were quickly sent home with the food. Some children were so small that they didn't look strong enough to carry the bowls without spilling the food. Some siblings shared a bowl, making one wonder how they would share this food.

Looking at how food, learning, and care were provided in the two childcare centers in the same city it may be hard to believe that they belong to the same childcare program, with the same daily routines, resources, and the same supervision, and administrative system. Differences in care provision cannot also be explained by teachers' qualifications as they both have the same degrees and childcare training. One significant distinction between the two centers is the locality of where they provide services. They operate in two structurally different social spaces. Revathi's center is in a congested and fast-developing neighborhood, dominated by economically mobile, lower-middle-class, and lower-caste residents who live in small but properly built housing units. Sumathi's center stands in a much poorer, working-class, and lower caste neighborhood with many makeshift houses, distanced from better economic opportunities.

In this chapter, I will argue that the social space of the neighborhood has profound effects on how childcare services are delivered. When examining how urban dwellers attain better public goods and services, scholars have largely focused on institutional design and bureaucratic norms (Brodkin 2012; McDonnell 2017; Mangla 2022) or on political claims-making (Chatterjee 2004; Harriss 2006; Coelho and Venkat 2009; Auerbach 2017) overlooking the role of frontline workers and their interactions with the residents. I will show that how childcare workers see and interact with their clients (Levenson 2021) significantly shapes the ways they approach their tasks and deliver care services.

I argue that teachers use class, caste and collective agency markers of the neighborhood, to construct distinct perceptions of parents' needs and expectations for childcare. These perceptions then inform how teachers adapt the quality of childcare (children's feeding, toileting, learning, and cleanliness) to what they think is acceptable in their area. These perceptions tend to be patterned by neighborhood's class and caste. In poor areas, teachers tend to perceive lower-class and lower-caste parents as acquiescent to lower quality services. Being overworked and underpaid, teachers invoke one or more of the three rationales about their beneficiaries allowing them to compromise on service quality: 1) they believe that beneficiaries are acquiescent about some aspects of care, like how children are fed; 2) they construct certain tasks, like cleaning up children, as mothers' responsibility; 3) they view parents as unconcerned about some aspects of caregiving, like cleanliness.

Yet, when neighborhoods exhibit collective agency, that is, when parents actively monitor workers and demand better services, they *can* challenge the negative perceptions and motivate workers to improve childcare quality.

In better-off areas, teachers perceive parents as having higher expectations for childcare quality compared to poor neighborhoods. Teachers believe that if they do not satisfy parents' needs and demands they will withdraw from using palwadi services. This in turn incentivizes teachers to improve quality to attract better-off parents in order to avoid tighter monitoring and questioning from their supervisors. In better-off areas, parents do exit services they find unsatisfactory, so their threats are credible. In the next chapter, I will reveal that while teachers' perceptions about better-off parents are matched by their behaviors, I will argue that there is a perception gap between what teachers perceive parents need in poor areas and what they actually desire.

Finally, perceptions are significant but insufficient in shaping teachers' agency. Whether and how teachers act on their perceptions is also informed by teachers' professional identities. Teachers cultivate different ideas about their occupational role (Watkins-Hayes 2009), leading to different levels of autonomy and work efforts. These identities are formed in response to institutional constraints, weak supervision and neighborhood social distinctions.

I differentiate four prototypes of professional identities. The first two types are more 'professionalized', wherein teachers perceive their role as either educators or social workers. The other two types are less 'professionalized,' with teachers viewing themselves as either rule followers or they are detached from their organization and do not cultivate any sense of occupational identity. These teachers prioritize carrying out immediate orders and requests from their superiors, instead of providing comprehensive childcare services. The way these professional identities manifest in the field will be discussed in chapter 4. In this chapter, I focus on how teachers perceive the social space in which they interact with residents and deliver their services.

Since Lipsky's (1980) insightful study showing street-level bureaucrats as de facto policy-makers, many have written about how various factors shape welfare agents' behavior. Yet, most accounts explaining variations in public services focus broadly on individual or organizational factors, examined in isolation from one another. I offer a new relational understanding of how welfare services are configured by the feedback loops between workers, their clients, and their shared social space. In doing so, I offer a new mechanism to explain why disadvantaged neighborhoods may receive poorer quality public services, beyond established explanations of resources, bureaucratic norms, and political-claims-making.

CONTEXT: PALWADIS AND TEACHERS

Teachers' recruitment and characteristics

Palwadi teachers are recruited centrally, meaning that positions for vacancies are announced on the district-level public employment board but interviewing and selection happens at the block level with final appointments issued by the director's office.¹⁴ Although no teacher admitted to bribing or could explain how bribing works, it was widely known that to get a teacher's position (or any government job), candidates need to pay a bribe to an intermediary. Usually, teachers are recommended to apply for this job by their friends and acquaintances, i.e., someone who is already working in the ICDS or education system who then help them navigate the recruitment process.

None of the teachers in my study wanted to become a caregiver and most of them got into this job because they *needed* employment. A few women left better-paying private sector jobs to become a teacher/helper because they wanted a government job which provides them with income security and stability. Officially, teachers and helpers are not government employees, they are part-time workers who are not on the government payroll. But they receive monthly honorarium and benefits, including health insurance, paid leave days, etc. Their wages and benefits are low (about 10,000Rs ~ USD\$134 for teachers and 5,000Rs ~ USD\$68 for helpers), but for these workers and their families it can be a major income source. However, helpers often work extra jobs to add to their income. In sum, most women did not aspire to become teachers, they did not have clear expectations of what the AWC work entails, and once recruited they quickly became overwhelmed with the number of responsibilities. Yet, most women stay in these jobs for many years as it provides them income stability, security and some prestige for working for the government. Thus, the worker turnover is very low.

Table 2 presents the characteristics of 16 teachers and 15 helpers in my study. The majority of teachers have a high school or a bachelor's degree. They belong mostly to intermediate caste

¹⁴ I use terms palwadis and AWCs interchangeably.

groups, like Other Backward Class (OBC) and the Most Backward Class (MBC), and only three teachers are from Scheduled Castes.¹⁵ Many do not live in the neighborhood where they work, but six out of sixteen reside very close to their work neighborhood. On average, teachers have been in this job for about 15 years with most of their time spent in the same AWC. Most helpers have less education than teachers and are more likely to belong to SC communities. They are also more likely to live closer to the AWC. Taken together, in the neighborhoods they serve teachers and helpers are often outsiders who tend to be of higher caste than their beneficiaries.

Table 2. Teachers' and helpers' characteristics

	Teachers	Helpers
Age (avg/median)	43	42
Education		
< 10 th standard	0%	67%
10 th standard	25%	20%
12 th standard	31%	13%
Bachelors/MA (distant learning)	44%	0%
Caste		
SC	19%	40%
MBC	31%	27%
OBC	50%	33%
Years in current AWC/total experience	11/15	7/10
Home residence		
In the area	6	5
Outside the area	10	10
Total	16	15

Note: there are 16 teachers because one AWC is “clubbed” meaning there were two centers in the same building which had two teachers, both of whom I interviewed.

RATIONALIZING THE PROVISION OF CARE

My central argument is that teachers use what I call *place-based class and caste distinctions* to construct ideas and perceptions about residents. These perceptions then inform how caregivers can

¹⁵ The Scheduled Castes (SC) are communities officially designated in the Indian Constitution as disadvantaged communities that are the intended beneficiaries of a wide range of affirmative action policies, including political reservations to guarantee representation.

adapt childcare quality to what they deem is acceptable in their neighborhood. Residents' structural characteristics, such as their housing, economic status and caste, that shape their habits and dispositions, in other words their habitus (Bourdieu 1977) constitutes the class and caste distinctions of the place or the neighborhood. Given high levels of class and caste segregation in Chennai (and other Indian cities) each neighborhood is distinguished by its social characteristics (Singh, Vithayathil, and Pradhan 2019; Bharathi et al. 2021). To cope with low pay and high workload (Sreerekha 2017), teachers' use these social distinctions to guide their work efforts. For example, depending on whether they serve and interact with residents in a poorer or a (lower) middle-class neighborhood, teachers construct different perceptions about its members, their expectations, and their demands for childcare, which are often imbued with class and caste stereotypes.

For teachers residents' speech styles is one of the most prominent features marking neighborhood class (and caste) status. For example, teacher Revathi who worked in a better-off area (*non-slum*), described differences between parents and children in *slums* and *non-slum* areas, indirectly alluding how teachers adjusted their language and work style based on the social space of the neighborhood:

Revathi: Even how they [kids in slums] sit and eat would be markedly different from the kids here [her area]. They would spill and eat despite being trained and taught. Whereas the kids here learn quite quickly even if they come without any training. The way they [children] address us also would be very different..just an extension of their slang and the way their parents talk.

Ieva: So, it might be difficult for you to work in such area [referring to the a slum]...

Revathi: Yeah, difficult to say unless one has worked with them. Similarly, teachers working there [in a slum] also tend to have a way of talking to the parents in that area. If they were to come and work in this area and address the parents here the same way, the parents in this area may not like it. If we also address them like we address the parents there, these parents [in her area] might think that we are disrespectful. *They might also think that not only are we disrespectful, but this is how their children who come to them [to this AWC] will behave as well. But over there that is how one must interact and engage with those [slum] people [emphasis added].*

By “way of talking” Revathi meant that teachers and parents spoke colloquially and to her and many other teachers it showed lack of respect. She acknowledged that for slum residents speaking colloquially was rather normal, but she “would find it weird and disrespectful.” If she spoke that way to parents in her area she would be disliked. Karen Coelho (2005) also demonstrates how water utility engineers in Chennai invoke a similar sociolinguistic schema for differentiating between slum dwellers as ‘rogue,’ violent and demanding, and non-slum, ‘elite’ residents as ‘VIPs.’ Language is a site for the entanglement of class and caste (Shaikh 2021). Coelho draws on Pandian (2002) to highlight how with the discourses of modernity the vocabulary of caste is denied, or rather coded and replaced by other, ‘cultural’ means. For example, teacher Pushpa working in a poor area explained that poor and better-off children spoke differently not because of their class position but because they were “captured by the slum culture”: “not because they are poor but because they live in a slum... even here some will talk well, some will use different language like *soru thunnain* (local Tamil slang for ‘I ate rice’) for *saapadu saaptain* (supposedly a decent way of saying ‘I ate rice’). We teach them what is appropriate to say.” Thus, when Pushpa spoke about the slum, inhabited by historically marginalized Scheduled Castes or Dalits (meaning the oppressed), as I will refer to them in the chapter, she misrecognized the class for caste as she viewed them as culturally inferior. In urban India, with persistent congruence between class and caste (Bharathi et al. 2021; Deshpande and Ramachandran 2019), the vocalized discrimination against lower castes has been replaced by the denigration of slums.

The class-caste distinctions also carried over into teachers’ construction of poor and better-off residents as having different needs and standards of childcare. Teachers viewed residents in many poorer areas as mostly needing a safe place for children to spend time during the day, and overall, less needy and more willing or able to compromise on childcare quality than residents of

better-off areas. In poorer areas parents usually have few alternatives for safe childcare and without a palwadi children may indeed be left roaming on unsafe streets. Hence, for many parents, palwadi was a safe place. Teachers also perceived that poor parents prioritized receiving free lunch meals that palwadis offered and that parents could compromise on other care aspects, such as early learning, toileting facilities, or cleanliness.

In contrast, most teachers perceived that parents in better-off areas wanted children to socialize, develop language and self-sufficiency skills (habits of eating, dressing, discipline), and learn letters and rhymes. They also believed that mothers in better-off locales were unwilling to tolerate poor center cleanliness, lack of a functioning bathroom, and did not accept letting children urinate outside. These perceptions were constructed and tested by daily interactions with parents, home visits and observations of how residents spent their day. Teachers built a baggage of local knowledge that guided their efforts and ability to compromise on various childcare tasks.

How workers perceived parents in poor and better-off areas is a depiction of “prototypes,” and in practice these differentiations may be muddier as neighborhoods itself are highly heterogeneous. As I will show in this chapter, even in some poorer neighborhoods, where parents happened to be slightly more economically mobile and their demand-making mirrored those of the better-off parents, teachers’ perceptions and behaviors followed accordingly. Finally, I also argue and will show in the next chapter, that parents’ standards and demands for childcare stemmed not from their class-based cultural dispositions (Lareau 2011) but from their powerlessness and disadvantaged socio-economic location, which limited parents’ options and possibilities for negotiation.

Teachers’ perceptions of parents informed their efforts and ability to compromise in four types of childcare practices: 1) cooking and feeding, 2) toileting, 3) early learning activities and 4)

maintenance of center cleanliness. I focus on these four domains because these were vital children's basic needs and caregiving behaviors that varied most across neighborhoods. Table 3 below presents these variations, and I will discuss them in detail in the following sections. Teachers and helpers could also adjust other childcare aspects, including their regularity and time spent in the center, but other aspects of care were harder to document systematically due to my limited presence in the centers. Other work tasks that were not directly related to interactions with children or parents seemed to vary less by place and were more likely to be adjusted similarly by most staff regardless of the area. For instance, tasks like children's growth monitoring were often done partially by most teachers because of systemic ICDS problems, such as lack of staff, inability to reach beneficiaries or high load of reporting.

In each of these four childcare domains workers' adjustments in childcare happened through trial-and-error—teachers often tested parents' tolerance of their misbehavior or deviations from the “norm”. For example, teachers assessed whether parents found it acceptable for them to send food or eggs home instead of serving them at the center, or how parents responded when they were called to clean their child who soiled herself. When a teacher witnessed strong resistance from parents to a particular behavior and could not explain it away, she could correct herself and avoid doing what parents found unacceptable, especially if it led to their withdrawal. However, if a teacher realized that parents did not push back on a particular deviation, even if some of the parents questioned it, she could adopt a “deviant” behavior as a regular practice.

While many tasks such as cooking, cleaning and feeding are carried out by the helper, it is the teacher who gives instructions to the helper and allows or forbids her to shirk in these tasks. Thus, if a helper compromised her work, it was upon the teacher to correct it. Still, it could be a challenge to run an AWC well if a helper was highly unmotivated (which I will discuss later).

Being overworked and underpaid, teachers invoked one or more of the three rationales about their clients allowing them to compromise on service quality: 1) they believed that beneficiaries were acquiescent when some aspects of care were neglected; 2) they constructed certain tasks, like cleaning up children, as mothers' responsibility, not their own; 3) they viewed parents as unconcerned with some aspects of caregiving. These rationalizations were more common in poorer areas where parents were socio-economically disadvantaged to challenge teachers' perceptions and make claims on better quality services. In better-off neighborhoods, and in poorer areas, where parents monitored and questioned workers, teachers perceived parents as having higher expectations for childcare and fearing parents' exit teachers improved childcare quality. The threat of beneficiary exit and complaint put pressure on teachers to perform better.

In the following sections I will first discuss how workers use each of the three rationales to adjust services in caregiving related to children's feeding, toileting, early learning activities or maintaining the cleanliness of the AWC. Then, I will show how these rationales are challenged or suppressed in better-off areas.

Table 3. Variations in childcare provision across neighborhoods

	Area Name	Teacher's Name	Teacher's labeling of the area	Serve eggs in AWC	Use toilet for children	Conduct learning activities	AWC cleanliness	Children's attendance ¹
1	Mamalpuram	Meenakshi	Slum	No	No	No	poor	20
2	Tiruvum	Sumathi	Slum	No	No	No	poor	20
3	Tangapuram	Divya	Slum	No	No	No	poor	25
4	Kolapatnam	Geeta	Slum	Yes	Only for defecating	Yes	good	25
5	Seypettai	Pushpa	Slum	No	No	No	poor	20
6	Kandivakkam	Kripa	Slum	Yes	Yes	No	good	15
7	Kannarpuram	Girija	Slum	No	No	No	poor	15
1	Narrambai	Veena	Mixed	Yes	Yes	No	good	25*
2	Sirupuram	Renuka	Slum (upgraded)	Yes	Yes	No	good	15
3	Sambpur	Indira	Middle-class	Yes	Yes	Yes	good	16
4	Cherapur	Revathi	Middle-class	Yes	Yes	Yes	good	20
5	Chinnapuram	Mala	Middle-class	Yes	Yes	No	medium	10
6	Nagapuram	Vidya	Middle-class	Yes	Yes	Yes	good	18
7	Langapatai	Selvi	Middle-class	No	Yes	Yes	medium	20*
8	Jeypetai	Ramani	Middle-class	No	Yes	No	medium	10

Notes: the table is grouped into two sections: first section 1-7 denotes areas that I group as poor and the second section 1-8 denotes areas that I group as better-off. All names are pseudonyms.

*Two palwadis are in one building, so the number of children combines two centers.

¹ - Number of children attending was averaged based on my visits (during each visit there may be a somewhat different number of children attending).

Beneficiaries are “Acquiescent”

Some childcare tasks are more time consuming and require more effort than others. As teachers were overloaded with tasks and responsibilities, they sought to minimize efforts and time spent on duties they find unnecessary or unpleasant. Due to low monitoring capacity by supervisors (which will be discussed in chapter 4), teachers' accountability in many childcare tasks was significantly shaped by their interactions with the parents. Thus, when teachers compromised on certain tasks, they examined parents' reactions. If teachers perceived that parents tolerated their “deviations” they could adopt them as common practice.¹⁶ In doing so, teachers constructed parents as acquiescent, that is, they were satisfied with the approach and did not object to how a particular care task was enacted. This was one of the most common frames that teachers invoked to legitimize their ways of ‘rationing’ care quality.

Toileting

Workers engaged in some of the most notable childcare ‘adjustments’ when taking care of children’s toileting. I observed that toileting was most starkly patterned by neighborhood class. In nearly all poor areas, children were sent to urinate outside the center in the open whereas in better-off areas children used the pit latrine in the AWC (see table 3). The majority of AWCs had a latrine, but workers often justified sending children to urinate outside because of broken or incomplete water infrastructure, which made it difficult to access and gather water from alternative sources. Water motors broke down in all areas but workers in better-off areas managed to fix them quicker than workers in poor areas. Fixing infrastructure was difficult as it could take time for an

¹⁶ Importantly, it does not necessary mean that parents are indifferent about how care is provided. There may be many reasons why they do not intervene, but as I will argue in the next chapter it is ultimately the structural conditions that limit parents’ power to negotiate.

overloaded municipality to address such issues. Teachers had to find ways to exert pressure on municipality, either through their superiors in the ICDS or through community leaders. If a motor was broken, helpers could still make toilets usable by fetching water from other water tankers, communal or residents' taps. This was what most workers did in better-off areas. Yet, in poor areas teachers let helpers fetch water only for the cooking needs but not for the bathroom.

In poor areas, by letting kids urinate outside, regardless of whether the bathroom was functional, workers minimized their efforts in cleaning the toilet *and* the children. They justified this practice by reasoning that parents were fine with this approach because they did the same at home. One of the poorer centers I studied in north Chennai, in Seypetai neighborhood, was temporarily moved to a community building, which did not have the standard AWC setup, including kitchen (just a stove), so helper Mrinalini washed dishes in the bathroom which had tap water. One day, just before lunch several girls and boys went outside the center and peed together on the road. When asked why children did not use the toilet, Mrinalini said it would be smelly for when she needs to wash dishes, so they just let kids pee outside. When asked what parents thought about this, she nonchalantly responded that they were not 'bothered' as they were used to it. It was indeed possible to see *some* children in the area peeing outside, but I did not see *most* kids doing it. Many residents used shared bathrooms, and some had private ones.

Teachers' assumptions that residents' accepted open defecation as normal mirrored what Michelle Alexander (2020) notes about how impoverished Black communities are misperceived in the US. Alexander argues that it is a fallacy to believe that just because incarceration rates are high in Black communities, their residents find it acceptable and do not desire safer neighborhoods, better jobs, healthier families, and meaningful opportunities to contribute to society. As she

contends, such a belief is inherently racist and disregards the aspirations and experiences of these communities, who are often struggling against systemic barriers and inequalities.

In Seypetai, several parents told me they did not like having kids pee outside and thought it was unhygienic and wrong, they wanted a bathroom to be used in the AWC. Mothers were concerned with their kids' safety and especially disliked if girls were seen peeing outside. But most mothers also did not insist on the bathroom use and had tacitly accepted the arrangement. Teacher Pushpa told me and the mothers that peeing outside was "temporary," only until the new AWC building is constructed. When it is complete it will be equipped with a usable kitchen and toilet. Nevertheless, despite having a functioning bathroom workers chose not to use it for the intended purposes. Pushpa contended that once they have a new building and everything was set up, they will use the toilet. She wished to have two toilets, one for teachers and one for children. Still, I was left wondering how workers would handle toilet matters once they moved into the new building.

Pushpa's construction of her beneficiaries as acquiescent stemmed from her strained interactions with the Scheduled Caste (SC) community and her casteist beliefs. Pushpa was originally from a different district from a middle-ranking Other Backward Classes (OBC) but lived in this area since marriage, for about 15 years.¹⁷ Three years ago, she took up this job because the center was right next to her home and she had some interest in teaching. The majority of her beneficiaries were Pushpa's neighbors – low-income Dalits from a nearby settlement, some of whom lived in shacks, though a few also lived in proper one-storey cement houses. She spoke to her SC neighbors for the first time only when she became a teacher. Pushpa now regretted having

¹⁷ The Other Backward Classes (OBC) are non-SC groups designated as socially disadvantaged by Indian states. However, their status is consider higher than the status and conditions of SC groups.

to serve mostly slum kids, who often came without bathing, “not neat,” and spoke poor language as mentioned earlier. Although she had amicable relationship with several SC parents, she explained having difficulties working in this area:

This particular area.. it is difficult. Other areas are okay. How do I say this? We are from a different community. People from this area are from the SC community, we are BC. So they don't like us – even before I started working here. So if we request their support for palwadi, then they will comment, ‘why can't you do it yourself?’ I will have to listen to all what they say. If they celebrate Ambedkar birthday or Kamarajar Birthday [late political leaders from post-independence period], then we will have to keep the center open. Because they will insist as it is in their area. So there are some problems. We cannot ask them anything. They continue to see me as how they saw me before becoming the teacher. They see me as a person from this area but not as a teacher. It only pertains to this area. But in other areas, they give good responses.

By “other areas” Pushpa meant a better-off BC community who she also served but they lived slightly further away from the center. She believed that BC parents did not use her AWC because they did not want their children to mingle with “slum kids”. Pushpa viewed BC parents as college-educated, who were more understanding and cooperative, and whose children would be easier to care for. Yet, since she was unable to address the caste divide she felt stuck with Dalit kids and their parents. These beneficiaries were viewed as inferior as they were less educated, “did not listen to her” advice and instructions about nutrition, health and were uncooperative when she needed them to attend her awareness events.

Thus, for Pushpa, SC beneficiaries had lesser needs and standards. As parents did not actively resist lack of facilities, she felt that she and her helper could compromise on services, like toileting, to reduce their caregiving efforts. According to Pushpa, parents here were mostly concerned with children's safety, food, and wanted them to socialize without paying a fee for the service. They also did not mind if she was frequently away for office meetings and children were left only with the helper. Having established that parents' childcare needs centered on safety and food, Pushpa did not exert much effort in caregiving. She did not mind children urinating outside

and did not wash their feet and hands afterwards, especially before eating lunch. She ignored a little girl who struggled to put on her underwear after peeing or when the youngest kids had difficulties feeding themselves. In short, Pushpa and many other teachers in poor areas allowed children to urinate outside, and ignored many other aspects of care, when they believed that parents accepted it as a normal practice in their area. Even teacher Geeta, whom I will discuss later, let children urinate outside rather than use their perfectly functioning toilet with tap water.

Yet, if children needed to defecate, not all workers sent them outside. In some congested neighborhoods teachers did not let children defecate outside stating it would be too smelly for them. Instead, they sent them home or asked parents to pick them up and take them home. If children wetted or soiled themselves, which I will elaborate on in the next section, helpers usually cleaned up children or called on parents to do so.

I suggest that workers' reluctance to enable children's toilet use might also stem from the long-standing caste-based notions of purity and pollution. Children's, and especially Dalit children's urine and feces are considered polluting not just from a sanitary perspective, but it is also ritually polluting. Caste is a hierarchy of ritual purity. Lower castes are considered ritually polluted and are restricted in their physical interactions with the upper castes who are considered ritually pure. Thus, while it is fundamentally the workers' role to train and help children with toileting, they can invoke infrastructural deficiencies to avoid tasks that they might consider ritually polluting (e.g., cleaning lower caste kids or toilets used by them). But as expected in urban areas (Coelho 2005), they never admitted to practicing untouchability or this being their concern at all. Moreover, it is also possible that by being proximate to other people's feces and urine higher caste workers (such as OBCs) may feel denigrated to lower caste status as cleaning jobs are largely performed by Dalits (Spears and Coffey 2017). In palwadis itself, there was a hierarchy where

teachers tended to come from OBC and higher castes whereas helpers who dealt with cleaning duties are usually SCs. Yet some helpers too could be unwilling to clean toilets and children regardless of their caste.

The distancing of workers from toileting matters may have important links to large caste-based gaps in children's malnutrition outcomes, which scholars cannot explain by differences in socio-economic status (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2020). Instead, they suggest that high rates of malnutrition among Dalit children are likely to result from the illegal but widespread practices of untouchability, such as I described above (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2020). Many older studies have documented how palwadis mistreated or differentially treated children from Scheduled Castes (SC) compared to children from 'touchable' castes. For instance, SC children were often given food after caste children, made to sit separately during meals, or provided with smaller portions of food (Harriss 1991).

Another channel that can lead to higher rates of malnutrition among Dalit mothers and their kids is the denial of health services by healthcare providers. A number of studies document how health sector workers, such as nursers, engage in untouchability by limiting their interactions with Dalit clients providers (Shah et al. 2006; Acharya 2010; Diwakar G. 2014; George 2019). Most of this research is conducted in rural India, but it is likely that while untouchability may not be explicitly practiced it can also infuse frontline workers' behaviors in urban settings. These linkages should become clearer when I discuss how teachers constructed distinct notions about poorer beneficiaries to adapt feeding and other care practices.

Feeding

Teachers construct parents as acquiescent to also minimize their efforts in lunch service. Adjustments in feeding are particularly striking and unsettling given the program's emphasis on

providing nutritious meals to fight malnutrition. In Tamil Nadu, palwadis have served food for kids since the 1975 and they are still commonly referred to as *sathu unavu* meaning a center providing nutritious food. Six days per week palwadis serve children ages 2-5 a variety of rice meals with vegetables. Boiled eggs are included on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Under the National Food Security Act, the ICDS is one of the programs that guarantees the right to food by providing take home rations of nutrition mixes (*sathu maavu*) and free lunch meals to all children under age 6, and pregnant and lactating women. Providing free nutritious lunches and supplements via palwadis has been an effective intervention to help reduce high malnutrition among children in India (more than one third of India's children under 5 are malnourished, but about 25% in Tamil Nadu) (Jain 2016). Teachers have internalized food provision as the key aspect of their institutional mission to the extent that their heavy workload may allow them to justify skipping preschool activities but not serving meals. In each AWC, there is also a poster or a blackboard with a menu of lunch that is supposed to be served each day of the week, so beneficiaries can check if that meal is served.

While teachers cannot compromise on food provision, they can adjust *how* they provide it. Workers exerted different levels of effort and care in cooking and feeding children, which was often based on how they viewed what was important to their beneficiaries. A common adjustment in feeding was to serve hot lunch to kids in the center but give boiled egg to take away to eat at home. I observed that in five out of seven poor areas teachers did not serve boiled eggs in the center but sent them home, and in two of them they gave the entire lunch meal to take away (see table 3). For most workers (and parents) boiled eggs had a very unpleasant smell which required more thorough cleaning after eggs were eaten in the center. Since children and teachers ate on the floors (there are no tables for kids) without consuming eggs, workers did not necessarily have to

mop the floors and use a cleaning product. Thus, to minimize cleaning some workers gave eggs home. When asked for a reason why they did so they usually explained that they could not get rid of the smell “no matter how much you mop the floors”.

Training children to eat eggs is also time consuming but it is an important task to ensure kids, especially those who are malnourished, receive essential nutrients. When workers did not serve eggs in the center it defeated the purpose of the ICDS program because it shifted the responsibility to the family, making it unclear if children ate eggs at home, or if anyone else in the family ate them (Vikram and Chindarkar 2020). In the past, studies found that food brought home from noon meal schemes was often shared with family members (Harriss 1991). If this is a larger pattern that continues (which I cannot confirm given my small sample size), it would be unfortunate because children in poor areas need nutritious food more than children in better-off areas where parents can afford to purchase eggs.

The ICDS suspected and knew that workers may sometimes shirk their duties, so officials requested pictures of completed tasks, such as lunch being served or awareness meeting conducted. Yet, it was relatively easy to manipulate these pictures. Once, just before children started eating lunch in a poor Mamalpuram neighborhood, helper Kanmani served mixed rice, including boiled eggs in children’s plates and asked them to pose for a picture. Right after taking the picture, Kanmani told the kids to eat rice but collected the eggs and gave them back to take home when the children were leaving. When they were not looking one child bit into the egg and some of it spilled on the floor. When Kanmani saw it, she was furious—she would now require mopping the floor, which she eventually had done after the kids left, but even then, she mopped only that one spot of the spill.

Just like with toileting in the open, workers often justified that parents had no problem taking eggs home instead of having them served in the center. Some parents also agreed that egg smell was bad and that it may be easier for workers if children ate eggs at home. Some parents, whose children did not like eggs, also preferred taking them for the family instead of letting the teacher decide what to do with them. Some parents preferred feeding eggs in the center but even if they questioned the ‘take home’ approach, they often accept teachers’ reasoning. Regardless of the reasons, many parents did not object to eggs being sent home. This helped teachers establish that parents were accommodating and that they may even prefer to take eggs home. In so doing, teachers ultimately shifted their responsibility of feeding eggs and improving children’s nutrition back to mothers.

By sending eggs home, teachers lessened their efforts not just in cleaning but also in feeding eggs and often the entire meal by hand. Some teachers in poor areas did not feed children by hand, which was common to do when trying to teach toddlers how to eat. I argue that workers’ social bias against *slum* residents compounded their construction of parents as accommodating and thus can better explain workers’ reluctance to touch and feed children. Feeding children by hand was kind of a “bonus” to many parents as they did not expect it in both better-off and poorer areas. But I will later demonstrate that feeding by hand was an important selling point of palwadi services to parents in better-off areas, leading to greater differentiation of services between poor and better-off neighborhoods.

Teacher Meenakshi worked in a poor resettlement area called Mamalpuram, where food was a crucial component of palwadi services to low-income residents. Meenakshi explained to me how children came to her center because of the food, as parents “do not follow a regular three course meal daily but eat where they work” and thus may not cook at home. Meenakshi understood

it would be “hard for these people” if she did not provide lunch and doubted whether children would attend her palwadi if the food was not provided:

...half the children come without having breakfast. Some kids come expecting food. Those kids don't wait for their mothers to drop them off, they come themselves. They will collect money for [breakfast] snacks, buy, eat and come straight to the center. “They [children] won't even bathe, we can figure out from their dress. We will scold them (for coming without bathing and changing clothes) and send those kids back home. Then, they will say that there was no water (supply).

Meenakshi and Kanmani served the food as instructed, but they were not concerned to ensure that the children ate adequately. They let kids go home if they did not finish their plates. Older kids usually ate well but smaller kids struggled to eat by themselves and often ate very little. As Mamalpuram workers did not care about children's eating, they did not feed them by hand. In fact, they outsourced the process to older children:

If there are siblings, they [kids] will feed themselves. We make siblings sit together and tell the elder one to feed the younger one. Some kids will get motivated to eat by themselves when they see their friends eat on their own. So, they learn everything that they don't learn at home. Even those kids who are stubborn and don't like to eat by themselves, learn to eat independently after coming to the center and seeing other kids eat on their own.

It was indeed common to see siblings who were about one or two years apart attend the same AWC. While in better-off areas it was usually staff who fed the youngest kids, in poor areas older kids—siblings, cousins, or friends—fed younger ones. The lunch “process” and efforts in feeding children were similar in many other AWCs in poor areas: workers were reluctant to feed kids by hand, they sent eggs home and, in a few cases, gave the entire meal take away. Without actively conveying the importance of feeding kids in the centre, parents were seen as having basic needs for food and safety, but not for greater care in *how* services are carried out. Workers translated parents' disadvantage into “lesser needs” and acquiescence, which helped them withdraw from tasks they construct as unnecessary and unpleasant. Parents were seen accommodating because what they were getting was already “enough and sufficient”.

Teacher's reluctance to feed kids was bolstered by their prejudice against poor Dalits. Meenkashi's area Mamalpuram was a particularly stigmatized neighborhood. It was on the outskirts of Chennai where squatter settlers were relocated from the central parts of the city. The area is often referred to as a ghetto whose residents are looked down upon and discriminated against for being poor, uneducated, and dirty, who "happen to be" largely Dalits. Yet, the relocation and neighborhood construction was solely the state government's responsibility which housed residents in substandard quality apartments lacking proper physical and social infrastructure. Residents complained that when they were relocated from the inner city they got disconnected from their jobs and now they struggled to find employment in the new area. Moreover, they complained about schools and healthcare facilities being inadequate, and that there were many more social problems compared to their previous habitats.

Frontline workers often constructed an symbolic boundary (Lamont and Molnár 2002) between themselves and their beneficiaries which fostered their indifference, avoidance and partial provision of childcare. Meenakshi and Kanmani were from similar economic backgrounds as their residents, and Meenaksih lived five minutes away, in an area which was part of an older resettlement colony. Yet, they saw a large cleavage between themselves and their beneficiaries. Both workers were from intermediate castes (OBC and MBC) and viewed themselves as "decent," educated authority who delivered vital benefits to children and mothers. But for them Dalit residents were "indecent", poor, uneducated, and unhygienic, and some of them could not understand palwadi benefits. They were hard to teach and change. Meenakshi and some other teachers were particularly vocal about their disdain towards the residents. But describing beneficiaries in derogatory terms was not uncommon for many teachers working in poorer areas.

In a few more extreme cases teachers seeking to reduce their workload used the notion of

accommodating to go as far as sending the entire lunch meal to take home. One of the most “deviant” lunch practices I observed was in an AWC located in a poor area called Tiruvum, described in the first vignette of this chapter. Tiruvum was a small settlement dominated by poor and working-class Dalit residents, majority of whom lived in makeshift and semi-permanent houses. Teacher Sumathi was originally from an OBC community from Madurai and has been working here for the past 12 years. She just moved into a government subsidized high-rise three bedroom apartment about 10 minutes away (by auto-rikshaw) from Tiruvum. When I visited her home and found her living quarters to be starkly different from her beneficiaries.

When palwadis re-opened to serve lunch after being closed for over a year during the pandemic, Sumathi was not concerned about complying with the rules of serving food in the center and opted for sending the entire lunch meal home. She instructed parents to send children with their own bowls to the center to pick up food and go home to eat. Sumathi did not want to admit she was shirking responsibility and came up with an unreasonable explanation, as if children would fight if they ate lunch in the center:

We can serve here, but children will fight with each other. So, they will take food home. Before [before the lockdown], we used to make kids sleep after lunch because parents won't be here and they [children] will listen to us. And now because parents come with them [children], they will immediately leave along with them [parents].

Sumathi's explanation was irrational, because if anything, parents would help their children eat. In no other center, having a few parents around during lunch was a problem. Generally, most teachers preferred parents not to interfere in feeding as they distract children but sometimes they did allow parents to feed their toddlers. In Tiruvum, I saw only a few family members coming with kids for their lunch meals. Most children came alone or with older siblings and friends. Letting kids take food home was risky—even though most of their homes were nearby it was possible children could

spill or lose their food while walking. As mentioned before, sending food home created a risk that it would be consumed by family members.

It was particularly surprising to witness Sumathi doing this because AWCs were re-opened after the pandemic-induced lockdown to specifically serve hot lunch meals *in the center*. The government re-opened AWCs after someone submitted a Court case complaining that ICDS take-home food rations were not reaching children during pandemic. The demand behind AWC re-opening for lunch was to make children eat in the center instead of distributing products to be cooked at home. While I saw this happen regularly in Sumathi's center, lunch (except for eggs) was mostly served in the center elsewhere. Sumathi may be exceptional, but her approach illuminates how she, like many other teachers, used her perception of parents as acquiescent to justify bending the rules.

Sumathi believed that because parents in her area were more needy of food but also less fussy and more accommodating, they were content with *how* she delivered it. When asked if parents wanted children to eat in the center, Sumathi responded: "you saw right? nobody asked, so nobody asks for it. They are okay with it, they take the food and feed at home". She thought kids and parents loved this food as they have never mentioned anything (bad) about it. She explained that people who lived in this area were less educated and not very oriented to children's well-being. Those who were interested in "development" left to live in better places. Here, mothers mostly gave junk food to children and just let them play, without taking time to feed their kids. This is *why* she argued there were more severely malnourished children now. According to her, people did not have much awareness about nutrition, as most women studied till 10-11th grade and men did not cross 8th grade. Thus, dealing with parents who were less educated and rather careless about their children's nutrition allowed her to justify distributing benefits based on how she preferred.

Teachers who rationalized lower quality services had to be careful in navigating their communication and self-presentation to their communities (and to some degree to themselves too). Maintaining cordial relationships with parents was essential to avoid potential conflicts. For example, Sumathi believed she could tweak her service delivery and avoid complaints because she worked properly for a long time and had established a good reputation in the area. Sumathi believed she worked better when compared to her predecessor, who used to be a late-comer and irregular. When Sumathi took over the AWC about a decade ago, she came to work on time, distributed benefits and looked after children properly. According to her, residents have noticed it. She has also been friendly when interacting with mothers and children: she recalled their names, asked how they were doing and what they ate for breakfast. If she found out someone was underweight, she tried to advise them what to eat to gain weight. While this is what many teachers did (and were supposed to do), Sumathi believed that being friendly, punctual and most importantly *being present* in the area helped her gain people's approval and respect, which ironically now allowed her to adjust feeding and other services to her beneficiary *disadvantage*.

In sum, rationalizing beneficiaries as acquiescent allowed many workers to justify their partial approach to feeding. This was more common in poorer areas, where residents did not resist or object to however workers decided to feed the kids. In some cases, teachers' approach was also compounded by casteist beliefs and unwillingness to interact with "unhygienic" Dalit children.

A Mother's Responsibility

Children's toileting required dealing with unpleasant tasks though it is not what most workers spoke about when asked about difficulties in their job. However, it is where teachers and helpers sought many quiet adjustments to lessen their workload. Most children enrolled in AWCs at around two years old and the majority were not toilet trained. In most areas that I studied, parents did not

use diapers, they re-used underwear, i.e., they would often send an extra pair with their children to the AWC. Palwadi staff were tasked with toilet training and cleaning up children when they wetted or soiled themselves. They toilet-train children by making them all go to the bathroom together at the same time, usually around 11 am. It was primarily a helper's task to help children use the toilet and clean them up but if they were unavailable, teachers had to assist children. Moreover, teachers held the power to instruct helpers and ensure they were accountable for all their responsibilities.

When water was not readily available and because cleaning up children requires dealing with a lot of "nasty matter," workers could minimize their cleaning efforts by constructing that it was mothers' responsibility to ensure children poop before coming to palwadi. In doing so, they called on mothers or their family members to clean up their children's soiling or wetting. Workers often reiterated to parents to ensure their children completed all their morning routines at home to avoid wetting and soiling. Obviously, it was not easy or even appropriate to force children to defecate against their will, and many mothers felt particularly burdened with such tasks when rushing to work in the morning. Thus, children's wetting and soiling in the center was common. To avoid cleaning, workers could involve parents. For example, teacher Sumathi, whose lunch practices I discussed above, did not have a water connection in her center, so she made children urinate outside and normalized calling on parents to clean up their children:

Ieva: How do you manage the bathroom without water?

Sumathi: No one will use it. If I have the need, then I alone will use it. I will wash it and it will be clean, but for peeing the children will do it outside.

Ieva: What if the children pee themselves accidentally?

Sumathi: If they do so, then their parents will come and clean up. If we call them, they will come and clean up.

Ieva: But will they ask, why are they called?

Sumathi: No, they will not ask.

Ieva: How do you think parents understand that?

Sumathi: They know that generally I don't clean up, I will never clean up. When the children wet themselves, parents will say: "don't strain, teacher, we will come". If the helper is here, she will clean, but I will not.

...

Ieva: Have there been instances where parents stopped sending kids, as there is no means to use the bathroom?

Sumathi: All of them defecate in the streets...[laughing]

Ieva: So that has never been the issue?

Sumathi: No, not an issue.

Initially, I was surprised about how nonchalant Sumathi was about outsourcing her care work to parents. I considered it unacceptable behavior, because it was the staff's responsibility to take care of all children's needs in the center. I soon realized that shifting responsibility to parents was a social norm marking unequal power relations between teachers and parents that was more prevalent in poorer neighborhoods. When I asked parents why they agreed to come and clean their children themselves, they would insist it is "*only their children*" and it is not necessarily the AWC staff's responsibility to clean up kids when they make a "mess". Mothers often believed they had to give children some tea and make them complete their toileting routines in the morning. Yet they also acknowledged it was a difficult task. Many parents, especially in poor areas, internalized this responsibility and felt guilty if children had a "soiling accident" that workers needed to clean it up. To "redeem" themselves mothers agreed to come and clean their children even if they found it annoying. This process was articulated very clearly by teacher Geeta, who worked in a large poorer neighborhood Kolapatnam.

Geeta felt the pulse of the neighborhood demands and directed staff's efforts to where they felt it was most necessary *and* most monitored by the community. She and her helper Sudha cooked, fed kids, looked after them, and cleaned the center with greater care as they knew parents kept a watchful eye on them. Yet because workers considered the area a slum, where urinating outside was acceptable, they also let palwadi children urinate outside, despite *having* a bathroom with a functioning water connection. They only used the bathroom for defecating because Geeta said: "if they pooped outside it would be smelly and parents and visitors wouldn't like it, and they

[workers themselves] wouldn't like it too". Geeta also thought it was perfectly acceptable to call parents for cleaning their children (if staff were unable to do so) as she believed it to was parents' fault:

Ieva: What do parents say when you call them and tell that their child defecated or wet themselves?

Geeta: They will say "sorry teacher, please don't be upset".

Ieva: They will tell you not to be upset?

Geeta: They will be apologetic and will say something like that -- that they too are struggling to get their children to poop in the morning or that the child did it unknowingly. No one is special, they will not ask such questions like "why didn't you clean up". Not everyone, but some will say that "you are getting salary and why didn't you clean-up?", but *here* no such thing has happened and they will not question us that way. We will clean-up and send children, be it them [helper] or me, we will clean children up and send. In case of emergency parents will come and take children back..

Ieva: Suppose if it was a different area, and if there were wealthier people, do you think they would ask why they are called and why you don't clean-up?

Geeta: No one will demand that. Because it's their fault. They must ensure the child defecates in the morning and then send here, it's their work. If parents take them outside, then what should the mother do? They must know that the child must use the bathroom before going to school. Shouldn't they know that or not? So, they will realize that it's their mistake, there is no one who don't realize.

This dialogue reveals that Geeta had a strong belief in parents' willingness to clean their children regardless of the area, which might be challenged if she had been exposed to parents' expectations and behaviors in better-off areas. I will demonstrate later in this chapter how teachers in better-off areas perceived parents as much more reluctant to clean their children, who found it unacceptable to be called upon for such matters. In this conversation Geeta also illustrates the internalization of the power dynamic by the teacher: as cleaning up children is constructed to be parents' responsibility: she felt it was her legitimate right to demand parents to clean their children. By constantly reminding parents to complete kids' morning routines before sending them to an AWC teachers reinforced this responsibility and guilt-tripped parents if they "failed" to do so. Teachers' power to call on parents was sustained by parents' structural disadvantage—they had fewer

opportunities for childcare and also because they lack facilities themselves, as was often the case in densely packed settlements (Doron and Jeffrey 2014), they were forced to use the outdoors.

Even though toileting practices may be worse in many poor areas, teachers may not always be at liberty to do as they please. Parents need to be nearby and available upon request, if mothers are working and no one else from the family is around, workers have to clean children themselves. Some parents may also question workers as hinted by Geeta, but it seemed uncommon in poorer areas. Parents were more likely to negotiate “their responsibility” softly, by appealing to teachers’ mercy and kindness to understand their struggles. As Geeta recounted, mothers would share about their unsuccessful efforts in making their child poop in the morning and ask for forgiveness in advance if the kid wet or soiled themselves.

Parents often mentioned they harbored some fears that workers may be upset with children’s soiling and would not clean them properly or even hit the child. Thus, they often agreed to come and do it themselves. I did not witness or hear about workers actually hitting children for such issues but some teachers had seen helpers “clean kids’ bums with a harsh broom” or letting the “poop dry on the bum”. Some teachers also had qualms about recruiting more educated staff who would be less willing to clean up kids. Thus, parents’ fears about children’s cleaning in palwadis seemed not unwarranted. Moreover, resisting teachers’ requests invoked worries about possible retaliation against children or denial of other benefits.

Neighborhood structural position, namely lack of toilets, and social construction of parents’ responsibility for children’s toilet “accidents” enabled workers to let kids urinate outside and to request parents to clean up their children if they wet or soil themselves. Parents in poor areas were also more likely to subscribe to this norm compared to many parents in better-off areas. When parents did not challenge teachers or withdrew from the AWC for lack of toilets or such requests,

workers could continue such behaviors without consequences. Teachers were also more relaxed and confident about their aberrant practices when they knew they did not have to struggle to attract children, as is the case in many poor areas. Parents in poor areas, unlike those in many better-off areas, were more dependent on palwadis for childcare and thus, were more likely to compromise on quality.

Beneficiaries are “Unconcerned”

Workers can also engage in the social construction of beneficiaries as unconcerned about cleanliness when they compromise on the maintenance of palwadi cleanliness. Before delving into how these adjustments were enacted, I will explain how I measured the variations in palwadi cleanliness. To some extent, all centers were not perfectly clean. In Chennai, dust gathered quickly as centers did not have glass windows and doors were usually open. As children sat, played and ate on the floor, did not wear diapers, and could wet or soil themselves at any moment, the floors required constant wiping and mopping. However, even the frequency of sweeping and mopping also tended to vary from place to place. Helpers were responsible to come in every day early in the morning to sweep and mop the place before the children came. Teachers usually came later but they had to ensure the place was cleaned before the children entered. They were ultimately accountable for keeping the center clean and well-maintained. Teachers had to maintain a cooperative and friendly relationship with their helpers because any antagonism or fights could affect how helpers completed their duties.

I visited each center multiple times and noted the patterns of how much effort was put into cleaning. After each visit I noted how clean the center was, specifically, whether the floors were swept and mopped and if the toilet was clean (if it was functional). After summarizing and compiling these notes I grouped centers into three levels of cleanliness: poor, medium and good

(see table 3). Centers with a poor level of cleanliness were untidy, floors might be swept but were not mopped with some trash lying around. The toilet would also not be clean. Centers with medium level of cleanliness were relatively tidy, swept with no or just some small trash on the floors, mopping would be done only in the eating area, or not at all, toilet was not always clean. Centers with good levels of cleanliness were tidy, floors were swept and mopped every day and the toilet would be relatively clean. The patterns of cleanliness that emerged varied by neighborhood class. I rated 5 out of 7 AWCs in poor areas having poor levels of cleanliness. I rated 5 and 3 out of 8 AWCs in better-off areas as having good and medium levels of cleanliness, respectively.

These patterns also reflected how palwadi staff adapted cleanliness levels to their perceptions of how much parents cared about AWC cleanliness and hygiene. This was most strongly influenced by workers' observations and perceptions of the housing and infrastructure conditions of the area. Many teachers who worked in poor areas with dilapidated housing, *some* open urination/defecation, and garbage accumulation imagined that residents themselves cared little about cleanliness and were rather unhygienic. Yet through my interviews it was clear that for all parents, regardless of the area, cleanliness of an AWC was important and no one wanted to send their children to a dirty center. Still, in poor areas parents tended to compromise more on certain aspects of cleanliness, such as not having floors mopped daily.

To illustrate how workers' perceptions about the neighborhood residents informed their efforts in cleanliness, I return to Meenakshi and her disdain for the Mamalpuram residents. Even though Meenakshi herself lived in a nearby resettlement colony (which also used to be known as the most unsafe *ghetto* in Chennai) and came from similar economic background as the residents, she viewed herself as an outsider. She described her beneficiaries as "locals" (another euphemism for slum-dwellers or Scheduled Castes) who "do not know how to be clean and neat", they "brush

their teeth and spit outside through the window” and “do not know how behave in general”.

Meenakshi reasoned that people in Mamalpuram were unable to live “properly”:

These people here are used to living in tents (on the platforms), they eat, sleep and do everything in the open. Since they are used to such a lifestyle, they are unable to live here [in Mamalpuram resettlement area]. For example, there is a toilet attached to every house. But they do open defecation. Others (in the area) would scold them, even then they continue doing that. They will wash their hands and throw away the water from their window. The area is so filthy only because of them and their lifestyle.

Meenakshi said that if anyone damaged anything, then Kanmani would talk at their level (use vulgar language).” When I asked her if she would tell people anything Meenakshi said: “They won’t listen. Even when we are standing, they will sweep and put all dust from the top floor on our head. They will not listen even if we shout. They will throw and keep going.” However, Meenakshi ignored the struggles that residents encountered after relocation, including water shortages and the fact that the state that did not construct proper pipes and drainage systems leading to constant clogging, sludge and spillage between the houses making the whole area stink.

When I asked Meenakshi whether parents cared about the AWC cleanliness both workers immediately answered “no!”, and that parents would never even mention or say anything about it. Meenakshi and Kanmani casted their beneficiaries as beneath them, who cared little about education or cleanliness, were lazy and dirty. They once said that parents “even forget to pick up their kids sometimes”. Serving a large area with many poor children made it rather easy to fill the AWC with kids whose parents were not fussy about cleanliness. Meenakshi even mentioned that she turned away kids who came dirty to her center.

It was also evident helper Kanmani did not like cleaning the center, it seemed this task did not match her social status. In the end, she was an OBC who had to clean the place for SC kids and while she, like others, claimed not to see “caste”, one could sense her language and actions were infused with casteism. Whenever I visited the center, I saw pieces of trash on the floor and

felt small dirt particles sticking to my bare feet, something that I did not feel in many other places. Yet, Kanmani pretended not to see dirt *inside* her center, she used to just sit idly without sweeping or mopping, and often came to the AWC even later than the teacher herself. I also never heard Meenakshi asking Kanmani to clean anything or complain about the hygiene of the center, even though she did not miss an opportunity to comment on garbage and dirt in the neighborhood. The workers were also not bothered to let kids sit on the dirty floor and eat. Once Kanmani mopped only a small area of the floor, where a few kids bit into their eggs for lunch, leaving all other parts of the floor dirty. For many workers and mothers, egg smell was repulsive and at least some mopping with a splash of *Lizol* (a fragrant surface cleaner) was essential to eliminate the odor.

Similar biases and attending behaviors were expressed by many other workers in poor areas. Teachers used to attribute the characteristics of a neighborhood to the parents' lack of interest in cleanliness and would not be inclined to maintain high standards of hygiene unless parents explicitly demanded it. Notably, as others have noted and in my discussions with parents as well (which I will document in the next chapter) parents *did* express desires for cleanliness (e.g., Joshi, Fawcett, and Mannan 2011). But their demand-making for better care and facilities was constrained by their powerlessness and disadvantaged circumstances, such as lack of water, drainage and proper toilet facilities. When parents asked for toilets, water or questioned teachers about cleanliness in the palwadi, workers often talked back and dismissed them by pointing to lack of cleanliness in the neighborhood and parents' homes itself.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND EXIT THREAT

Teachers who worked in better-off areas viewed their beneficiaries as having high standards and expectations for various aspects of care, rather than being accommodating or unconcerned. These perceptions, sustained by the threat of unsatisfied parents' exit, often inhibited teachers' ability to

compromise on childcare. Compared to poor neighborhoods, teachers and helpers in better-off areas often paid more attention and care in feeding, did not let children urinate outside or call on parents to clean up children, maintained higher levels of cleanliness and sometimes put extra effort in early learning activities.

Several factors motivated teachers to fear children's exit. First, workers were accountable for not wasting stocks that were distributed according to the enrollment numbers. Having fewer children than allocated stock invoked questioning by supervisors and potential penalties. Second, enrollments reflected on workers' performance, which could be questioned if numbers were low. While supervisors rarely imposed serious sanctions on workers for poor children's attendance, they did exert pressure through other means, like questioning and shaming, more frequent visits, and requests to cover additional areas. There was also a general sense of worry about the future of palwadis if they are unable to retain children.

Feeding

A common complaint among teachers working in better-off areas was that it was difficult to convince parents that palwadi food was good quality. These complaints and suspicion about food motivated workers to be careful in cooking and feeding children. Many ICDS workers mentioned that food was no longer the primary need for the majority of families in Chennai. Teachers recounted that in better-off areas parents often refused palwadi food saying they preferred to pack and send their own lunch.

The common misperception among Chennaites is that palwadis serve lower quality rice (unpolished or brown rice) as it was supplied by the government. Teachers complained about this misperception, and many parents told me themselves that they thought the ration rice would cause children diarrhea and other stomach problems. Some parents reported that palwadi food did not suit their children, so they sent their own lunch or made children eat at home. The unpolished rice

that AWCs provide has higher nutrition value than the polished rice, but it needs to be rinsed a few times before cooking to remove contaminants. Diarrhea may happen not because rice is unpolished but because it may be cooked with contaminants, or because of many other reasons unrelated to food quality. Teachers had to explain these issues and assuage parents' doubts.

Even if many parents did not value getting free food itself, they desired their children to eat nutritious food, especially boiled eggs and believed that children ate better in the center than at home. When children see other kids eating it encourages them to eat too. This was an important factor that attracted parents across neighborhoods to use palwadis. Parents often asked palwadi teachers about how their children ate, and sometimes came and fed their kids themselves, provided teachers allowed it.

In areas where workers perceived parents as fussier and more demanding about food quality, teachers compromised less and put more effort into feeding. Because affordability of quality food was less of an issue in better-off areas, parents were less needy of AWC meals. Thus, teachers had to work harder to "sell" their meal service to attract parents in such areas. They could do so by demonstrating that their food was nutritious and cooked well, they would feed children themselves by hand and/or teach them to eat on their own, and they could make them eat better in the center than at home. This was appealing to many parents who struggled to cajole their toddlers to eat.

For example, helper Maria who worked in a better-off Cherpur neighborhood, described in the opening vignette, explained how they prioritized feeding children: first, they fed children whose parents come to pick them up first, then, they fed the youngest kids who struggled to feed

themselves, and at the end they fed kids who slowest. After kids enrolled, for the first three months staff fed them by hand themselves and taught them how to eat on their own:¹⁸

Maria: We train kids to use their hands and teach them the right way of eating eggs. We tell them that they must not waste the yolk and must bite harder into the yellow yolk and eat them. It takes about 3 months of training.

This sequencing and practices of feeding signaled that workers internalized what aspects of feeding were important to parents in Cherpur. On different occasions I observed how both Maria and teacher Revathi fed children by hand, including eggs. They ensured children finished their first servings and gave a second one to those who asked for it. They took the feeding process seriously, they did not answer their ringing phones until finished, and fed children with the utmost care. Moreover, workers here were from OBC communities and also did not like the egg smell, but they made sure they fed eggs and cleaned up the floors carefully afterwards. Importantly, the majority of residents here were Telugu Dalits (Scheduled Castes from a different state) but caste did not feature in workers' construction of parents as unconcerned, uneducated or accommodating. Here caste was trumped by residents' class—most lived in solidly built housing units, had college education and skilled occupations. This was the primary marker that the workers responded to and adapted their service to. When talking about slums however, Revathi associated class with caste and expressed her prejudice against them.

My observations of the lunch process were similar in many other better-off areas. As teachers and helpers realized the importance of feeding to parents, they tended to be more careful and attentive. They explained to me how they cleaned rice several times to make it softer and tastier. Sometimes to make it easier for children to eat, they cut boiled eggs into smaller pieces and mixed it with rice. Sometimes, when a child refused to eat a boiled egg teachers saved it and gave

¹⁸ For them it is a difficult period as they have to be very attentive and cannot take any leave.

it to the parent when they came to pick up the child. Once, when I observed over 20 children eating lunch in Veena's center, I saw a 4-year-old girl trying to give away her boiled egg to her friend. Veena noticed it and asked why she was not eating the egg. The girl said she did not like it and that her friend wanted it. The teacher refused to give the egg to the other child who had already eaten one. Veena saved the egg and gave it to the girl's mother later explaining to her that her child did not eat in the center. Veena was unsure if the mother would feed her daughter this egg at home, but she wanted to give her the chance, and also show to the mother that she paid attention to what her child was eating and that she also did not appropriate the egg.¹⁹

Many workers also understood that feeding children and making them eat better was their unique value proposition to better-off parents. Teacher Indira worked in a middle-class area called Sambpur. She complained it was hard to attract people in Sambpur because most people were "rich" and looked down upon palwadis. She had to go around people's homes continuously to persuade them to at least "try out" her services. One of her selling points was that she and her helper would make children sit next to them and feed them lunch by hand.

One day Indira introduced me to what she considered an upper-class family who were extremely skeptical of using palwadis. The family admitted that before they met Indira, they thought of government childcare in a negative light, just as *sathu unavu*—as an unclean canteen for poor kids, with not very good meals, and with rude and scary workers. Yet, Indira convinced the family to visit her center, taste the food and asked them to leave the child only if they were satisfied. After they did so, the family realized the center was the opposite of what they perceived—it was bright, clean and food tasted well—so they let their 2-year-old girl attend it. The girl's uncle, who was a lawyer, was especially surprised by how staff made food so tasty with

¹⁹ Because eggs are highly demanded even by better-off parents teachers sought to show residents that they distributed them boiled or raw.

ration rice. He thought ration rice was inferior and could not believe one can make it taste well. When I interviewed the child's mother Dakshita, she said that one of the unexpected benefits of the center was her child eating better. She said before going to the AWC, her daughter Samya would not eat boiled egg yolk, but the teacher used to mix it with food and made her eat it. During the interview Samya herself said she loved eggs! She ate everything in the AWC.

Many teachers also spent extra money from their own pocket to buy more vegetables and spices to make lunch more flavorful. However, spending extra money, was annoying and not possible for many because workers' wage are already very low and they have to spend their own money not just on food but on gas and other ad hoc items for the center. Most of them reasoned they did so for the welfare of children. But it was clear they also did so because parents in better-off areas were more likely to inspect AWC food and its quality. If food tastes well and children eat well, parents are more convinced about sending their children. Veena's reasoning about spending her own money typified the kind of responses many other teachers gave in better-off areas:

Ieva: What if you don't have money to buy things and feed the children?

Veena: I can't leave like that. We consider the children as our own. So, we can't just let it go like this. As much as possible, we will do.

Ieva: Could you not try to manage with the things you have at the centre and not spend from your own salary?

Veena: Children won't eat right? Whether the quantity is big or small, children won't eat if the food is not tasty.

While many teachers in poor areas also mentioned spending out of pocket money, they were also more likely to admit they could not make food "as tasty as cooked at home," which meant they did not always add sufficient items, like oil, spices or vegetables, to improve the quality of meals. It was impossible to systematically investigate the spending on food as the numbers of children varied across place and time, but it was clear that cooking and feeding involves many steps in which workers can exercise discretion.

Toileting

Teachers working in better-off areas could not construct parents as accommodating of letting children urinate outside. They knew that parents would find it unacceptable and did not let children outside. Parents who lived in places with their own private bathrooms and better toilet facilities typically did not allow kids to pee outside. Thus, in none of the better-off neighborhoods children were allowed to urinate outside (see table 3). Nearly all bathrooms were functional and children could use them. Even if water facility was not working, helpers fetched water for the bathroom from outside sources. If workers had any problems with the toilet or water connection, they would seek to fix it as soon as possible. Otherwise, they would take kids home for toileting. Teachers reasoned that parents would withdraw children from the center of staff let kids pee or defecate in the open. This would make it harder for workers to maintain stable enrollments. Having a functioning bathroom and cleaning children was reported to be very important for parents in better-off areas. Many teachers explained that before admitting children to the AWC, parents would inspect the facilities, including the bathroom and its cleanliness, and only if it satisfied their standards, they would use it. Such inspections were less common in poorer areas.

Similarly, it was harder for teachers in better-off neighborhoods to justify that it was mothers' responsibility to clean children who soiled or wetted themselves. While they may believe in this, they knew that such requests may not be responded to positively, and they tended to avoid them. Teachers in better-off areas reported that they rarely if at all called parents to clean up their kids, and even if they did so, it would be during exceptional circumstances. They would do so only if they were managing the center alone and it was around the time when parents had to pick up their children anyway. To illustrate how teachers dealt with parents' expectations for toileting matters in better-off areas I return to teacher Indira from a middle-class area Sambpur. Indira once

told me how one family withdrew their boy from her center because a grandmother was asked to clean her boy and she perceived that he did not receive the care he needed while toileting.

One day while Indira and her helper Sushila served lunch one boy asked to use the bathroom. Sushila accompanied him to the toilet (which is located outside the center) and left him to sit there. She returned to the main area to serve hot lunch with eggs. The helper and teacher were feeding and monitoring the children's eating. They felt that if a child chokes on eggs they will be responsible. So, they thought the boy was old and mature enough to sit in the toilet by himself, without slipping into the pit latrine hole...Then, while Sushila was feeding the children this boy's grandmother came to the center. Sushila informed her that her grandson was in the bathroom and asked her to clean him up. The grandmother cleaned him up and afterwards, for about three days the boy did not show up at the center. Wondering where the boy was, Indira called the parents. They told her that the helper did not take care of their child. The grandmother complained that the boy could have fallen into the hole of the pit latrine, and that the helper totally ignored her grandson while feeding other kids. She thought that if he had fallen, his head would have stuck in the hole. Indira was very upset with the incident and thought the parents were not considerate of the situation, which she assessed as harmless: "He was a big boy and my helper would have gone to clean up the child after lunch, but since the grandma showed up, my helper did not clean him and asked her to do it. But that grandmother has also seen how we cleaned the boy on previous occasions!"

Indira could not convince the family to bring the boy back to the center. While she thought some parents might not react so harshly, she no longer asked parents to clean up their children. She and Sushila always cleaned the children themselves: "it would be a problem if I don't clean." Parents would also not tolerate it if children were asked to pee outside "because they would find

it smelly”. Finally, Indira also motivated that “since it is a posh area it’s difficult” to have no water facility in the bathroom. Parents would be reluctant to send their children. Thus, Indira like many other teachers working in better-off neighborhoods had less discretion and cannot compromise on children’s toileting.

Teachers in other better-off areas gave similar explanations for why they ensured children used the bathroom. Revathi said that *her people* definitely needed a bathroom, and that in the *slums* it may be alright to let kids outside, but not here. Vidya from another better-off neighborhood reasoned similarly—that parents would not send their children in her area without a bathroom, but maybe in “other areas where people are poor and desperate” it would be acceptable. I observed that in all these centers helpers or teachers often accompanied children to the bathroom and (often grudgingly) cleaned them when they wet or soiled themselves.

These findings reveal that while in poor areas compromising on children’s toileting may be acceptable, as teachers did not experience resistance from parents, in better-off areas workers’ behaviors were constrained by the credible threat of parents’ exit. Structurally advantaged parents could afford to withdraw their children—they could keep them at home safely or find other alternatives. Without having enough children teachers are at risk of facing greater questioning, intimidation and tighter supervision from their officers, which I will discuss in another chapter.

Cleanliness

Similar to toileting expectations, in most better-off areas palwadi workers tended to *assume* that parents needed AWC cleanliness more automatically. In better-off neighborhoods, streets looked cleaner and tidier (even if many were extremely narrow marking squatter-settlement origins), there were more trees and plants near people’s homes, and no large piles of garbage or cattle roaming around. As big water storage drums were not visible on the road, you could expect people to have

a bore-well and a municipal water connection. Any semi-*pucca* homes (cement houses with sheet roofs) were rather hidden within middle-class housing structures. In short, the surroundings signaled (lower) middle-class dwellings. Working in better-off neighborhoods which esthetically looked different from the poorer ones, teachers assumed that parents were of higher socioeconomic status who wanted higher quality services and perhaps even looked down upon government palwadis.

Teachers in better-off neighborhoods always attributed the need for palwadi cleanliness to the class status of the neighborhoods. For example, every time I visited Indira in Sambpur she always noted how it was a “rich,” “posh,” or middle-class area for whom cleanliness was a non-negotiable issue. She said that parents would “have high expectations about cleanliness because this is a *posh* area. If this center was in a *slum*, they would not care. They would think, ‘however it may be let my child go there, eat and come back.’ But since this is a *posh* area, they would be very conscious about the cleanliness factor.” Indira compared her residents to those of *all slums* whom she automatically classified as unconcerned about hygiene. Indira’s area covered several streets, of which one street accommodated poor residents. However, because the larger area was middle-class, Indira minimized the fact that she also served some poorer families for whom cleanliness may be perceived as less of a concern (she may still differentiate her interactions with individual children at the center by taking greater care of better-off kids).

To her credit, Indira managed to maintain appropriate levels of cleanliness and attracted both better-off and poor parents, of OBC and SC communities, including two children who together with their mother lived on the street. In several areas, teachers, like Pushpa complained that wealthier parents did not want their children to mingle with slum kids in the AWC and it was difficult to attract them to the center. But Indira managed to overcome this: she worked with poorer

parents to ensure they sent children clean and neat so no one could notice a difference in children's appearance. It also helped that her area did not cover a large informal settlement, only one low-income street and hence, the *slum population* here was less visible.

Teachers' assumptions about residents' demand for cleanliness were tested through social interactions and ultimately through the withdrawal of children from the AWC. Several years ago, Indira did not have a helper (the previous one retired) and she had to complete all the cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children alone, which was extremely difficult. Indira's superiors did not appoint a helper for two years and so Indira hired a worker from the area herself by paying 1000Rs (~\$13) per month from her pocket. But the temporary helper was not very good at cleaning and taking care of the kids. Indira could not pressure her to work better and eventually the enrollment of children reduced from thirty to five. Indira believed that the enrollments had reduced due to lack of hygiene. She felt upset because she could not delegate or compel the worker to do better for such a meagre pay. Later on, a new helper was appointed three years ago and thanks to her efforts in maintaining the center and cleanliness, the enrollments had risen again.

Like Indira, teacher Revathi, who worked on another side of the city in Cherpur, dominated by better-off Dalits, also believed that due to their class advantage (despite their low caste status), her residents would not use an AWC if it was not clean and maintained well. She, like other teachers, also felt that demands for cleanliness varied by area type:

Ieva: How important do you think is sweeping and mopping of the center for parents?

Revathi: In the slums they don't care but in this center parents notice everything. Earlier in this center when there was no wash basin, the children would wash their hands in the bathroom. Some parents who came in during that time have noticed that their kids put their hands directly in the bucket to wash them. They definitely notice these things. Again, if the floor is unclean or not swept, they notice and report it. There was once some rat feces. They do notice these things. They ask us if we report or complain about these things.

Ieva: So, if it's not neat or not maintained well, they might not send their kids?

Revathi: Yes, they definitely expect the standards of a private center in terms of hygiene at least. If it is unhygienic or unclean, they will definitely not send their children and the number of children coming to the center will decrease. Since the center is neat and maintained very well, they send their children willingly and tell their neighbors too.

Ieva: Do you think they would send their children if there were no bathrooms?

Revathi: No, they would not send their children if we have to make them use a bathroom outside the center.

Indira's and Revathi's accounts typified responses about cleanliness in better-off areas. While teachers tended to assume better-off areas have automatically higher cleanliness standards, these assumptions were reinforced through interactions with parents and ultimately can result in lower enrollments if hygiene is not maintained.

Maintaining high levels of cleanliness required helpers and teachers' cooperation. In some cases, teachers, like Mala or Ramani, who had uncooperative relationships with their helpers or did not have helpers at all, struggled to keep up good hygiene standards. To some extent these problems were beyond the teacher's capacity to solve, as in the story that Indira recounted. The appointment of new helpers in the ICDS system was a slow bureaucratic process, and there were no effective mechanisms in place to motivate underperformers to improve their work. Such systemic issues created disparities in the delivery of services.

Early learning

Another domain where teachers' perceptions of parents' expectations shaped their caregiving behaviors was in early childhood education. But before delving into how teachers approached and conducted learning activities, it is important to first reveal how the ICDS itself valued and promoted these activities in comparison to its other mandates.

On paper, early childhood education and care is an important aspect of what palwadis should provide, yet in practice it is one of the most neglected and under-invested parts of the ICDS program. The overwhelming institutional focus on maternal and child health and nutrition has

marginalized the educational component at the national level. For about two hours every day palwadis should provide play-based learning activities, such as story-telling, rhymes, singing songs, learning alphabets and numbers, and physical exercises, like running in circle, playing with a ball and other toys. However, many studies report that early learning is not implemented or done poorly, with very few beneficiaries accessing these benefits (Borooah et al. 2015; Ministry of Women and Child Development 2015).

Still, compared to other states Tamil Nadu has been much more active in developing and promoting early childhood care and education. The state was among the first in India to develop a monthly theme-based syllabus which is easy for teachers to follow to engage children in activities stimulating their cognitive, social and physical development. Although the curriculum and its scheduling may appear feasible on paper, its implementation is impeded by the burden of a heavy workload and competing tasks that divert teachers' attention from teaching.

Due to multiple work demands and inefficiencies, teachers often did not manage to engage children in play-based learning. Apart from caregiving and teaching, teachers also conducted children's growth monitoring, awareness meetings for parents, distribute rations, visited mothers with newborns at home, completed multiple reports accounting for stocks and their assignments, and attended office meetings. Because these tasks were often conducted during preschool time, they reduced caregivers' time engaging and educating children.

Moreover, as the ICDS has been digitizing its reporting, teachers now have smartphones with apps on which they upload data on their beneficiaries. This process should reduce time on reporting but because technologies change and are often not reliable (e.g., lagging internet, poor design of the phone app, low battery life), teachers have to spend *more* time entering the same information into both apps and their paper notebooks.

Beyond these duties, Chennai's director's office often asked teachers to submit various ad hoc data reports on their beneficiaries. This ideally could be done by the block office but due to poor data management practices and lack of staff the load of "reporting from the field" was shifted to frontline workers. Sometimes teachers were also asked to help their block administrators enter data into computers in the office. While they did this after preschool hours, any additional requests usually reduced teachers' time for their regular activities. Chapter 4 will elaborate more on these issues.

Many teachers admitted that reporting demands limited the time they could devote to children's learning. They estimated that on average they spend only 3-4 days a week for preschool activities. Block-level officials knew these problems but they were powerless to change the system as the institutional mandates, demands and resources are determined by the state or even central government, which they have little influence on. Thus, while many teachers enjoyed conducting preschool activities most, they regretted that they often completed it hurriedly or missed doing altogether. Teachers also invoked requests for reporting by higher-level officials and office meetings as excuses to parents for why they were unable to conduct classes or why they were frequently absent from the center.

Given high demands of reporting and the workload of tasks, it was rather surprising to witness some teachers still conducting preschool activities, and especially during the time when they were not required to. During the period I conducted my research AWCs were not required to provide any learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions (they re-opened palwadis just for serving lunch). While visiting the centers I found that several teachers still engaged children in some activities even if they were not regular. Teachers who did so justified that without these activities it would be more difficult for them to attract children to the center. Parents were unwilling

to send children just for one or two hours to have lunch at an AWC. They wanted their kids to socialize and mingle with other children, but also have some free time for themselves. Importantly, parents across both types of areas had similar demands but teachers tended to respond more to these demands in better-off areas. They told parents to drop off their children earlier than the government's stipulated time and said they would take care of children like in "usual times" by engaging them in some activities, even though they were not required to do it.

Based on my interviews and observations, it was clear that many teachers in better-off areas believed that parents would be less likely to enroll their children in AWCs if no learning activities were conducted. These teachers were acting on their beliefs about parents' desire for their children's education and socialization. I suggest that these initiatives could also account for disparities in teachers' educational efforts prior to the pandemic. To illustrate the process of how teachers responded to parents' desires for children's schooling I will examine teacher Vidya's case.

Middle-aged Vidya worked in a small better-off neighborhood called Nagapuram in South Chennai. The area was congested with many small houses built on top of each other, but most units were located within the larger upper-class homes. Vidya's center was one of the best I have seen – it is spacious, clean, with a lot of toys, educational materials, well-functioning toilet, water and other facilities. It was also the only center (among over 25 AWCs that I visited) that had a newly renovated playground with swings, seesaw and other standard playground equipment. The aesthetics and equipment of the center were such that it resembled a private kindergarten catering to middle-class residents.

Vidya's center matched parents' demands, as those who considered using her AWC are keen on having well-maintained facilities, cleanliness and prioritize children's learning and education. These demands, according to her, were not necessarily present in other areas (where

parents may be more dependent on AWC for food). In Nagapuram, many parents aspired to send their children to a nearby school following central government's curriculum (CBSE), which is considered prestigious for its higher educational standards and more stringent admissions. The school was also heavily subsidized by the central government making it more affordable for many low-income families. Thus, many parents wanted to send children to private kindergartens to prepare them for admission to the CBSE school.

Because in Vidya's neighborhood many parents used private preschools over time it became difficult for her to maintain stable enrollments of 25 children. Parents would send children to her palwadi just for a year or so and put them to private kindergartens when they reach about 3 years old. To help her balance the enrollments over the year, Vidya decided to offer the same learning activities that private preschools do, namely teaching Tamil and English alphabets, numbers and writing. Teaching writing and reading is not mandated by the ICDS. But Vidya managed to convince many parents to send their children to her center until 1st standard instead of sending them to private kindergartens by assuring them she would get children admission to first standard at a the CBSE or other private schools.

Vidya enhanced learning activities by engaging more actively with children and parents on educational issues and followed the ICDS manuals more closely than other teachers. Vidya tailored activities for children based on age: she taught under 3-years olds self-sufficiency and routines (using a toilet, washing hands, etc.), she introduced 3-year-olds to alphabets, taught them to hold a pen and draw, color; and for 4-5-year-olds she taught writing. Vidya maintained an individual portfolio for each child, with their profile pictures glued in and representations of their drawings and writing. While these portfolios should be distributed and used by all teachers, Vidya was the only one in my study who maintained and showed us such files. During primary school admissions

time, she gave these files to parents and trained them on how to answer questions by the admission committees. She enjoyed recounting stories of how her children passed the private schools' tests (on alphabets, rhymes, etc.). Vidya believed that she was teaching the same curriculum or even more than what kindergartens do. Thus, report cards and her eagerness to show parents she could teach children at a required level, convinced many residents to enroll children in her AWC for more years.

Vidya's motivation to go the extra mile stemmed from parents' demand for education and her own sense of accountability to her institution. Without stable enrollments, her work efforts would be questioned, and like many other teachers, she feared that over the longer-term without children AWCs are at risk of being shut down. Vidya was convinced that most parents in Nagapuram would not send their children to her AWC without any learning activities: "it would be a waste (for parents)". When probed to think about how parents would react in a hypothetical situation if Vidya was working only part of the week in this this AWC (and during the other part kids would stay with the helper), Vidya thought that parents would feel their kids might miss out on learning something and then emphasized again that "especially in this area, parents are quite keen on the teaching part".

Not all teachers were as competent as Vidya to respond to parents' educational demands. Vidya had somewhat more skills and determination to seek quality at work than other teachers, and she embraced what I call and elaborate on in chapter 4 a "preschool professional" identity. Although Vidya had an incomplete bachelor's degree, she could teach young children some English words and deliver beyond preschool curriculum. Before becoming an AWC teacher she worked at an NGO-based school as a primary teacher where she learned various teaching skills and work ethics from a senior teacher. Vidya made many visual charts put up on the walls of the

palwadi to aid her in teaching. She believed it helped children memorize words faster. Vidya wanted to maintain standards like in a private educational institution—she insisted that children wore uniforms and requested that even mothers did not come to her center wearing “nighties”—a shorthand for a nightdress, i.e., a long dress worn at home by many women in Chennai. She also insisted that parents picked up and dropped off children on time, even though it was difficult for them to do so. Finally, Vidya also had a cooperative helper who was temporary but diligent at her work.

In her personal life, Vidya also had a relatively easier time meeting family and work demands. Vidya’s children were both in college and her husband has passed away, so she does not carry the same load of chores as teachers with younger children or larger families. All in all, these favorable conditions were important in enabling her Vidya to go the extra mile.

During the pandemic, Vidya, and a few others (Indira, Revathi and Selvi), who worked in better-off areas, accommodated parents’ educational aspirations because they perceived that engaging children in some structured play would incentivize them to come back to the center. Revathi said that “we need to conduct these activities because if kids are bored, they wouldn’t want to come back”. Yet, Veena and Renuka who also worked in better-off areas did not think that parents were as keen on teacher instruction and thus, they considered it enough to allow children to play by themselves while at AWC. Still, both teachers invited parents to send children for a longer time period, gave them toys to play with, engaged in small talk and supervised their activities. It was clear that they had the skills and motivation to do *more* had parents insisted on structured instruction.

Veena and Renuka recounted that parents really wanted their children to get out to socialize with their peers and that it was sufficient for ‘learning’. Parents craved this opportunity because

kids had been restricted to home environment during the Covid-19 school closures lasting for more than a year. Parents in these areas also were more likely to work as daily wage workers who needed a daycare facility. Thus, it was sufficient for teachers to provide a safe space for kids for a few hours. From my interviews with mothers, I found that most wanted learning activities but in Veena's and Renuka's neighborhoods many were more willing to compromise on learning because they thought letting children mingle and play was still very beneficial.

CONCLUSION

Despite having a centralized and uniform childcare system, Chennai's neighborhoods demonstrate that childcare experience is not the same for all its residents. Childcare service varied by place: it could be starkly different depending on where one lives. In some places childcare was provided as mandated, where caregivers engaged with children in various activities attentively, fed them by hand, cleaned them and consoled them when they cried. In other places, it fell short of its institutional mandate: by treating children's feeding, toileting and learning with high indifference caregivers undermined institutional (and nation-wide) goals of improving children's nutrition, development and growth.

In this chapter, I argued that these variations in public childcare quality were significantly shaped by how teachers categorized and perceived residents as belonging to economically and culturally different types of communities with varying levels of needs and expectations for childcare. Specifically, I have argued that teachers' uneven care practices were influenced by class and caste distinctions of a given neighborhood. These practices stemmed from interactions with parents and deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about caste and class, which became attached to neighborhoods, thereby creating distinct social spaces that warranted differential 'treatment'.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the place-based social distinctions were marked by parents' structural position, built environment and other place-specific factors, like collective agency, and historic configurations of social and associational life. I will show that these associational factors, and residents' ability to monitor and make claims for better care could help structurally disadvantaged parents countervail teachers' perceptions and negotiate for better quality and standards of care. Meanwhile, parents in advantaged class (and often caste) neighborhoods did not necessarily need to rely on place-based associational ties to receive better quality care. Their economic position allowed them to afford alternative options for childcare which created a pressure for teachers to seek quality.

These findings extend dominant theories of inequality in public services emphasizing mostly institutional and city-level explanations of urban regimes (Logan and Molotch 1987; Centeno et al. 2017; Heller, Mukhopadhyay, and Walton 2019), or citizen demand-making strategies (Chatterjee 2004; Harriss 2006; Coelho and Venkat 2009; Auerbach 2017; Kruks-Wisner 2018). I highlight the overlooked role of frontline workers, who I argue, are socially embedded agents responding to place-based social distinctions.

CHAPTER 3

The Social Space: As seen by parents

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I showed how teachers in many poor areas perceived parents as acquiescent with the quality of childcare, while teachers in better-off areas were more likely to view parents as more demanding. In this chapter I demonstrate how teachers' perceptions about poor residents and their needs are often biased and do not reflect the actual parents' values, attitudes and beliefs. I argue that most residents in poor and better-off neighborhoods have similar desires for their children's care and education, and send children to palwadis for similar reasons—to prepare them for school, develop their independence and habits. Yet unlike better-off residents, parents in poor areas are compelled to engage in *pragmatic compromises*—they are willing to compromise on some aspects of care quality for attaining benefits they value most, and because they lack alternatives for childcare. For many poor mothers besides the importance of children's school readiness, palwadis (AWCs) also enable them to work (at home or for pay), provide children with nutritious meals and safety. These are crucial factors that if satisfied, mothers are willing to compromise on other issues, like lack of bathrooms, food quality, feeding practices or cleanliness.

Some parents in poor neighborhoods found lower quality of care acceptable, yet the majority, rather than being acquiescent, *did want* better quality but could not attain it due to powerlessness and lack of institutionalized grievance mechanisms. Many parents complained to palwadi staff about food quality, non-functioning bathrooms, or lack of teaching. However, teachers declared that responsibility for improving amenities, like toilets or food quality, was beyond their control—it is the government's domain. Complaining was also difficult due to lack

of information about where to complain and power imbalances between teachers and residents. Women who depended on palwadis, feared losing benefits and retaliation from teachers against their children.

Parents' complaints were also suppressed by their belief that palwadis, like other government services that are free, are almost automatically inferior to private services. Many women thought that they could demand better quality care only if they paid money, and they associated teachers' (un)accountability to (lack of) payments by parents. This meant that a large share of parents did not voice their concerns about service quality to workers. Yet teachers perceived such parents as acquiescent. Low expectations for government services allowed workers to underperform, driving the feedback loop of lower quality care provision.

Despite parents' inability to attain better quality of care in most poor areas, two neighborhoods managed to invoke greater teachers' accountability through collective agency. Parents' claims-making and effective neighborhood intermediaries in these areas led to increased childcare quality. In these neighborhoods, parents made claims on quality through questioning and monitoring workers and their claims were tacitly bolstered by the presence of effective area leaders, who could act as informal grievance officers. This bottom-up accountability motivated teachers to deliver well what parents care about most, even if they did not improve all aspects of care.

Meanwhile, better-off residents' demands matched teachers' perceptions, in that their desire for higher quality care was expressed through lower willingness to compromise on it and possibility of credible exit. Given the rise of both government and private kindergartens, as well as high parental expectations for their children's education, palwadis in Chennai are facing

challenges in remaining relevant and attracting children. In this context, parents' exit serves as another form of bottom-up accountability, incentivizing many workers to increase their effort.

Taken together, my key argument is that poor mothers are willing to compromise on childcare standards not because they have lower expectations for what they *need* from service providers, but that they are *forced* to compromise due to their income and neighborhood constraints, and lack of mechanisms for grievance redress. Mothers *desire* better services, but they adapt to the given standards because they have low expectations for the efficacy of government institutions to deliver quality care.

This calls into question arguments that rest on cultural logic to explain class-based inequalities in parenting styles and parent interventions in schooling. These types of explanations assert primacy to social class as the primary determinant of parenting beliefs and values (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2011; Streib 2013). For example, Annette Lareau (2011) argues that middle-class parents practice distinct parenting styles from poor and working-class parents. The former engages in “concerted cultivating” by providing children with many structured activities and training them how to function in institutional settings, whereas the latter practices “natural growth” allowing children’s unstructured socializing with family and community, and teaching children to be deferential. These practices Lareau argues, lead to inculcation of different types of skills and cultural capital, which tends to disadvantage poor and working-class in the education system and the labor market. Similar to David Rangel and Megan Shoji (2021), I argue that it is important to examine *why* poor and better-off parents have different parenting styles or abilities to intervene in childrearing institutions, and pay attention to how these are shaped by larger contextual factors. In the case of Chennai, I argue that parents’ actions and willingness to compromise on childcare

quality are shaped more by their powerlessness, stemming from financial, social, and institutional constraints, than by class-based cultural models that dictate their needs, desires, and interventions.

(NEAR) UNIVERSAL DESIRES FOR EARLY EDUCATION

Parents' characteristics

Poor and better-off neighborhoods were marked by significant differences in their class and caste composition. I interviewed 84 mothers in the same 15 poor and better-off neighborhoods where I examined the functioning of palwadis. I usually met mothers after I became acquainted with palwadi teachers and helpers. I connected with mothers by approaching them on the street, through introductions of NGO and palwadi workers, and mothers' referrals of others in their area. In each area I interviewed mothers until I reached saturation, that is, when they were no longer offering new or surprising information (Small 2009). In some neighborhoods it was enough to talk to four or five women to obtain confidence in diversity of perceptions of mothers in that area, while in others I spoke to six, eight or more. On average, I interviewed six mothers per neighborhood. There were also a few fathers that participated in interviews together with mothers.

The semi-structured interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two hours. I interviewed mothers who had used palwadis in the recent past or were still using them to elicit their experience and assessments of palwadi functioning. The themes included women's reasons for using palwadis, their satisfaction with different aspects of care (food, learning and care, toileting, cleanliness, timings), desires for improvements, and demand-making for better quality care. I also spoke to some mothers who had not used palwadis (about 10-20% of women in each area) to understand their reasons for not using them, and how they arranged childcare. In addition to mothers, in each neighborhood I also spoke to other residents casually, and interviewed key informants, like area

association leaders, local activists and NGO workers about their perceptions and engagement with palwadis. In total, I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants.

Table 4 shows mothers' social and economic characteristics by neighborhood type. Mothers on average were 29 years old in all areas. In poor areas, mothers had about 9-10 years of schooling (less than high school education), whereas in better-off areas, they had 12 years of schooling (completed high school). The contrast in caste composition was stark. In poor areas, the majority of women (79%) belonged to Scheduled Castes (SCs), that is, the lowest caste communities. In better-off areas, SC women constituted only 40% of the sample while 60% belonged to Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Most Backward Castes (MBCs). In the caste hierarchy, which is usually correlated with groups' socio-economic outcomes, these latter groups are placed above the Scheduled Castes.

In poor areas, women were more likely to work for pay (48%) than women in better-off neighborhoods (39%). Women worked mostly as domestic workers and housekeepers or cleaning staff in wealthier households or offices, or in service sector jobs, like sales assistants. Women's husbands were usually daily wage laborers, such as painters, construction workers and drivers. In better-off areas they were more likely to work in offices as clerks and in service sector jobs. Importantly, the interviews were conducted in 2021, about one-and-a-half years after the Covid-19 pandemic started, when many women lost their jobs or were unable to work due to the pandemic. Those who were not working expressed interest in starting to work in the near future, when their children would be attending primary school.

The household incomes were also much lower in poor than in better-off areas. On average poor households had about Rs15,538 (\$190) monthly income whereas families in better-off areas reported Rs24,389 (\$295). It is likely that most families underreported their income and especially

better-off households, for not wanting to miss out on government benefits (as eligibility is usually tied to income). Importantly, my argument that caste and class should be combined into neighborhood social distinctions is supported by the way parents' caste and class are matched within neighborhoods.

Table 4. Mothers' characteristics

<i>Mothers with children ages 3-7</i>	Better-off	Poor	Total
Age	28.9	29.3	29.2
Education (years)	12.2	9.7	10.8
SC	38.9	79.2	61.9
MBC	22.2	8.3	14.3
OBC	38.9	12.5	23.8
Mother working	38.9	47.9	44.0
HH monthly income (Rs)	24,389	15,638	19,388
HH monthly income (USD\$)	295	190	235
Average household size	4.4	4.8	4.7
N of children	1.7	2.0	1.9
Used AWC	77.8	87.5	83.3
<i>N</i>	36	48	84

Note: SC=scheduled castes; MBC=most backward castes; OBC=other backward castes.

Preparation for school and skill development

The majority of poor and better-off parents sent kids to palwadis for educational reasons—to prepare children for school environment. Parents from all areas expressed a desire for their children to acclimate to the school environment and develop independence, often stating that they hoped their children “would not cry or miss them” when starting preschool or primary school. Mothers also wanted their kids to learn discipline, routines, habits and develop some social and cognitive skills. Palwadis can transmit such skills by teaching children to sing and memorize rhymes, songs, Tamil and English alphabet. When asked about reasons why mothers sent their children to AWC, the typical answers in poor and better-off areas would include some version of what mothers Namritha, Nalini, Kainika (poor areas) and Madhavi, Esha (better-off areas) articulated:

Namritha: Only if the child is sent to the palwadi, it will get prepared for the school. Otherwise, the child will cry everyday when going to school.

Nalini: He [her son] will be looked after well there [palwadi], and also with other children around, he would be interested in learning. So later when he is sent to school he will not be afraid. Once he makes friends here, he will not be afraid to get along with other children when sent to school. Having attended the balwadi, he will easily adapt to the school setting.

Kainika: I had also studied in a balwadi, so I sent my daughter too. They might teach her basic concepts like A Aa E Ee [Tamil alphabets] and it will be easier for her to study when she starts going to school.

Madhavi: So that she [her daughter] can learn and study, and gain knowledge from the outside world, which cannot be gained from staying at home. My husband is not well educated and I have studied until 10th standard. The children learn well when teachers teach, and then understand well when that happens, rather than us parents trying to teach them. They are able to relate to others, and gain knowledge about the world. It is easier when they get to school, because they have spent time in the palwadi. Otherwise, they might cry or make a fuss while joining school. That is why I sent my child there.

Esha: Everyone in the family believed that the kid should send the child to palwadi when he is 2 years old. They believed that only then, the child will be well prepared for school, will socialize well and will go to school without crying. Even the previous generation has gone to the palwadi. I have gone to the palwadi myself.

Preparation for school also included socializing with other kids, learning the alphabet and other foundational skills. Importantly, educational aspects, such as rote memorization of letters and rhymes were sometimes even more emphasized among poorer mothers than better-off mothers. Scholars have documented that lower caste and class households in urban India have high educational aspirations, indicating that children's education has become a top priority for them (Kumar and Aggarwal 2003; Sarangapani 2003; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2005; Krishna 2013; Naudet 2015; Nitya Rao 2018). For example, Jules Naudet (2015) reports on how Dalit parents from poor backgrounds had stressed the importance of education for their children though they had limited resources and cultural capital to help children navigate the school systems.

Meanwhile, many better-off mothers who used AWCs emphasized wanting to improve their children's speaking abilities and socialization skills, which was mentioned less often among poor residents. Better-off mothers often complained that before they started using a palwadi their children were not speaking at home. Toddlers who spent the day alone at home with their mothers

had few opportunities to interact with other children or adults and develop social skills. For example, Shailaja from Narrambai was concerned that her daughter was not speaking which motivated her to send her to a palwadi: “She is always around me and doesn’t mingle along with others much. Also, she is 2 years-old and doesn’t speak much. So, I thought if she went to palwadi then she’d mingle more and pick up on speaking.” Many mothers like Shailaja thought that AWCs would help their children pick up speaking faster and facilitate transition to kindergarten. Imani was a homemaker but she had limited time to interact with her son. Thus, she decided to send her son to palwadi to interact with other kids:

Ieva: How did you decide to send him there?

Imani: Here I am alone. I thought if he went to palwadi, he could mingle with everyone easily. He could also build his communication skills better than being home. Our home schooling is entirely different. I always get into work, work, work here. Just because of palwadi his speaking ability and intelligence has improved, that’s why within these three years I was able to enroll him in LKG (lower kindergarten).

Somewhat ironically poorer kids seemed to have slightly more avenues to learn speaking and socializing as they were more exposed to other kids within their home or in the neighborhood. As poorer families lived in more congested neighborhoods and were likely to share some facilities like water pumps and toilets, and kids often played outside, the private space of home often stretched into public, into the alleys just outside home. It would be common to see women doing household chores, like washing clothes or preparing meals just outside their doorstep where children would be running around playing. Thus, the physical proximity to neighbors and their peers created somewhat more exposure for kids, though it was often not positive. Many mothers lived in places they deemed unsafe and risky for their children and did not want them to pick up “bad language” from others in the area. Thus, they often did not want their kids to play outside homes and sought palwadis to avoid these risks.

Paid and Unpaid Work

Another commonly mentioned reason for sending kids to palwadi among poor and *some* better-off parents was mothers' need to work outside home, or for doing household chores. For many poorer mothers palwadi offered a safe free daycare that enabled them to work and it was often articulated as the primary motive to use a palwadi. Many women I interviewed in poor areas worked as domestic workers, housekeepers in offices, or engaged in self-employment at home. Many of these mothers had few childcare alternatives. For example, palwadi was crucial in enabling Kalpana from Kandivakkam to work: "It would have been difficult for us because my husband works as a security guard and I work as a housekeeper. We can only earn money if both of us work every day; with children to look after, it would have been quite difficult for us if palwadi had not been present."

Although only about 50% of women in poor areas worked for pay, for others managing children and household chores simultaneously was equally difficult. In poor areas lacking basic facilities and amenities, such as water chores can be especially taxing. In some places women had to fetch water during unpredictable times from water tankers or pumps. Without 'modern' appliances, chores, like laundry and cooking could take long hours. Thus, having a few hours to work undisturbed by childcare was a huge help for all women.

Women who reported using AWCs primarily for work had differing opinions on how much importance they placed on the early learning opportunities provided by palwadis. Besides safety and care, many women desired that children going to a palwadi should learn something. Kalpana had strong views about the educational role of teachers, and wanted her child to be stimulated and gain a variety of social and cognitive skills:

Ieva: How important were the activities taught at balwadi?

Kalpana: Children should learn a variety of things while learning at palwadi. The parents have to go and earn a living. So the staff look after the kids and teach things as if they were their parents. The children learn fundamental etiquette, how to read and write, and how to think critically.²⁰ Children are taught how to be obedient and well-behaved, not to use foul language, and to respect leaders, among other things. If a kid is having difficulty speaking or forming words, the staff will train them fluency, and kids will gain confidence from being around peers their own age. Rather than sitting and learning, children are encouraged to run, play, and improve their physical moves.

Ieva: If the children are not taught any of these things at palwadi would still send your child?

Kalpana: No, I believe it would be a huge waste of time for kids to simply eat and sleep there. Learning is an important component of it because as children grow, there are certain things they should learn, and attending palwadi brings all these benefits together. If this is not the case, then sending children to palwadi for the sole purpose of eating and sleeping is pointless. This, I believe, can be largely provided by the parents themselves.

It is hard to know what Kalpana would have actually done if teacher Kripa did not engage with children in her area. But the fact that many parents in Kandivakkam were very keen on children's education and monitored teacher's actions, influenced how Kripa thought about and, to some extent, addressed parents' expectations for learning (which I will elaborate later in this chapter).

In other cases, it was also evident that for some mothers children's learning was not a priority and they were more willing to compromise on it for the sake of earning a living. Parimala from a poor Kannarpuram neighborhood reasoned that she would have sent her child to palwadi if there was no learning:

Ieva: Would you send your child to palwadi if there are no activities there, like teaching rhymes, or teaching the alphabet?

Parimala: We're supposed to start [schooling] from there [palwadi], aren't we? I would have sent him even if they didn't teach them anything. Only if we go to work and toil, we'll be able to take care of the family. There's no one at home - both my husband and I go to work. So, we drop him [Raghav] there and go to work.

Yet Parimala also described how it would be "waste to send the child to palwadi" if the teacher did not show up daily. She wanted her kid to learn something. Parimala felt she did not have

²⁰ Mother's account needs to be qualified. Only if older kids (aged 5-6) attend the palwadi they may be taught reading and writing. But nowadays kids at this age are usually sent to primary schools. Kalpana sent her son to palwadi when he was 1 year old until he was 5. Her son is now 8 years old.

enough knowledge to teach her son herself (she finished her 4th standard), so she wanted teachers to educate children and “bring out their talents.” Parimala was satisfied with her son’s learning in the palwadi she used. She noticed improvements in her son’s behaviors and skills – at home her son started playing games with blocks and reported on learning Tamil and English alphabets.

Parimala’s account revealed difficulties that many poor parents faced in managing work and childcare. Working was crucial to support her family and perhaps afford schooling needs when her son is older, so Parimala was willing to compromise on teaching if it was not provided. In many low-income areas, some women had to prioritize work over their children’s education, and were willing to overlook the lack of formal teaching if there were no other options available. Sometimes, mothers also thought that at age 2 or 3 children were very young and did not need much teaching.

Food and safety

Finally, some mothers also emphasized sending their kids to palwadi for nutritional benefits and safety, which aligned with the primary goals of the ICDS program—supplementary feeding to combat malnutrition. For many poor families struggling to afford healthy food the ICDS steps in to supplement children’s food consumption with healthy lunch meals and take-home nutritional porridge mixes (*sathu maavu*). While free lunch is not what attracts most parents to use palwadis, for the poorest households it is a significant help, and for many an additional benefit to school readiness. For example, when asked to specify the benefits of the palwadi she used, Jayaprabha from poor Tangapuram neighborhood said it was “teachings and food for children”. Compared to other women in her area, food was more important to her because it was nutritious and provided “at the correct time”:

Ieva: How did you decide to send your children to Palwadi?

Jayaprabha: In palwadi, teachers will keep children quiet and calm. If children don't eat well at home, palwadi staff will make the children eat breakfast mandatorily. In the morning, they will give porridge (கஞ்சி - *kanji*), *satthumaavu*, eggs. The children will get the food at the right time and then go to school at the right time. They will also let children play in palwadi, which keeps them entertained.

Ieva: How important do you think the food served to the children in palwadi is?

Jayaprabha: Good! It's good for children's health; like vegetables, spinach (*keerai*), nutritious foods are served. Children won't eat enough food when we (mothers) feed them. But, to my knowledge the children would eat more (enough) in the palwadi than at home.

Ieva: What was specifically useful to you in palwadi?

Jayaprabha: It's the teachings and food provided to children. Food is more important for me; they would provide nutritious food at the correct time.

Jayaprabha's focus on food as the primary reason for using palwadi diverged from many others in her area. This reveals that motivations for using palwadi really depend on individuals' circumstances, and thus can vary even across families within the same neighborhood. Jayaprabha and her husband struggled to earn enough to take care of a family of six. She was a mother of four children, one of whom recently died from bone cancer at the age of 15. Jayaprabha and her husband both worked in daily wage jobs, together bringing home only about 15,000 Rs/month (about USD\$180). Jayaprabha found it difficult to cook proper meals on time, and so she considered that palwadi food was more nutritious than her own cooking and the biggest benefit of AWC.

In some poor neighborhoods using AWC for children's safety concerns often complemented mothers' prioritization of food. Children's safety can be a concern in neighborhoods that not only lack adequate space for play, but also lack social cohesion, and expose children to violence, drug use, and abuse (Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2022). My interviews with Saanvi and other mothers from Mamalpuram revealed how both food and safety were critical to parents in her neighborhood. Initially, Saanvi decided to send her son to palwadi after a teacher indicated to her how nutritious meals can facilitate her kid's education. The teacher told Saanvi that "children would study well if they drank milk and ate nutritious food like spinach, milk and eggs, which are provided in palwadi." This convinced her to use the AWC and the mother

confessed to me: “we cannot prepare food like chana dal and spinach everyday, we do it only on certain days. But the people in the palwadi provide something nutritious for the children everyday.”

At the same time, it was important to Saanvi that palwadi “kept children safe from 9am till 3pm”.

For many mothers in Mamalpuram having someone to take care of kids safely was preferable to having them “fight at home” (with siblings or neighboring kids) or on the streets with older kids, who may use drugs and pose various risks to small children. When asked about their decision to use palwadi most Mamalpuram mothers in some way mentioned their inability to ensure children’s safety at home and the surrounding environment:

Saanvi: It will be safer for my children there. There are people in the streets who use drugs and all. We are at home and children go out to play. If they went to the palwadi, they would be kept safely inside. That is why I decided to send my children.

Tanisha: If my son was at home he would be playing around other children and even get beaten up by them which would make him cry. I would also beat him because he is naughty. So I thought if he was at AWC at least he would learn something. I can sit inside the AWC for sometime too.

Sheetal: She (daughter) is being very naughty. She is eating whatever she finds in the house. When she goes outside to play, she fights with others. I am not able to manage. So, we sent her to palwadi.

In Mamalpuram and several other poorer neighborhoods mothers often discussed how they struggled to ensure their children’s safety. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mamalpuram residents lived in government-built multi-storey tenements consisting of apartments of about 390 square feet each. Because of the small home space, kids were confined to play in the narrow and dark corridors, or outside, which many deemed unsafe. Mamalpuram was one of the peripheralized Chennai’s resettlement areas, where residents and NGOs reported many “anti-social” elements, including sales of drugs and alcohol, theft, petty crime and sometimes even murders and kidnappings of children, or other illicit activities (like sex work) (ActionAid 2010; Peter 2017; Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2022). As people were relocated from different parts of the city, residents also lacked trust in their new neighbors coming from various parts of the city, many of

whom seemed to change frequently. This state-induced “ghettoized” physical and social environment compelled women to prioritize children’s safety.

Even though many women in the area emphasized children’s safety and food, many of them expressed desires for their children to learn *something* and prepare for school. Mothers like Tanisha wanted palwadi to teach her child some habits, and several women in Mamalpuram took various strategies (yet unsuccessfully) to obtain better care and learning activities, which I will discuss later in this chapter. In short, poor and better-off mothers’ reasons for using palwadis were largely similar—most mothers sought school readiness, training independence and socialization. But they often valued other benefits too, and what they emphasized tended to vary by their individual circumstances.

WILLINGNESS TO COMPROMISE

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the perception gap that exists between teachers in poor areas, who often cast parents as acquiescent with their service approach and quality, and teachers in better-off areas who tend to perceive parents as more demanding. Here, I reveal how perceptions about parents in poor areas do not reflect parents’ actual desires and attitudes to childcare quality. I argue that many poor parents *do want* better quality childcare but are compelled to make *pragmatic compromises*—they adjust to AWC shortcomings for the sake of benefits they deem are most important to them, like children’s school readiness or mothers’ need to work and children’s safety. These parents lack other alternatives for childcare, and have to use palwadis even when they are unsatisfied with some aspects of care. Without AWC, mothers believed that their children would have difficulties adjusting to school, would be more exposed to adverse social environment, while mothers themselves would struggle to manage work and childcare simultaneously. Private childcare options were few and even if they were available, they were unaffordable. Thus, lacking

alternatives, parents in poor areas were willing to accept lower quality services as long as palwadi delivered some benefits they care about.

In better-off areas teachers' perceptions matched parents' accounts better. Parents were more likely to argue and demonstrate that they were unwilling to send children to a palwadi if it was not up to their standards. Better-off mothers exercised their voice through Albert O. Hirschman's (1970) exit—they disengaged from using substandard services. In so doing, they lowered children's enrollments which created greater opportunities for supervisors to question, reprimand and monitor teachers more. Persistently low enrollments could threaten teachers with transfers or palwadi shut down. To maintain higher enrollments in better-off areas teachers needed to respond to parents' demands for quality.

Toileting

Children's toileting is perhaps one of the main care domains where views between poor and better-off parents can be the starkest. Many parents in poor areas accept children's urinating outside as a normal practice, while for most better-off parents this practice is unacceptable. Some parents in poor neighborhoods explained that their children were used to going outside for toileting and it was common to do so for kids in their area. They reasoned that it was easier for them that way, that children were afraid of darkness inside the toilet or found latrines too scary, so mothers did not insist on them adjusting at a young age. My interview with Nalini from Kolapatnam area illustrates such views:

Ieva: You mentioned that the kids learnt to go to the bathroom there right, so was the child comfortable using the toilet there? Will the children use the toilet or go outside?

Nalini: Some children use the toilet, and some others go outside.

Ieva: Why do you think it is this way?

Nalini: These children have gotten used to it. Such is this area. Here we make the kids pee or defecate outside and sometimes inside.

Ieva: Isn't it a problem?

Nalini: They might wet the mats while sleeping or make a mess. So the staff don't want that to happen. To avoid that they send the kid outside or to the toilet wherever the kid is comfortable.

Ieva: Is it a problem for you personally to allow your child to pee outside?

Nalini: No. I too will make my son go outside. These little children are scared to use the toilet. Those toilets are small in size, so we make the children sit outside to pee or poop.

Others thought that compared to palwadi toilet, the open space may be cleaner and better, though such suspicions were rather uncommon. Defecating outside was unacceptable to most. Mothers explained that it could cause infections and diseases, and so they tried to ensure that their kids defecated at home before going to palwadi. This accounts for why many poorer mothers did not complain to teachers about children's urinating outside, especially when the kids were doing the same in their area.

While in poor neighborhoods some mothers viewed urinating outside as acceptable, many others argued that it was important to have a bathroom in the palwadi and did not want their child to pee or defecate outside. Many wanted their kids to learn to use the toilet. But lack of toilets was often not a deal-breaker, mothers adjusted or expressed willingness to adjust to lack of toilets provided they derived some value from using a palwadi. For the majority of women one of the biggest benefits was children's school readiness. In other cases, women also valued the time they gained to work and nutritious meals above other things, as described previously. For example, Gajalakshmi from Mamalpuram explained that if the toilet was not working in the palwadi, she would adjust by taking her child home:

Ieva: If there was a bathroom but in unusable condition, would you have sent your child to AWC?

Gajalakshmi: Yes. The child will have the need to go to the bathroom once they eat or if they have some stomach issues. We will know accordingly, right? [suggesting it was something predictable and could be accommodated] Bathroom and all not an issue. She [daughter] is getting all these good habits, right? This is enough for me.

Ieva: What if the staff asked the child to urinate outside?

Gajalakshmi: No, even younger children won't go outside. As home is nearby, we can bring back the child, make her use the bathroom, clean her and take her back.

Ieva: If it was like that, wouldn't it have been difficult for you to do all this?

Gajalakshmi: For people going to work, it would have been difficult. As I am staying at home, it is not an issue for me.

For Gajalakshmi, learning good habits was the most important benefit of palwadi. It included learning daily routines and independence as well as training her daughter to talk 'decently', i.e. with respect. Gajalakshmi liked that her daughter was taught to say "Welcome Aunty" (with respectful "vaanga" instead of informal "vaa," speech pattern associated with slum residents). By socializing her daughter in speech and behavioral styles valued by the mainstream society, the childcare center was critical in cultivating children's cultural capital. Because Gajalakshi felt her child was socialized well, she did not think it would have been an issue if the AWC did not have a toilet. She would have brought her child home.

Other mothers suggested they would engage in similar solutions—they would adjust by taking kids home because its nearby. They, however, reasoned that this would be complicated if they lived further away or if they were not at home. Many mothers, like Cholai from Kolapatnam (who has not yet used palwadi yet as her child was too young) explained: "If I come to know that there are no restrooms, I'll make the kids use the bathroom in the house itself in the morning, freshen them up and then send them to palwadi. And if the staff inform me that my kid needs to use the restroom, then we have to go and take care of it." For Cholai, restroom was important but she thought she could adjust if it was not working. Cholai saw education as the primary reason why she would use a palwadi for her son: "he shouldn't just go, eat and come back. Staff have to teach him, using charts and stuff. Only if they start now, it'll be easier for kids next year."

Beyond education, palwadis were also a crucial support for working mothers. In many poor areas there were mothers whose financial circumstances were extremely difficult and they had to use palwadis no matter how good they were. Kannarpuram was a poor tenement area with 2-3

palwadis in each block, but since the buildings were very old and dilapidated palwadi facilities like toilets were non-functional, teachers were irregular and merely watched over children, rather than engage in caregiving and early education. Due to their poor quality, mothers used palwadis reluctantly and used them for only a short while until they could admit children to kindergartens. One mother Parimala, mentioned earlier, having no other choice but to work and leave her kid in the palwadi was upset about non-functional bathrooms, that children had to urinate outside and that she had to take children home for defecation or cleanup the child herself:

Parimala: As of now, there aren't bathrooms in any of the palwadis [in Kannarpuram]. If the children need to use the bathroom, since our house is nearby, they [staff] drop the child at home, or they call us and we'll have to clean it up.

Ieva: Even if the child has only urinated?

Parimala: If the child has urinated, they themselves clean it up. If the child defecates, they call us.

Ieva: They make them urinate outside?

Parimala: Yes.

Ieva: What do they do if the mother isn't available?

Parimala: That's what irks me. Palwadi should be able to take care of everything - bathrooms should also be there. Since we're available, it's okay if they call us. But if we weren't available, what about then?

Parimala was annoyed but she did not ask the staff to clean the kids themselves. She felt that they were on good terms and if she asked them to clean her child's poop, they would be hurt by the request. But she believed toilets were necessary and that cleaning up children's soiling and the area outside was the staff's duty. Since Parimala needed this palwadi she depended on the goodwill of the workers. Her solution to the irking toileting issue was to wait quietly until her child was old enough to go to a kindergarten. Like Parimala, many mothers in poor areas were annoyed about lack of facilities in palwadis as it often involved demands on their time.

Many mothers attributed the lack of toilets to the overall poor state of government services. They also found it ironic that the government demands cleanliness from slum residents but does not provide the means for it. Kamala from another poor neighborhood Kolapatnam complained

that when she sent her daughter to palwadi there was a time when the borewell was broken and there was no water in the toilet. The staff made kids urinate outside during that time. Kamala and others were furious that government did not care to repair it: “they (the government) say that we must keep our surroundings clean. In that case we ourselves are soiling our surroundings, right? But the government were doing that and we were still sending the kids, as there was no one to take care of our kids. That is why we spent just a year. That’s why I sent them to pre-kindergarten class (instead of keeping the child longer in palwadi).” Kamala, like many other mothers, thought that lack of facilities in palwadi derived from the government’s attitude that (poor) children need mostly food while other aspects of care are “non-essential”:

Ieva: What do you think about it...that the government is not ensuring all these facilities?
Kamala: they don’t care... They think it is enough to send rice and dal. They think that is care towards children. But it is not so. But if there is a palwadi, then they must have all facilities to run it. Water is essential – that itself would not be there. In several palwadis that is the state. Then what will the staff do? They would make kids urinate in public places. The government only demands us to keep our area clean but they do not make the necessary provision. If the kids have to urinate, then what will they do? They will have to make them go out in the open only.

Thus, Kamala’s and others’ accounts reveal that many mothers were not acquiescent with how the toileting matters were managed, rather they were willing to adjust because they valued other benefits palwadis could provide and had few childcare alternatives.

Mothers were also willing to adjust to requests to come clean their children when they soiled or wet themselves because they were entangled in a power relation with the staff. Some mothers may have internalized children’s cleaning up as their—mother’s—responsibility and did not find it disturbing, but others revealed they feared the consequences if they did not submit to teachers’ requests. These mothers explained that staff might consider children’s cleaning an unpleasant task, might be harsh and not clean children properly. Several mothers revealed they gave money to helpers for children’s cleaning as they “might feel uncomfortable cleaning a child

who defecated.” One mother said she went to clean up her son when he pooped because she did not want him to be embarrassed. She complained that on several occasions other children and even adults judged the boy for soiling himself. She was upset and agreed to clean up her child. Yet, she did not dare to question workers so as not to hurt them.

While women agreed to be called upon (provided they were available), when probed, most mothers believed it was palwadi helpers responsibility to look after children’s toileting needs and they wanted them to do so. The possibility of complaint was withheld by the status of the teacher, and her power over children who were too young to report on potential neglect or abuse. Others submitted to requests to maintain good relations with the staff that would later enable them to gain other benefits and flexibilities, like leaving children in the center longer, or simply to sooth their anxieties about how children were cared for.

Unlike in poor areas, most mothers in better-off places reported that toilets were critical for palwadis and argued they would not send kids without it. For example, before admitting her daughters to a palwadi, mother Leena carefully researched and examined about 20 palwadis in several neighborhoods until she decided on the one that resembled a private playschool and satisfied all her needs. It was unusual even for a better-off mother to put so much effort into finding a “perfect” palwadi. Most mothers admitted their kids to the nearest center. Leena observed that many palwadis were dark, dirty and had many kids from the ‘slums.’ Leena searched for a space that was clean, with “good ambience,” had a functional toilet and caring teachers. Sambpur palwadi fit her criteria and Leena recounted how delighted she was when staff trained her daughters to use the toilet independently:

Ieva: Did both your kids use the washroom at the balwadi?

Leena: Both of my children weren’t potty trained before attending the palwadi, though they would use the restroom there if they needed to. If they needed to urinate urgently, they urinated in their pants. The palwadi helper taught them proper toilet etiquette, such as

washing their hands and legs after using the restroom, communicating their need to use the restroom, and other rules. My kids continue to practice all that they learned at the palwadi. Despite the large number of kids, the helper would first take 5 of the girls before taking the boys separately. They would then use *Dettol* to clean the kids and wash the toilets. I don't find any difference between this and a private center.

Ieva: Even if the children pee or potty at the palwadi, staff would clean it up?

Leena: Of course, they would, of course. This is why I insist that there aren't many differences between a private daycare centre and a palwadi in terms of the care and consideration they give to the kids.

Leena, like others, also reported not being called upon to clean their kids and said that workers took care of such matters. Similarly, Johila from a different better-off area, argued that she would refuse to send her kid to palwadi if staff called her to clean up the child:

Ieva: What would your reaction be if the palwadi staff called you to wash up your child soiled himself?

Johila: I will feel bad. I would think, "Why have I sent the child there, why are they calling me?" These kinds of questions would be there. But if there is a situation where staff say that they cannot wash my child and I would have to go compulsorily, then I have to go. Someone from home will have to go. I will go and tell them that we will never send the child to the palwadi again. Why should I go there (to the palwadi) and do the same thing (wash up my child) if I can do it at home. I would rather keep my child at home and make him use the bathroom that we use.

Most mothers residing in better-off areas often deemed it inappropriate to be asked to perform tasks that were the responsibility of the caregivers. If requested to do so, they preferred to withdraw their child from the palwadi entirely.

Curiously, many mothers still tried to ensure their children completed their morning routines at home. Similar to mothers in poor areas, women did not always trust staff to clean kids properly or were afraid of teachers scolding them. For example, Ambika was particular that bathroom had to be clean, and her views reflected similar opinions of her peers in other wealthier neighborhoods:

Keeping the bathroom clean is highly important whether it is at a school or public hall. Even when someone uses the bathroom, it will be great if they clean it up. Because staff are getting paid for it. They should do justice for the job. They should think that this is my job, and I should not create any inconvenience or trouble. If they don't think like this, kids

will get affected. They will shout at the kids ‘don’t you use the restroom at home?’ They surely do this to kids. They should do it with a good heart but not many are like that.

Ambika was relatively satisfied with the palwadi bathroom she used. However, she opined that she would not send her daughter there if the toilet was dirty or non-functional. She had heard stories of some workers shouting at children for using the toilet, while another mother had shared an alarming account of helpers using children’s own hands for wiping their ‘bottom’. These incidents fueled the mothers’ apprehension about the level of care provided by the workers and their subsequent ‘prevention’ efforts. In poor areas, some mothers adjusted their toileting standards or took their children home when necessary. However, mothers in better-off areas were less willing to compromise and would keep their children at home or seek out other affordable centers that met their standards.

Food

In general, in poor areas parents were more likely to find palwadi meals satisfactory than those in better-off areas. However, there were significant variations in parents’ assessments even across and within poor neighborhoods. In about half of the poor areas, parents who used subsidized food grains, like rice, obtained from the government’s Public Distribution System (PDS), perceived palwadi food, which also served PDS rice, as nutritious and good. Many parents thought that because PDS rice was unpolished it was better than the polished, “shop-bought” rice. They also liked that meals contained eggs and vegetables, and thought they were cooked well. A few mothers said it was more nutritious than what they could cook at home.

However, in several poor areas (Mamalpuram, Kannarpuram and Kandivakkam), parents’ opinions about food diverged and many did not like that palwadis served PDS rice. These parents were similar to many parents in better-off areas who also thought food was not good quality and

were skeptical of it. As discussed previously, ration rice is often perceived inferior quality due to being unpolished, bigger in size, and less clean. Ration rice was associated with potential stomach problems. In both types of areas, but more so in better-off neighborhoods, several parents who did not let children eat in palwadi, either sent food from home or made children come back home for lunch. In poorer areas such cases were minimal.

The majority of parents in poor areas compromised and let kids eat palwadi food because it was not the primary benefit they sought. Many mothers in poor areas prioritized educational aspects, while for others it was also safety and time to work. For example, grandmother Prakriti from Kannarpuram explained:

Parents like us cannot teach kids on their own. So we send kids to palwadi so that kids can learn something and get used to the school environment. We don't care about the food given there. He needs to learn discipline. Some kids in this area behave badly and speak foul language. Only if the kids behave well can they join good schools. But unfortunately, they haven't learned those things. We are teaching at home with books we bought ourselves. Whatever my grandson was talking about today, that you saw, is from our efforts.

Prakriti sought educational benefits for her grandson, but she was disappointed that the palwadi teacher was irregular and taught little. Others, like Parimala compromised because her financial constraints compelled her to work and did not allow her to look for better options:

Ieva: Some people say that the ration rice is too big and is not good for kids...

Parimala: It is true that it isn't that good. But what can we do? In our economic state, we can only depend on sending our child there. If there's not enough money, we should depend on it.

It would have been difficult to provide healthy meals at home if palwadis did not provide food but Parimala was among a few who acknowledged it. The vast majority of mothers were willing to send food from home if palwadis. Importantly, in poor areas women felt they had to adjust to the food quality because "this was what the government gives," but in better-off staff *convinced*

“fussier” mothers that their food was nutritious, and showed how workers fed children by hand making them eat better than at home.

The fact that even many poorer women did not prioritize or want their kids to eat unpolished rice in the palwadi reflects a trend, where getting free food is becoming a symbol of lower status. Parents increasingly looked down upon on palwadi food and exchanged the freely distributed *sathu maavu* nutritious mix for the more expensive shop brands, like *Maana Health Mix*. Ironically, the doctors and nurses I met went to palwadis to get the *sathu maavu* for their kids stating its nutritional benefits, though they did not send their children to palwadis. Rajakumari, an NGO worker from north Chennai who helped me connect with several palwadi workers in her neighborhood, remarked that: “Now it came to a stage where the parents have started feeling shameful about their children having a free meal, and it started hurting their ego. But it is strange that the same parents who do not want food, expect all other benefits for free from the school ranging from the books, uniforms, scholarships etc.”

Cleanliness

Palwadi cleanliness was important to all parents, across all areas. But like with toilets and food, compared to those in better-off areas, parents in poor areas were more likely to acknowledge that they would send their kid to AWC even if it was not regularly mopped or swept. A substantial group of mothers in poor areas could tolerate lower levels of cleanliness for the sake of education. When I asked mother Lalima in Tiruvum neighborhood whether she would send her child to the palwadi if it was not swept or mopped often, she did not see it as a deal-breaker: “We send him there to study so this isn’t a problem. If it isn’t clean, we will question them [staff].” In each poor area there would be a couple of mothers who would have similar responses. Mothers wanted cleanliness to prevent infections and diseases but thought they could compromise on it if sweeping

or mopping was not done daily. Some said they would send kids for a shorter time, others reasoned that kids sit on chairs so they would be fine. They also thought they would request staff for mopping if needed. Meanwhile, parents in better-off areas were more likely to say they wouldn't send kids if AWC was not clean due to fears of infections, diseases.

Across poor and better-off areas, parents perceived AWC to be sufficiently clean even if I rated AWC low on cleanliness during my visit. It is possible that the AWC was cleaner during the period when my interviewees sent their children compared to my observation period, which was during the post-lockdown phase when children only came in for lunch instead of the full day. But it is also likely that some parents did have lower cleanliness standards or considered the place sufficiently clean for a government palwadi. As I will discuss in the next sections, parents perceived government services to be generally lower quality and adjusted their expectations accordingly. They often compared palwadis to private childcare services and mentioned how much more they would expect and question staff if those expectations were not met in a private center.

Teaching

Educational goals were among the key reasons why women sought palwadis, yet mothers' understanding of desired teaching and activities varied among both poor and better off areas. These varied expectations determined who was satisfied and who compromised on early learning. In four poor neighborhoods, most mothers felt that learning activities in their palwadis were sufficient, but in three other areas most mothers were disappointed with the lack of teaching. Mothers who were satisfied with teaching reported that after going to palwadi their children learned rhymes, songs, alphabets and names of things, and did some physical exercises (e.g., play with the ball, running in circles), as they recounted them at home. Mothers were also pleased to see that their children were also developing healthy habits, such as handwashing, proper eating etiquette,

socialization, and respectful communication. They also appreciated the emphasis on discipline, independence, and overall ‘decency’ that the palwadi instilled in their children.

However, many mothers acknowledged that they were ready to send children to palwadi even if teachers did not engage kids in more “academic” matters and language training. Women thought children could still benefit from exposure to other children, socialization and become more independent. Gnanisha’s answer illustrated this stance:

Ieva: If the teacher was present but did not do any activities with kids, only let them play by themselves would you have sent your son to palwadi?

Gnanisha: Yes. The child would interact with other children and at this age it's fine if the child is not studying. The child will play with other children, gain friends, it's good for the child. So, I would have sent. If they teach something orally, the children would repeat it after the teacher. A little thing would get into their (children) mind. If there is no activity also, the child can learn from their [teacher's] words.

Like Gnanisha, most mothers thought that intensive or highly structured activities were not needed before children were aged 3-4. The majority wanted their kids to learn through play, though some mothers insisted that children should start learning alphabets from age 2. For the past few years, the Chennai Municipal Corporation has been running preschools, making it a popular trend for parents to enroll their children in lower and upper kindergarten (LKG and UKG) programs once they reach the age of 3-4 years old. Thus, in most areas palwadi was used for a year or so before sending them to kindergartens.

Still, in three areas—Kandivakkam, Kannarpuram and Mamalpuram—mothers were particularly disappointed with the lack of teaching and learning. Some of these mothers had relatively high expectations for what children had to learn but others wanted at least minimum engagement with children. In Kannarpuram and Mamalpuram mothers reported limited teaching, teacher absenteeism or that children were mostly rehearsing the same songs and rhymes all the time. Kainika from Mamalpuram described teacher’s slacking as her primary concern:

It would be good if the teacher takes up the responsibility to teach the kids new things. The teacher of the palwadi I sent my daughter to was not quite sincere. She would arrive late and during working hours she would be chatting with the lady next door. One day I expressed my concern to her saying that she should monitor the kids properly and teach them sincerely. She replied it was none of my business to say so and that she is well aware of what needs to be done. Thereon I stopped questioning her. My mother advised me to ignore it and continue to send the kid there until time permits or shift her to a different palwadi if required. Since there was only less time remaining, I let go of it and did not question the teacher further. Even my daughter used to complain to me saying that the teacher is not teaching properly but is lethargic and always chatting with the neighbor.

Kainika sent her daughter to palwadi when she was four years old with the intention to prepare her for school. Initially, her daughter learned some songs and rhymes but over time the teacher paid less and less attention to learning, and at some point Kainika got upset that her daughter was not showing progress. Since her daughter was soon at an age when she could go to school, Kainika did not bother to find another place or fight with the teacher. Other mothers in Mamalpuram also thought that rhymes and songs were very limited and not stimulating enough. Some mothers reported that kids were not even taught rhymes. Many mothers wanted more teaching of alphabets, and basic concepts (e.g., shapes, colors). Similarly, many mothers in Kannarpuram were also upset about teachers being irregular and teaching almost nothing, but those who still used such palwadis had no other alternative as they had to work and needed daycare.

In Kandivakkam, mothers primarily used palwadi for early stimulation and learning, and had somewhat higher expectations for teaching than most mothers in other poor neighborhoods. Kandivakkam was covered by an NGO which conducted training for new mothers in childcare. Many mothers gained awareness about the importance of early learning for brain development. Here, they recounted that teacher Kripa did a relatively good job teaching children rhymes, songs, ABC and used charts for teaching names (e.g., animals, plants). Besides these cognitive activities, children were also taught habits of hand-washing, how to sit and how to eat by themselves (e.g., which hand to use). Yet, many mothers thought that Kripa could have done more—they wanted

kids to be taught for longer hours or more often, learn more words and some even desired English instruction. Many mothers were willing to send children to palwadi for more years if it provided the same education as kindergartens. Roja's view captured the sentiments of many mothers in Kandivakkam:

Ieva: How much teaching is important to you?

Roja: I don't know how to explain. Teacher needs to spend more time, at least an extra hour teaching. Schools follow schedules. I also want palwadi to follow this regularly. They have books and all, but they don't follow schedules. If they do it at least 3 times a week I will be happy.

While mothers desired more diverse activities or for longer, and several of them talked to teacher Kripa about it, they did not obtain substantive improvements. Mothers continued to send their children until they reached kindergarten age. In short, mothers were willing to compromise on teaching when they felt children could still learn something useful or when they needed safe care for work reasons.

In better-off areas (with some exceptions, like Chinnapuram and Jeypetai) most mothers were relatively satisfied with teaching. Mothers from better-off areas tended to describe a broader range of activities that teachers organized and how they engaged children, compared to mothers from poor areas. In some neighborhoods, women mentioned kids learning *Tirukural* (2000 years old set of poems about ethics and morality), others talked about teachers reading stories with action, children's ability to play with educational toys, and overall better-equipped facilities. Mother Dakshita from Sambpar, liked that kids could play in the playground on the slide and see-saw; and that periodically, staff conducted events for kids: "for special days, such as *Gandhi Jeyanthi*, they would dress up the students as Gandhi; for Krishna *Jeyanthi* too... for those kinds of events, they would ask the parents to come to the palwadi to celebrate." During the interview Dakshita's daughter intervened to say how she loved celebrating them. When asked if Dakshita

would send her child if these educational activities did not happen, she shook her head and said: “no, if the children just sit and play with other kids without learning anything, I could set up playdates with other kids. Learning with other kids is the most crucial aspect. There isn’t any use to palwadi if there's no learning.” Many mothers like Dakshita were of the same opinion and were unwilling to send their children to centers that did not provide activities.

But even in better-off areas a substantive minority also emphasized socializing and learning to speak as the biggest benefit they sought from palwadi, rather than learning rhymes, songs or ABC. Therefore, some mothers *were willing* to send children even if activities like rhymes and songs were not happening. Like Gnanisha, they believed kids could pick up on speaking by interacting with their peers. Some mothers also thought they could teach their children at home or that they would develop their academic capacities in kindergarten and school. Overall, for most mothers in better-off areas using palwadi was often an option, and if it satisfied their expectations, they continued to send children. The sense of compromising was less present in better-off than in poor neighborhoods.

Taken together, while some parents in poor areas accepted lower care standards in toileting, feeding, cleanliness or teaching, as sufficient, many mothers expressed a desire for better care. These mothers were not instinctively accommodating as perceived by teachers, but they *adjusted* to lower quality due to their powerlessness and lack of grievance redress mechanisms. As long as women found value in using palwadis they consented to overlook its shortcomings.

Meanwhile, in better-off areas mothers were shielded from pragmatic compromises. The relatively advantaged socio-economic position allowed mothers to take care of children at home with lesser difficulties than in poor neighborhoods. The neighborhood conditions and housing were often more comfortable and friendlier in better-off neighborhoods compared to less safe and

sometimes even violent poor areas. In the next section, I will explain how powerlessness and lack of institutionalized systems for complaint-making inhibited residents' ability to attain better childcare quality.

STALLED DEMAND-MAKING

Despite desiring better quality childcare and facilities, many parents in poor areas were unable to attain it due to their lack of power and the absence of effective grievance redress mechanisms. This powerlessness stifled their ability to voice their demands and question the quality of care provided by palwadi workers. Upon examining claims-making practices on public services and goods in rural Rajasthan, Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner (2018) argues that successful claims-making starts with citizens having aspirations and capabilities to reach the state. People need to have exposure to information, ideas about the state and channels to access it. In Chennai, many women I met did not lack in desires and aspirations for their children and for better quality childcare. Many also felt entitled to public childcare with functioning facilities and even teachers who teach. They also articulated their grievances to palwadi workers. Yet, they lacked power to voice their demands and had few channels for grievance redress. Complaining about palwadis carried risks of reprisal against children and women feared that any small benefits they received may be taken away. For many families the costs of complaining outweighed the potential benefits. This situation, drawing from John Gaventa (1980), represented poor residents' powerlessness. In contexts of high inequality, the inability to act on the unequal treatment by the deprived group can be viewed as a function of power relationships, such that power serves for the development and maintenance of the quiescence of the disadvantaged.

Beyond that, powerlessness was instilled through ideology: parents believed that the government lacked political efficacy—it did not care enough to address their childcare needs.

Drawing from encounters with various public officials and agencies, women had low expectations about governments' responsiveness to enhance quality of care beyond the basic provision. This led to almost automatic acceptance of the lower quality of public childcare, and government services in general, compared to private providers who were seen as superior.

Beyond teacher's control

Many parents in poor neighborhoods questioned palwadi staff about food preparation quality, non-functioning bathrooms, or lack of teaching. However, teachers often absolved themselves from responsibility to address these issues, citing that fixing infrastructure, like toilets or improving food quality is beyond their control, that it was the 'government's task.' When parents in poor areas questioned teachers about having to clean up their children after soiling, wetting, or lack of toilets teachers typically justified it by referring to lacking infrastructure, like broken water motor, and explained that parents had to take care of toileting matters themselves. However, parents understood that it was usually an excuse to reduce work efforts. For example, Kashvi and her mother-in-law Ragavi in Tiruvum thought that it was unpleasant for workers to clean their kids which workers 'covered up' by citing lack of facilities:

Ieva: Why don't they clean kids up?

Ragavi: I suppose they find it gross, so they think 'why should I do it?' I asked them, 'why do you not clean them up when we only drop them off here to be taken care of? If there are many children, one or two is likely to have a (bathroom) accident. Say one of them has an upset stomach or something. They might vomit or something. Since you—helpers—are there to care for the children, you should tell the mother later that something like this happened. But you just bring them home as they are, without cleaning them up. Is that right?'

Ieva: What did the helper respond?

Ragavi: She didn't care about what I said or reply to me. Even with the lady who leaves her six-month-old baby at a palwadi and goes to work, because the older daughter is there, she takes care of her sibling in case of a bathroom accident. Otherwise, the helper would have to, right? The lady who goes to work is also very young and has three daughters so she leaves her children at palwadi so she can work. If a child poops or pees they don't

really give them the attention they need. When asked about it, they say they don't have a bathroom. Or that the bathroom doesn't have a tap, or whatever.

Ieva: If you were to tell her that it was the helper's responsibility to clean the children what would the teacher do? Do you think they would say something?

Ragavi: They would only say something like what I told you earlier, that the bathroom doesn't work and so on. I've said to the teacher, how can girls and boys pee together, and the girls pee where they are visible to other boys on the street? They said they were going to build a wall around the place. But they already have a clean bathroom! They say the children just pee themselves wherever they are as well. They say they will work on fixing it, but they just keep saying that they don't have water, or the motor doesn't work and so on. But at the end of the day, the helper feel disgusted so they don't clean the children up.

Many mothers in Tiruvum asked teacher Sumathi about the toilet, but Sumathi gave similar excuses and did not think much about it. Palwadi workers got away with such complaints because teachers created an expectation that the toilet or whatever that was broken would be fixed, and they just needed to wait. The long waiting time was also attributed to the municipality's fault. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sumathi perceived that parents had no problems with kids urinating outside. Yet, most parents adjusted by trying to make their kids use the toilet at home before leaving for palwadi. If children peed or pooped accidentally, mothers had to go deal with it.

When some mothers asked about palwadi cleanliness, Sumathi and her helper also gave "environmental" reasons as excuse for why there was dust accumulation—it was hard to maintain cleanliness because palwadi was near a big road with a lot of vehicle movement which brought in dust and pollution. These types of responses created an expectation that the government provided poor quality services and was not responsive to people's grievances.

Food quality was another issue where teachers made excuses: it was the government that supplied all the grains and had discretion over their distribution. Many mothers in various neighborhoods complained to teachers about ration rice, that grains were too big for toddlers, or that it could cause stomachaches and diarrhea. Mothers would ask if staff could provide better

quality rice, but teachers would tell them that rice was supplied by the government, and they had no say over it.

Mother Tanika's son did not like how rice was cooked in palwadi in Kandivakkam. Tanika said he preferred rice that was more mashed than the drier palwadi version. When Tanika tasted the food herself, she also did not like it and asked the teacher about it: "the teacher responded that they can cook only with the provisions that are supplied to them. I once said to them that the rice looks odd and asked them if it was from a ration shop. They confirmed and added that this is what they have been given to cook. I agreed to it. They are carrying out their duty and we cannot blame them." Tanika did not pursue her claim as she thought that everyone may have different "tastes and nature," but also accepted that this was the quality of free food that the government supplies. She decided to let her kid stay in palwadi until lunch time and then brought him home to eat, demonstrating her "exit" from unsatisfactory meals.

Unlike food or toilets, learning activities was something that teachers had significantly more control over. Yet even then, many teachers could cite workload as an excuse for why they had little time for activities with children. Mothers often inquired about learning activities when they thought they were not happening or were insufficient. When questioned, teachers responded that they did their best within the given time, and that they also had to do other work, like updating reports about children's growth measures, demographics and or having to go to office meetings.

That teachers had a high workload was true, but as some teachers demonstrated it was still possible to find at least one-two hours per day several days per week to engage children in learning activities. Teachers could do this by doing paperwork in the afternoons, when children were sleeping, though sometimes it meant they had to stay and work longer hours. Mothers in Mamalpuram did not believe teachers were busy with other work and meetings, and felt they were

neglecting their duty. Jamini, like Kainika, was upset that her daughter did not learn much in palwadi. All the stories and rhymes she recounted at home were learned mostly in Sunday class conducted by the local church. When Jamini pressed teacher Meenakshi about why she was often away from palwadi, Meenakshi said she had to go to meetings and turned her answer into complaint about her superiors:

Jamini: Teacher says: “What can we do. They (superiors) are instructing us.” They are given instructions to do some chart work and training is given on what activities must be done with the children. So, I haven’t seen them teaching the children. There are charts on display but they are not being taught. Suddenly, if there is checking (surprise visit from superiors), they will teach the children. Even yesterday I went near the palwadi for some work, I didn’t notice the teacher coming. She called out to me. I asked her, “Are you done for the day and heading home?” She said, “I am going for a meeting.”

Ieva: Have you asked them (palwadi staff) about this?

Jamini: I have told them that the helper who was here earlier would teach children everything. The teacher said, “I am also teaching them.” But she (her daughter) has not come home and repeated any of it. Only if a line of a song is taught at least 5 times, the children will absorb it. Secondly, they should be asked to repeat it. They should ask them the next day. Now all that happens is the children go there, sit for some time, play amongst themselves and the teacher will be writing notes.

Ieva: Most of the time they are writing?

Jamini: Yes. Like, how many children were born, their weights, whether they were vaccinated, who are the new pregnant women and so on. This is mainly what happens. They count the provisions, how many eggs were delivered, etc. They will be writing all this. All this work should be done when children are sleeping. But now as soon as palwadi staff come in the morning, they do all this work.

Jamini thought Meenakshi was not teaching as she was supposed to because she had seen a previous teacher teach in the morning and do reporting work in the afternoon, when kids were sleeping. Hence, she realized this teacher was not following the same routine. When Jamini questioned Meenakshi repeatedly, she pretended that she was doing it. Jamini remained frustrated with the process: “they will respond as if they are putting in a lot of effort and teaching (children) for 3-4 hours.”

Mothers in other areas also mentioned teachers focusing much of their time on reports or going to meetings rather than spending time with children. In Kandivakkam, where mothers were

particularly keen on more learning activities, teacher Kripa demonstrated to parents her high load of “writing work.” Since Kripa tried her best and *did* spend some time teaching kids, most mothers accepted her response and did not question her much. Their impression was that Kripa was indeed burdened with a lot of reporting, and mothers like Niti reasoned to me: “I can understand how much work they have. When I go to collect the ration, they write in a book and take our signature, when we go for pregnancy meeting, health condition or when they check the height, they enter the details. I have seen them explain these details to the supervisors. So, I assumed that’s what she is writing.” Meetings and reporting were common excuses for not being able to teach, though teachers would still seek to demonstrate or argue that they tried their best.

Even when workload was not an issue, workers could still come up with different reasons for why children may not be learning. In Tiruvum, teacher Sumathi, for example, told parents, that it was children’s inattention that prevented her from teaching the alphabet. Mother Meghna recounted Sumathi’s explanation: “the teacher would say, “I teach the children, but they don’t pay any attention. If I treat them strictly and ask them to be silent, they start crying. Parents assume that I beat them, and then fight with me. So I leave them however they want to be. If children come and sit themselves, I teach them ABCD using the alphabet toys.” Sumathi managed to shift the blame on children or parents rather than her own inability to control the kids. As a result, Meghna’s questioning eventually reached its limits. Meanwhile, while making excuses Sumathi was always careful to talk to parents with respect and politely and presented herself as doing the needy to placate the parents. This non-conflictual, pacifying tone helped to suppress parents’ complaints.

No system for complaining

Demand-making was also complicated by the lack of institutionalized channels for grievance redress. Even if parents decided to seek recourse for the structural problems, like broken toilets,

they did not know where to complain. Most parents had not met the supervisors, did not know to reach them, and where their office was. While supervisors phone numbers were usually painted on the façade of palwadis, these numbers may not have been accurate as supervisors changed every few years but even then, most parents did not notice or use them. Mother Johila living in a relatively better-off area summarized what many others recounted—that people were not informed about officials overseeing palwadis and their workers: “People don’t know where they can go to make a complaint. Where does one go to report something or to ask for action to be taken (regarding the palwadi). In the case of school, if we tell the principal, they will take action on the teachers. But nobody knows where to complain about the palwadi staff. Maybe a literate population could search on the phone and find the contact of a person who would listen to issues (about the palwadi).” When asked whether parents would try to obtain phone numbers of supervisors from government offices, Johila thought no one would exert effort to ask and “go digging around” for numbers and information.

Even when mothers did meet the supervisors during their visits or palwadi awareness events women did not feel like they had a chance to talk to them. For instance, Parimala from Kannarpuram met the supervisors but was unable to speak to them: “They do come from time to time, but they talk among themselves. We don’t get a chance to talk to them. If there’s a meeting, they ask us to sit, take photos, sign stuff and that’s it.”

Johila, Parimala and many others thought that reaching out to supervisors was a significant constraint, but beyond that many women also believed that if they complained as individuals, they held little power to convince teachers or higher-level authorities to take their problems seriously. Parents thought that they had to gather as a group to be listened to. A common response women received when they complained to teachers about something was “you are the only one

complaining about it, no one else says anything”. For example, mother Tanya in a better-off Narambai neighborhood recounted how during the rainy season there was some water stagnating near the palwadi and due to that insects got inside and were biting the kids. She talked with the teacher about it who said she had reported the problem to the authorities. Yet public officials did not do anything about it and Tanya stopped sending her kid until the “insect menace” was over. Tanya did not know who the authorities were and never thought of reaching out to them directly. But then she also thought that they might have taken action if she went to complain together with other parents: “I think they would have cleaned the place. They need to be told twice or thrice to take it seriously. They would take it seriously if four or five parents complained, rather than just one. If just one of us complained, they would justify it by saying that no one else had complained about it.”

The tactic of telling mothers they were the sole complainants discouraged women from pursuing claims because they did not know what others thought or did. Some saw other mothers in the neighborhood as less demanding or reluctant to complain due to fear of losing their benefits. For example, Kainika, who criticized the teacher for chatting with the neighbors instead of teaching kids, thought that other mothers in her area were too complacent making it difficult to organize:

Ieva: Could you all as parents come together to address this issue [lack of teaching] with the teacher?

Kainika: No. The thing is, I am educated (at least a little) so I don’t mind questioning but the other parents are mostly illiterate and they mainly send their kids to the palwadi to be taken care of while they are off to work. So they are satisfied with whatever is and do not question anything. So the teacher might argue that why only I question her while the others don’t. So I just left the matter as it is as my mother felt that the teacher might refuse to look after my child.

Similarly, Aarti from the poor neighborhood of Seypetai did not like how the food was prepared. Yet she did not want to mention anything to the teacher as she anticipated there would be no positive response. I asked her if parents could talk to the teacher as a group, but Aarti did

not know if everyone would come together for it. Aarti mentioned that there was a relatively active MLA in the area so I asked her if women could talk to him about palwadi food. Aarti was doubtful. She thought that everyone may have a “different situation,” meaning that she did not know what others thought about the quality of food and whether it was acceptable to them. She also thought many parents were dependent on palwadi as they had to work, and she did not want to jeopardize the palwadi services for everyone. Thus, many women thought they would be more effective if they complained as a group, but they also that that most of their neighbors were too complacent to organize together.

My findings correspond to a large scholarship on claims-making in India which suggests that urban citizens do not expect public officials to be approachable. For example, Adam Auerbach and Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner (2020) find that over 80% of residents in informal settlements in Jaipur and Bhopal expected to be ignored if they approached a government official. In another survey of citizenship in Bangalore, Ebony Bertorelli and colleagues (2017) find that over 90% of their respondents did not know if there was a ward committee in their community, reflecting weak citizen participation in redressal of common problems. In my own interviews with a poor mother Kainika, she anticipated that complaining to authorities was a time-consuming endeavor that was unlikely to effect a positive change. She described how she struggled to obtain a widow’s pension and thought that if this relatively simple matter was so complicated to resolve, then complaining about the quality of teaching in palwadi would have no chances to generate redress. She said: “It’s the same with every government office/official, when my husband passed, I applied for the widow pension. My daughter was just nine months old. But I have not received it (pension) yet, though I was told I’ll receive Rs1000 every month. My salary was Rs3000 so if I had received this pension, it would’ve been helpful to cater to the needs of my daughter. For this sake, I met a lot of officials

and even had to bribe them. Despite all these efforts, I did not receive the pension.” Such experiences with various state agents are shown to contribute to people’s lowered expectations and submissive disposition towards public service provision (Hastings 2009; Auyero 2012). Failing to get the services they need disadvantaged residents develop low expectations which reduce their propensity to complain and collectively agitate for service enhancement.

Fears of reprisal

One common reason why people are hesitant to voice their complaints is due to the fear of alienating frontline workers who are vital to their community (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). For instance, a study conducted in the U.K. revealed that residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods refrained from raising concerns about the subpar quality of cleaning services due to fears of being labelled as difficult and reluctant to antagonize services providers on whom they depended on (Dean and Hastings 2000). Thus, it was not surprising to discover that complaining about palwadi services, and especially matters that were in teachers’ control, like caregiving, teaching or toileting, often invoked fears of potential reprisal. Many mothers in poor areas (but also in some better-off neighborhoods) feared that reporting problems and challenging workers could create animosity and result in less attention and care for their children.

Mothers were concerned that teachers may be harsh to their kids and talk badly to or about them or, for example, not clean up children when they had a toileting accident. To illustrate this, I return to Kainika who had concerns about teaching quality in Mamalpuram. Having questioned the teacher personally about it, Kainika realized the teacher was angry that she held her accountable. She thought that if she went further and complained about the teacher to her officials it might have affected her daughter. Kainika said that after she had questioned the teacher the first time, she did not talk properly to her daughter and kept scolding her for two days. After the incident

Kainika stopped talking about the issue. She anticipated that if she complained to officials the teacher could refuse to look after her daughter. Kainika imagined: “she would say something like this ‘you don’t have to send your daughter here, you can choose another palwadi where you feel the teacher teaches well’.” Thus, Kainika let it go and continued to send her daughter to palwadi until she was old to go to school. She thought palwadi was still better than letting her child roam on unsafe streets.

Mother Johila, mentioned earlier, also anticipated that teachers may retaliate against children if mothers questioned workers for not cleaning their children: “They may show their vengeance on the child. Sometimes if we ask too many questions at the ration shop, they will take away our (ration) card and won’t give it back to us the following month. Things like that happen.” Johila, like many others, drew from her experience with other government services, such as the subsidized food distribution system, indicating that frontline workers have significant power to deny benefits. Fears of retaliation were more common in poor areas where women were more dependent on palwadis than their peers in better-off areas.

Poor neighborhoods often faced a multitude of social problems, such as drug use, violence, and child abuse. As a result, mothers were hesitant to allow their children to spend time with neighbors whom they did not trust, and discouraged outdoor play on unsafe streets with other children who may be a negative influence. Furthermore, many mothers expressed concern about their children’s exposure to foul language and inappropriate behavior that they picked up from wandering around the area. Thus, even if it was not the best childcare place, palwadi offered a decent refuge from the dangers and risks of the neighborhood. To complain about it meant that workers could take away the space that they valued—it served as a sanctuary for their kids.

Taken together, many mothers sought better quality services, but lack of power and grievance mechanisms hindered their effectiveness. Teachers shifted responsibility to higher authorities, unknown to most, and whom parents had to approach as a group. Many women were also unwilling to complain fear of losing entitlements or compromising children's wellbeing. These obstacles fall under the most commonly reported barriers for citizen engagement worldwide: non-response and fear of repercussions (Gaventa and Barrett 2012). Still, a large group of women in poor areas did not even attempt to complain because they believed they could not expect more from government services than their current standards.

Acceptance of government services as inferior

Many parents in poor areas quietly adjusted and compromised on the quality of AWCs, without complaining to teachers or authorities, for two primary reasons. First, a significant majority of parents believed that free public services, such as childcare, were of lower quality than private services which charged fees. As a result, they had lower expectations from government providers. Second, most parents used palwadi only for a year or so, as they aimed to save money for private schooling in the future. This short duration allowed them to adjust to lower quality childcare for toddlers and defer investments in education until later.

Parents thought that because palwadi workers were paid by the government, rather than by parents directly, workers were less accountable to them. Kainika illustrated a common belief: "Basically, money is what matters. When it comes to palwadi, there is a notion that staff are paid by the government, hence they don't feel indebted to parents and thereby they are indifferent towards the children. Whereas at a private institution, the teacher might be responsible as they are aware that their salary is parents' money. So, they will be responsible and even answer us properly when we question them." Mothers thought that they would be more empowered to question

teachers if they paid them, as opposed to government funding their salaries through taxpayer money. Eswari, who was unhappy with the quality of care and facilities in poor Kannarpuram, reasoned that getting service for free was the primary constrain for claims-making: “If I paid, I could ask them why they aren’t taking care of my child properly for the money I’ve given. Now, they can challenge me ‘how I can question them’ because I’m leaving her [daughter] here for free.”

This perception that people cannot demand higher quality from free services was also widespread in better-off areas. For example, Danika who was unsatisfied with her palwadi and teacher Ramani in Jeypetai area, perceived that parents were bound to accept lower quality services delivered by the government:

Ieva: Would you still send your child to the palwadi if it charged a fee?

Danika: Then it is not a government service, right? It is equivalent to private service provider. If it was a free government service, we would compromise (on quality) and send. But if we were to pay for this service, we would expect more. We would expect better discipline (from staff), better education for children. We would expect better food. We would start monitoring everything. Not just me, all other parents would also start questioning (the service quality).

Ieva: Do you think people do not expect these things currently (when it is free)?

Danika: Yes. No one would question anything in the current scenario. Other parents wouldn’t even question to the extent that I question right now.

Thus, Danika, Eswari, Kainika and many others attributed their inability to make demands on palwadi quality because they did not directly pay for the service and could not raise concerns to the workers. These perceptions were reinforced by interactions with the teachers, who themselves discouraged questioning by saying that parents were not paying them. When talking to Johila in Narrambai, whom I introduced earlier, I tried to challenge the notion that teachers were not paid by parents, by arguing that parents paid taxes, which the government used to provide services for free. Johila did not think it mattered to teachers and thought that palwadi staff associated accountability to direct inputs from parents:

Johila: Yes, they get a salary. But they (palwadi staff) don't feel like that. They only expect things from us (parents). They sometimes ask us, "if you had paid a fee and admitted your child here, we will be answerable to such questions."

Ieva: They don't want you to make demands on them?

Johila: Yes. Generally, there is a way in which we perceive the government and a different way, private institutions. If the government provides any facility, generally people will say That they are not satisfied with it. People who are not well to do will have to send their child there (to the palwadi). And these will be the people who will not question anything.

Some women believed that paying a minimal fee to obtain better quality care from palwadis could be a solution and were willing to do so. For instance, Adya from Kalyanapuram thought that parents would have more power to request improvements if they paid a small fee. She argued that public services should not always be free, and that it would be worth paying for palwadi if kids received better care and education: "paying a small fee to give our children better facilities is not a big deal because they will study and learn in these places. In fact, it would give parents more power to inquire about and discuss any improvements that the balwadi might need, such as how they feed the children or what rhymes they taught them." She also wanted to have parent-teacher meetings where they could raise their concerns and give suggestions to staff.

Parents generally assumed that public services, whether it was daycares, schools, or hospitals, were usually inferior in quality compared to private providers. For example, Sharmila, a mother in the relatively well-off neighborhood of Chinnapuram, opted out of a poorly functioning palwadi and believed that it was representative of the poor quality of public services in general. She felt that most government institutions were understaffed, and their workers were unable to provide adequate care and attention:

Ieva: You say that the government institutions are careless, why do you think so?

Sharmila: In hospitals, as it's a free service there would be more patients visiting the government hospitals for treatment. There aren't many nurses in the government hospitals; The nurses face heavy workloads in the government hospitals, leading to carelessness. There should be more nurses and the workload should be less for them. If it is just one staff member doing all the work, they would be inattentive in any of the government offices.

The low quality of government services was also attributed to the working conditions and low salary of palwadi workers. Parents in poor areas often empathized with palwadi workers when they realized they had a high workload, were paid poorly and had to spend their own money for some palwadi expenses. Teachers and helpers often complained about these issues to parents which then discouraged many of them from questioning workers and raising concerns. Parimala, who was annoyed she had to cleanup her kid after defecating, decided she did not want to bring this up to the workers because she thought they were also struggling in the job, and felt they may be hurt by her requests. She developed good relations with the workers as they shared their troubles with each other. Thus, Parimala did not want to complain and affect the relationship. Parimala feared that if she complained to anyone it might get workers into trouble and she did not want to get them fired. According to her, teachers themselves complained about their superiors and municipality not taking action to fix toilets and drainage issues. It was not the fault of the workers that palwadi did not have a toilet.

Mother Mallika also described many things that were bad in her area palwadis, including non-functioning bathrooms, lack of cleanliness, and poor care for children. Yet, she did not question the teacher much because she anticipated her grumbling about low salary: “I feel they will say, ‘whatever we do is enough for the salary we get.’” Thus, teachers could suppress parents’ questioning by sharing their work struggles with the parents. Sometimes parents empathized with workers and sometimes they thought teachers were making excuses.

Teachers’ grievances about their own work conditions reinforced the belief among parents that the government, who cannot treat its workers well, is incapable of providing quality services. Mother Kamala, who used a palwadi in Kolapatnam, was disappointed with poor cleanliness and hygiene. Even though palwadi was swept and mopped regularly, Kamala thought that because kids

ate, pooped and passed urine on the floor, the foul smell lingered inside all the time. During the nap time kids slept on the mats that were wetted by kids accidentally and remained unwashed. Kamala expressed her concerns about cleanliness to the teacher but the teacher told her she had no alternatives but to use the same mats all the time. Kamala thought that the solution was not difficult to find and the government could have done something: “I feel that the government could replace mats at least once a year. It can also provide soap for cleaning—they just send rice and other things... but that alone is not enough for the children, right? They could give phenyl. Otherwise, the teacher has to spend from her pocket to keep the center clean. All this the government can provide...” Kamala’s criticism was directed at the government and not the teacher. She felt that the teacher herself got the salary late and it was not right to ask her to spend her own money. The teacher shared with Kamala that their superiors did not listen or act upon their requests. The teacher has instead requested parents to buy cleaning products and mats, which they did. Yet Kamala thought it was not parents or teachers but the government who had to provide the necessary tools and equipment for proper palwadi functioning.

Finally, parents also felt it was easier to adjust to palwadi standards for a short period of time rather than pursue their grievance, which had low chances of being resolved. The majority of parents used palwadi only for about a year or two after which they sent kids to kindergartens. Parents were also willing to compromise on quality because it was free while still offering some benefits. For better-off parents it allowed them to save money for private schools, which they deemed more important in imparting education than childcare institutions. Mother Johila explained that fees for private pre-kindergartens were high (and pre-KG was not unavailable in most government schools) and because supposedly pre-KGs conducted the same activities as palwadis,

why waste money on them. Many parents tried to save money for private kindergartens or schools, which presumably provided better teaching than public schools.

In summary, most parents had low expectations from public childcare, understanding that the government and its workers were unlikely to address their requests for better quality services. This perception was reinforced by teachers' complaints about their work conditions and the government's lack of concern for its workers. As a result, many parents chose not to voice their concerns to teachers, which further reinforced teachers' belief that parents in poor areas were acquiescent with the quality of childcare provided.

BOTTOM-UP ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE AGENCY

In many poor neighborhoods parents' demands for better care services were largely unarticulated or unaddressed. Yet in two poor areas—Kandivakkam and Kolapatnam—residents were able to positively influence workers' accountability and improve care services through collective agency. Collective agency, as I define it, refers to the willingness and ability of residents to advocate for better public services, including better childcare provision. It manifests through daily interactions with frontline workers, as parents voice their concerns and demands regarding various aspects of childcare directly to workers. Importantly, collective agency involves a shared belief that other residents have similar needs, demands, and expectations, and that individuals will support one another when voicing their concerns.

A combination of social factors that bolstered collective agency and successful demand-making in Kandivakkam and Kolapatnam (which was lacking in other poor areas) included the presence of local intermediaries, strong social capital and cohesion. Although specific configurations of these elements were slightly different in each area, these social conditions

enabled residents to activate the social orientation of teachers Kripa and Geeta, leading to improved childcare quality, within the limits of what Kripa and Geeta were capable of delivering.

In Kandivakkam, many parents were better-off and could demand better services by articulating their expectations and threatening to withdraw children if desired standards were not upheld—a strategy similar to that in better-off areas. But even among poorer counterparts, many had a sense of collective agency and did not fear reprisal as they had an effective area association that was involved in solving public service concerns.

In Kolapatnam, many parents had significant financial constraints and mothers needed the palwadi to be able to work. Here, residents developed a strong culture of claims-making for public services and were not afraid to make demands on teachers. They were also uniquely situated to monitor palwadi as it was physically surrounded by people's homes. Like in Kandivakkam, the neighborhood also had an effective area association and political leaders that were trusted by many residents to help them address their grievances. It was also important that both areas exhibited high social capital: many neighbors knew each other and helped each other out, many lived for several generations and had relatives nearby. The two neighborhoods were also characterized by high-levels of social cohesion—they were relatively safe, and unlike in many other poor areas, people did not harbor fear about crime and violence. All these social conditions contributed to fostering collective agency that translated into relatively effective claims-making.

Being aware of both residents' ability to make claims (however they did so), and the presence and power of area leaders, teachers in Kolapatnam and Kandivakkam developed a sense of accountability to the residents. They believed that people knew their rights and could exercise them, some of them could also exit their services or pursue grievances with the area leaders. These beliefs led teachers to dedicate more energy to aspects of care that parents deemed important and

demanded. To unpack the mechanisms of how the two neighborhoods achieved greater teachers' accountability, manifesting in greater cleanliness, teaching and better feeding and care (though not necessarily more care in toileting), I will delve into the specifics of interactions between residents, teachers and area leaders.

Conditions for claims-making

Kandivakkam was an interesting area in that it was demographically diverse yet socially segregated and still managed to attain better care through collective claims-making. Some scholars suggest that ethnic heterogeneity can impede cooperation and development (Banerjee, Iyer, and Somanathan 2005; Habyarimana et al. 2009). This was not borne out in Kandivakkam. Kandivakkam was a small 8-block tenement colony housing about 1,600 residents. The tenements were built about 40 years ago by the government to house people who lived in substandard housing conditions (shacks). The tenements had amenities, like tap water, toilets and drainage, but they were in constant need of repair. Due to high levels of disrepair, these tenements were now up for demolition and rebuilding.

Kandivakkam was characterized by rather high demographic heterogeneity. The area was split into two sections: one inhabited by mostly Telugu Dalits and the other by a mix of Tamil Other Backward Class (OBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC or Dalit) communities. Both communities had residents who were very economically poor and better-off. The colony was situated within a larger high-income, upper-caste area of south Chennai. This allowed for greater economic opportunities and jobs. Many women worked as domestic workers in wealthy people's homes.

The two sections co-existed peacefully but they were spatially and socially segregated. Telugu area was on one side, and Tamil area was on another. They had their separate temples and festivals and did not interact with each other much. Although there was no open hostility or conflict

between the two sections, residents perceived a symbolic boundary between their groups, leading them to avoid venturing into each other's territory despite their proximity. For instance, some parents from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) community were hesitant to send their children to the same palwadi attended by Scheduled Caste (SC) children, fearing that their children would be exposed to foul language and bad habits. The teacher, who was a Dalit herself, had to convince parents to overlook caste differences and send their children to the center. To demonstrate to parents that children who came to her center were "decent", she ensured that all children were clean and neatly dressed, and would even help comb their hair or trim their nails if necessary. While some parents adjusted, others opted out altogether.

Despite the additional challenge of working in a mixed-caste area and attracting better-off intermediate castes, it was residents' collective agency and credible threats of exit that induced teacher Kripa in Kandivakkam to provide better quality childcare services. In Kandivakkam, residents' power to demand better quality childcare derived partly from their relative socio-economic advantage that allowed them alternative forms of care (familial or private), and partly from their sense of collective agency, reducing fear of reprisal. Here many mothers with toddlers were not working or they worked short and flexible hours, or worked from home, which minimized their dependency on palwadi service. They were able to keep children at home without significant struggle. Many parents also sought English language skills for their kids and were more likely to enroll children into private (pre-)kindergartens and lower kindergartens (preKGs and LKGs, respectively) than parents in many other poor areas. Thus, palwadi teacher Kripa had to compete with these private institutions for children's enrollments. Partly due to parents' improving circumstances and aspirations, changing landscape of schooling requirements, and partly due to teacher's inability to meet them, over the years her enrollment quota was reduced from 25 to 15.

Residents and local area leaders attributed the decline to greater need for English learning that palwadis could not provide. During a meeting with one of the area leaders Madhav, who was a driver and a DMK party member,²¹ he reasoned that starting learning English at an early age helps with children's school admissions:

Parents think that earlier, when we studied, school admission was simpler. Schools would ask the child to reach the left ear lobe with right hand over the head. If a child can do it, they will admit them in the 1st standard (grade one in Indian school system). But nowadays, they conduct entrance exams for children. What will children going from palwadi know if they are subjected to exams? By that I mean, there is no English teaching. If kids go to private kindergartens they ask them to recite rhymes and kids 'sing' in English. Children going to palwadi will not 'sing' in English. Parents send children to private pre-KG to develop English knowledge right from the beginning. In palwadi, teaching is mostly in Tamil and they teach only English alphabets. But in pre-KG English knowledge will develop beyond learning alphabets.

Madhav and his colleague Vijay, another leader from the area, argued that this urge for private kindergartens also stemmed from parents' desire to maintain or improve their social status: "if neighbor's child studies in a convent and a working-class family's child studies in a corporation²² (public) school, then there is a clash of ego between them. So, working-class parents take it on themselves to somehow work hard and make kids study in private."

Kripa was aware of these dynamics, as parents asked her for English instruction before admitting children to the center. However, she could not teach in English, and even though she tried her best to engage children in activities, her ability to meet parents' expectations for learning was limited. Thus, she had to strive in other areas of caregiving to not allow for more reductions in enrollments that could potentially lead to the closing of the center. Kripa was already asked by her officials to help distribute benefits and conduct activities in another area which became a big inconvenience.

²¹ DMK or Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam – political party currently ruling the state of Tamil Nadu.

²² Shorthand for The Greater Chennai Municipal Corporation – the civic body that governs the metropolitan city of Chennai.

To attract and retain parents Kripa needed to at least maintain other standards of caregiving. She and her helper cleaned the center, fed children by hand, took care of children's toileting and were quick in fixing broken infrastructure. For example, whenever a water motor broke, which happened quite often, she engaged her contacts to fix it and, in the meantime, they found temporary solutions. Unlike in other poor areas, where parents had to adjust to non-functioning toilets and water facilities, here staff adjusted by getting water from alternative sources themselves. Mother Vasantha and others assured that somehow there is always water in the palwadi: "teacher will arrange some water. Even if piped water is not available the teacher and helper will fill up the bucket with water and put it in the bathroom." This was unheard of in other poor areas.

Parents here were also willing to question workers if certain standards were not met. Mrinalini, a mother of a toddler, who was associated with a local NGO and an active neighborhood resident, argued that it was teacher Kripa who had to attract kids, rather than parents needing her and AWC services. Having an exit option encouraged many parents to question Kripa about various aspects of quality.

However, even those who were more dependent on palwadi also felt empowered to do so. For example, one of the mothers named Roja, who needed palwadi for work and who had high expectations for quality, contended that cleanliness was non-negotiable, and she was willing to make demands if it was lacking: "we will go and inform the teachers or *aayas* [helpers] to clean it every day. We would tell them that 'only if you clean every day we would send our children.'" Most mothers I spoke to confirmed they were ready to inquire about cleanliness or other care issues they deemed important. They were aware that teacher Kripa needed children to do her work and used it as leverage to make claims without fearing reprisal. If parents delayed or did not want to

send children to the center, Kripa or her helper went to parents' homes themselves to bring children to palwadi.

Hence, parents' expectations for high quality care and education vocalized through threats to withdraw children raised teacher's motivation to seek quality. Besides that, Kandivakkam also had a strong area association that intervened in various public service matters. This association was important for residents to turn to if they also had concerns about palwadi. But before discussing the role of intermediaries, I will examine how collective agency operated in Kolapatnam.

Residents in Kolapatnam derived their power to demand better care through routinized practices of claims-making, underpinned by vibrant associational life and social ties. Kolapatnam was part of a larger settlement in south Chennai. It was developed through Sites-and-Services slum upgrading scheme supported by the World Bank in the 1990s (Coelho 2016). Residents, who were largely Dalits, were given low-interest loans for housing construction but the municipality offered few amenities and infrastructure. People had to continuously demand the municipal corporation for facilities and improvements in infrastructure, such as roads, electricity and water. The area received support for services and infrastructure from various non-governmental organizations. People also noted that social issues, like alcoholism and drug addiction and violence, that made the area unsafe in the past and that marked the social dynamics in other poor areas, have subsided in Kolapatnam. Although over time housing and basic facilities have developed, some issues persisted. Residents complained about poor drainage, lack of piped-water connections, insufficient garbage removal and unusable roads. These various local public service problems were often addressed by local associations, area leaders, women's groups or party workers.

Kolapatnam and surrounding areas had a vibrant associational life, which included various youth and students' clubs, caste associations, groups for women domestic workers, women's self-help groups, NGOs and so on. Women's groups have played an active role in demanding public services. One community activist named Latha, affiliated with a women's organization, recounted that women were often at the forefront of civic activism, whether it was electricity, water or other issues: "we'll go to the municipal corporation and complain, as an individual or a group. If there are bigger problems, we will write a petition, get signatures from everyone and give (to the municipality). If the garbage vehicle doesn't come, the women's group will go and give a letter to the corporation. If 10 members go together, the problem will be addressed. Women's groups meet MLAs and give letters for all issues."

The palwadis in Kolapatnam (and some other neighboring areas) also came about because 10 years ago it was mothers of the area who organized themselves and engaged with local leaders and an MLA to demand public childcare from the municipality. Latha, and other women I spoke to recalled the events in a similar manner:

There was no palwadi, the kids have to go far for it. Then, people went to the political party leader and gave him a letter saying "we have to take our kids a long way for a palwadi and it's difficult." So the women gave letters to MLA, corporation and wherever needed. It's a big area and it had only one or two palwadis. After the letter the palwadis were established.

These accounts reveal that Kolapatnam was marked by a history of claims-making and awareness of people's entitlements to public services. Karen Coelho and colleagues (2022, 169) suggest that many state-sponsored schemes of affordable housing in 70-80s, where slum residents were provided with plots and loans to construct their own housing as well as basic infrastructure had contributed to an "ethos of collective action". While they were assisted with housing, residents had to coax civic authorities for paved roads, water and sanitation over time. According to the authors, the sense of ownership that residents had in their neighborhoods led to the development of a

collective action, wherein people joined forces to address local issues or demand better services. Since Kolapatnam was one of those areas, I argue that people's collective efforts to improve their neighborhood had a lasting effect on residents' attentiveness to the quality of childcare provision.

In Kolapatnam mothers needed palwadi to go to work, and some of their power to hold teacher Geeta accountable lay in their capacity to monitor workers from up close. This instilled in Geeta a sense of responsibility and motivation to seek quality in the aspects of care parents found important. In the interview below Nalini reveals how parents could watch what was going on inside the palwadi through its windows and doors:

Ieva: Have parents here had any complaints about palwadi?

Nalini: No, I haven't seen anybody complain. Parents just come, drop their children and leave. There is a door on one side and a window on the other side. So whichever way the parents come they will be able to watch what's happening inside. Nothing like hitting or scolding the children happens behind closed doors. The door will be open all the time and we will know what's going on inside. If it is a school, we (parents) will not know anything. In school, everything happens between the teachers and the students, and we don't know what is going on. Maybe the watchman would know what goes on there. But no one else. But here in this palwadi all of us know what is happening inside.

Ieva: Do you think people would say anything if the teacher wouldn't come on time and things like that?

Nalini: Yes, people will ask the teacher why she did not come and express how difficult it is for them (parents). Parents would tell her that they were late for work since they weren't able to send the child to the palwadi if the teacher wasn't there.

Nalini decided to admit her son to the palwadi only after observing how the staff worked. She watched how kids were greeted and treated as she washed clothes just behind the palwadi premises. Seeing that teacher was caring and responsive she decided to enroll her son. While mothers who worked outside the neighborhood could not monitor palwadi themselves all the time, they had relatives or neighbors, like elder and pregnant women, or mothers who worked at home, who observed the staff and reported back on their activities. Since palwadi was surrounded by people's homes, being literally in the center made it easy for residents to keep an eye on it from the doorstep

of one's home. Talking to the residents who were not beneficiaries of the AWC revealed that they knew about palwadi services and functioning, which was relatively rare in other neighborhoods.

Working parents needed a well-functioning palwadi in many poor areas, but in Kolapatnam parents relied on their collective agency and social capital to express grievances without fearing reprisal. Mothers Jayshri, Devika and others were certain that if they did not get some benefits or teacher was not teaching at all they would complain: "people would fight if they don't get the material they are entitled to." Like in Kandivakkam, mothers here also complained to staff if the palwadi was not clean or had a foul smell. According to Nalini, when staff cooked non-vegetarian food (eggs) there would be a "mess" on the floor, and the place would "stink." On several occasions she asked the helper to clean the place better to get rid of the smell, which the helper did. Mothers also believed that they would talk to Geeta if she was not teaching at all and they were not afraid of retaliation because of their collective power to challenge the teacher. This culture of demand-making was recognized by the teacher too.

Teacher Geeta corroborated that she felt being watched and questioned, which resulted from residents' knowledge of their rights. Geeta came to work in the area about seven years ago and initially no one was ready to trust a stranger with their kids. Geeta and helper went around the neighborhood to convince people to enroll their kids. She had to show that she was caring and trustworthy. People hesitated because they feared that palwadi might be as bad as when they grew up (with rude teachers, bad food and facilities). So they needed some signs to be able to trust the provider. Geeta demonstrated that she was reliable and caring, but she felt she had relatively little discretion to deviate from the standards and quality parents expected.

She realized that if her service was unreliable, working parents might stop sending kids and there could be a complaint. Geeta presumed that parents would not know enough about

supervisors to complain to them, but she believed that people could reach out to two major party members present in the area (DMK or AIADMK) or municipality representatives, who frequented the neighborhood for various infrastructure issues. She knew residents were active and knowledgeable. Many residents themselves worked for the municipality and were networked with various departments. Once Geeta remarked how she could not keep even a single egg to herself because if she was caught, “the people would tear her apart, the area is like that” (she used the word *saavadichudvanga* which literally means they would kill her). Thus, residents’ awareness and proximity to various political and state actors with relative power to address grievances also pressured workers to seek quality in childcare.

The presence of effective area leaders

Another source of accountability in both areas, but especially in Kandivakkam, was the presence of active welfare associations and area leaders. Their presence performed two functions. First, they acted as mediators helping teachers maintain AWC standards. For example, a vibrant welfare association in Kandivakkam took care of fixing various issues, like drainage, water and electricity connection, and facilitated repairs in the palwadi. Whenever the water motor broke teacher Kripa contacted one of the area leaders to help repair it. According to Vijay, one of the welfare association leaders and a DMK party functionary, this happened relatively often. He went on to explain how they could get the municipal corporation repair things much quicker than if teacher did so herself:

Vijay: Palwadi staff usually inform me. Because if they ask the municipal officers, there won’t be much response. The teacher will inform us (the association) and we will make a call immediately and the (municipal) Corporation would come.

Ieva: Why do you think you get a better response than the teachers?

Vijay: We hold positions such as president of the locality and secretary. When we complain they will be afraid, because if they don’t listen, then we will gather some 10 people, go there and raise our voice. But the teacher cannot go alone and ask, right? They will call once or twice, and they will not fetch any response. But we will go ask them to act. If they don’t, we will escalate it to higher authorities. Then they would assure that they are here in 30 minutes or one hour and they will come.

As an association and a group of political party members, Vijay and his colleagues held greater power than the teacher to demand repairs from the corporation. Maintaining good relations with the association helped Kripa to get repairs done quickly, which minimized disruption in childcare provision and ensured that parents' expectations for facilities were met. Kripa could also reach out to the association if she needed small equipment, like chairs, mats, etc. From time to time, she also asked the leaders to participate in palwadi awareness events, which increased her visibility and repute in the area. In return, when community members needed space to organize family events Kripa allowed them to use her palwadi.

Second, the presence of effective area leaders enabled parents to turn to them as informal “grievance officers” who could address various public service concerns. This was an important mechanism of accountability for the staff. Teachers understood that parents had local recourse who could act informally on behalf of the actual supervisors. There were no recent problems with palwadis in both areas, except for the teacher’s inability to offer more teaching in Kandivakkam. But Vijay and another leader Karthik recalled an incident of how they were ‘utilized’ when there was one. Some years ago, parents complained to them about a helper appropriating some food supplies earmarked for children. Karthik intervened and threatened palwadi helper with dismissal if this practice continued. After the incident, the helper worked properly and there were no more complaints. Vijay and Karthik were certain that people would come to them if they had complaints: “we are 10 people here as office bearers. People will reach out to one of us and the information will eventually reach us. Issues of minor concerns will be resolved by them (parents and teachers).” Vijay met the supervisors when they visited palwadi in the past and knew where to complain if there was a serious problem. Mothers in the area also attested that the association would help them solve public concerns.

In Kolapatnam, leaders seemed somewhat less engaged with palwadi compared to leaders Kandivakkam, yet their presence enabled people to approach them if they had grievances about public services. Danesh, a DMK party functionary, reported having no major issues with palwadis in the area but when needed he helped out teachers with small donations, and other matters. He confirmed that people approached him for various public service matters. When probed about what he thought people would do if teachers were absent from work regularly, he thought they had options to complain to several local party members, though people were most likely to reach out to someone who was closest to them or someone like him, who was in the ruling party “because they were more likely to get things done”. Crucially, what mattered in the two areas in inducing relatively better teachers’ responsiveness and performance was parents’ capacity to demonstrate their demands and efficacy in making their complaints heard, through a combination of voice, monitoring, exit, and local intermediaries.

Other poor areas

In other poor areas, residents’ capacity to foster teachers’ accountability and improve quality of care provision was more limited largely due to their powerlessness deriving from multiple socio-economic and neighborhood disadvantages. Lacking income, social ties, neighborhood safety and security and without effective intermediaries, parents were highly dependent on palwadis. In Mamalpuram, Tangapuram, Tiruvum and Seypetai, parents faced various economic and social adversities, including high poverty, drug use and violence, which made them especially reliant on palwadis. Mamalpuram was a relatively new resettlement area and people had few trustworthy social relations. As different communities were relocated from various parts of the city, people did not know who their neighbors were and did not trust them, though as time passed by social ties slowly developed.

Tangapuram and Tiruvum were about 70-year-old settlements in north Chennai but people lived on government-owned land and did not have *pattas* (land titles), though over the years they had fought and attained housing security, and were promised to get *pattas* soon. Despite some development and amenities, these areas were economically poor and socially fragmented. Residents spoke about problems, such as youngsters being involved with drugs, alcohol, crime and violence. Mothers heard or witnessed stories of child abuse and feared for their kids' safety. They feared leaving them alone or with neighbors. Families that attained better incomes moved out of these neighborhoods. Meanwhile, many poorer ones, including those who were previously unhoused and lived on the pavements in other parts of the city moved in. It was difficult to build social cohesion and ties in the context of low residential stability.

Thus, in these areas many parents prioritized palwadis for safety, food and care more than school readiness, though it was definitely important to them. Given this heightened dependency mothers did not want to complain about anything problematic to not antagonize workers and not lose their entitlements. Moreover, for families who lived in rented houses and were relatively new residents, complaining about palwadis was out of the question. These residents felt powerless relative to teachers and other long-term neighbors. They spoke of teachers having established good relationships with their neighbors, and/or landlords who could vouch for these workers if they were accused of wrongdoing. Rajakumari, who was a local resident and an NGO worker with deep knowledge about people in these areas, explained how this precarity in housing and livelihoods forced Tiruvum residents to make pragmatic compromises:

They reside in an uncertain environment. Most people there live like migrants. There is no legal document (*patta*) for their lands. Because it is a railway property. They do not have any benefit in residing there. If suddenly they were asked to move out, they must comply. They have no other choice. Most people work as housekeepers, servers in hotels and sweepers, etc. So, people from such backgrounds would not want to raise their voice, they would just comply with whatever being said to them or asked to do....they live in huts and

tilled roof houses. There is a common public toilet there, they are using it, since there is no drainage facility provided for them till now. People got used to the environment and created their livelihood there. Like I said, there is no option for them. It is because of their poor livelihood they do not want to get into any issues. When their very survival depends on this, they would agree to do whatever it takes to get the benefits offered to them.

Ieva: So, parents do not want to risk that by asking questions—thinking if they do—teachers may not take care of their child?

Rajakumari: Yes, teachers may not take care of the child, they may even beat or scold the child. Most teachers have the habit of venting their anger on parents or on the child. Much worse, some teachers would even call children by their caste names.

Besides powerlessness, for others some palwadis did not seem so bad. Some women perceived palwadis to function relatively well compared to the past. Many mothers were sent to palwadis when they were kids and they recalled that “back then centers were run from shacks or poorly equipped cement buildings,” workers were rude, harsh and did not serve tasty meals. These comparisons also reduced their willingness to raise complaints.

In Tangapuram, for example, mothers really valued nutritious food, which was more diverse and better now than earlier. Mothers Chandrika and Adya, talked about how when they were kids, they ate just one variety of rice in palwadi, whereas now kids ate different meals every day. In their area, residential stability and economic circumstances were slightly better than in a nearby Tiruvum settlement. Yet, a large share of kids was still malnourished and teachers’ efforts to help out families with food supplements made parents appreciate the staff, and overlook their faults. Adya explained: “in this locality you’ll come across many kids with immunity deficiency. In palwadi they conduct a particular test (growth monitoring), which benefits the children. The staff also provide dates, pulses, and variety of nutrient-filled edibles so that children can gain strength.” In short, while the teacher Divya did not necessarily devote much effort to teaching, cleanliness or toileting, her focus on combating malnutrition was recognized and valued by families. This made other claims on care less urgent or unnecessary.

Although making trade-offs between different aspects of a service to achieve a valuable outcome is common worldwide, people's social and economic circumstances can sometimes prevent them from recognizing or acknowledging such trade-offs. For example, many (low-income) individuals compromise on the quality of their food to save money. They may purchase cheaper, processed foods instead of fresh fruits and vegetables, or opt for fast food instead of preparing meals at home. While this compromise may not be ideal for their health in the long run, it allows them to obtain something valuable in the short term, such as satisfy hunger, pay their bills or afford other necessary expenses. Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) calls it *taste of necessity*. The working-class fulfills its bodily needs with heavier, fattier, and more fulfilling foods because they need to satisfy hunger. But at the same time people can also come to gradually appreciate it. Thus, as Bourdieu notes, eating unhealthy foods is an acquired taste:

Some simply sweep it [the taste of necessity] aside, making practice a direct product of economic necessity (workers eat beans because they cannot afford anything else), failing to realize that necessity can only be fulfilled, most of the time, because the agents are inclined to fulfill it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to. Others turn it into a taste of freedom, forgetting the conditionings of which it is the product, and so reduce it to pathological or morbid preference for (basic) essentials, a sort of congenital coarseness, the pretext for a class racism which associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat. Taste is *amor fati*, the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary (178).

Similarly, parents in poor neighborhoods of Chennai are often compelled to settle for the level of care they are provided with. Many residents also do not even consider asking for anything better, especially when they assume that the standards they receive are already good or commonplace.

Beyond reliance on palwadi benefits, these poor areas also had little organized leadership or party functionaries to turn to for complaints. Unlike in Kandivakkam and Kolapattanam, which had effective local associations, constituted from party members, in other poor areas, such organizations and intermediaries were lacking. Mamalpuram, Tiruvum, Tangapuram, and Seypettai

had no clear area leaders during the time of my research, or if they had, they were dismissed by residents as seeking only personal benefits. Anyone who was affiliated with a political party was viewed as using people for votes, and not working for the development of the area. According to Pavitha, a local resident and an NGO worker in Tiruvum, ‘party members would come only during elections seeking our votes, and after that we will see them only 5 years later. They would give money but would not ask about our grievances.’”

Similarly, in Tangapuram, a young social activist Venkat remarked that local leaders were active only during elections, otherwise “they say “why should I do it for free” anytime we ask them for help.” Lack of effective intermediaries often meant that people had few recourse mechanisms to address problems with palwadis or other public services. For difficulties with electricity and water people approached relevant departments directly, and if they did not respond residents got together to protest. Thus, without intermediaries teachers were ‘allowed’ greater discretion in service provision.

While there was no real presence of area associations and leaders, disadvantaged areas were often supported by NGOs, which provided children with extra tuition classes, various awareness campaigns and other kinds of services. Yet, these NGOs and activists were often limited in how much they could mediate issues between parents and teachers. For example, a well-established local NGO owner and activist Tarun mobilized funds to repaint 25 palwadis in Tangapuram, Tiruvum and surrounding areas. But he was unable to get the municipality’s water department to repair the water supply in Divya’s palwadi. He called the office, and then sent a group of his proteges to the authorities, but the junior engineer who was responsible for the job ignored them. According to Tarun, he was looking for a transfer and did not want to invest time in fixing amenities in ‘slum areas.’ Karen Coelho (2005) noted that such responses were common in

Chennai's slums. Thus, Tarun's and other NGO influence in shaping AWC quality was limited to donations, possibly due to lack of their political clout.

In some neighborhoods parents had relatively strong collective agency, but because teachers were extremely detached from their job and whom I refer to as 'survivalists' (more on this in chapter 4), they were unable to improve the quality of care. One such area was Kannarpuram. It was similar to Kandivakkam, in that people had comparable socio-economic conditions and the presence of associations. Families lived in similarly dilapidated tenements that have aged enough to be demolished and rebuilt. Many people were long-time residents, who had improved their economics status through education and jobs. In many households both parents worked for pay and some could even afford private kindergartens. There were also party workers and leaders in the neighborhood that people sometimes reached out to for help. Furthermore, three years ago, residents established a welfare association to negotiate for better housing after their tenements are rebuilt. Thus, almost all the necessary social elements were present to create fertile conditions for demanding better quality childcare.

Out of the eleven palwadis in the area, I observed two in a residential block that was in a high state of disrepair. These small and cramped palwadis were located on the ground floor of 5-storey tenements, and lacked basic amenities, such as tiles and toilets. The teacher, Girija, was irregular and did not put much effort into her work, resulting in only a few children attending the palwadi. Residents expressed their discontent with the palwadi's functioning, citing issues with drainage, lack of toilets, and teaching quality. Despite complaints made to Girija, many were left disappointed and those who had the means left the palwadi. Girija herself was frustrated with the poor amenities, but did not take any action beyond conveying her grievances to higher authorities.

Girija's goal in her organization was to survive with minimum effort, and so she was not moved by the pressure from parents. Parents did not even trust her to feed their kids, so she balanced on barely having any children in her palwadi. Only the most desperate parents used her palwadi. When they had to send photos showcasing their work, or during inspections, Girija and her helper gathered random children from the street to manipulate attendance numbers. Girija feared officials' questioning about enrollments, but she had a convincing excuse that because the government started operating free kindergarten classes a few years ago, parents were choosing either those or the private ones. Hence, Girija presented structural excuses for poor quality of services to parents and structural excuses for low enrollments to supervisors.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the perception gap that teachers had about parents in poor and better off areas. Teachers' perceptions about better-off areas as more demanding and less willing to compromise on childcare were matched by parents' accounts, who indeed sought high-quality care and were likely to withdraw their children from palwadis if their standards were not fulfilled. However, teachers' perceptions about poor parents as acquiescent departed from poor parents' reality. Just like their better-off peers, they desired high-quality public childcare that imparted in children school readiness and cultural capital. However, these parents were compelled to compromise on quality due to their powerlessness and lack of grievance redress mechanisms. Parents made pragmatic decisions about using a childcare service that was not very satisfactory in order to derive something still valuable to themselves and/or their children.

One implication of this finding is that that mothers in poor areas displayed remarkable willingness to adapt to challenges, such as the absence of toilets and cleaning up after their children at palwadis. This highlights how a child's education takes precedence over mothers' personal

needs, whereby schooling dictates mothers' everyday decisions (Donner 2018). Because education is considered the primary pathway for social advancement and status attainment (Donner 2005), mothers sometimes have to endure caste discrimination and indignities like cleaning their children's excrement that should be handled by workers.

The chapter has also shown how in poor areas the state effectively rendered parents powerless. Palwadi teachers frequently dismissed or ignored parental demands and concerns regarding quality of care. But to a large extent, concerns were not articulated and suppressed by lack of effective accountability channels, parents' fears of reprisal and lowered expectations for public services. Parents commonly equated free services with lower quality and did not push for improvements.

I have also argued that poor neighborhoods are not uniform in their political and social capacities, as many others have noted (e.g., Coelho and Venkat 2009; Auerbach 2019). However, while most scholarship points to various kinds of brokers and associations who facilitate improvements in public services, I highlight many other social elements that are required to attain better public childcare. Many neighborhoods had some kind of intermediaries, but they were not engaged in brokering better public goods, especially childcare. Only in a few areas they were relatively effective in doing this.

It was the residents themselves and their social ties and relationships, which had developed over time through the formation of neighborhoods, that enabled them to question teachers and demand better care practices. Meanwhile, when they were present, effective intermediaries, such as neighborhood leaders and associations, acted as informal supervisors and advocates who could back up and defend *agentive* residents' claims if needed. Their influence stemmed from their

affiliations with various ‘hands’ of the state, which had the authority to take action against teachers who failed to comply with parental requests or displayed improper behavior.

In particular, I have argued that inducing collective claims-making required configurations of some of the following factors: a sense of collective agency, social cohesion and social capital, and/or presence of effective intermediaries. In some cases, one or two of these elements may be enough to demand accountability and attain better care. In others, even having all these elements may be insufficient when teachers operate in ‘survivalist’ mode and parents cannot reach the state to replace her.

The state can help simplify the lengthy process of building collective agency at the neighborhood level by providing various avenues for citizen engagement with the state (e.g., Evans 1997; Mangla 2022). One simple solution, that is already “on paper” but not in practice is parent-teacher meetings, which could be institutionalized to generate greater accountability and dialogue between parents and teachers, leading to co-production of better care services (Ostrom 1996; Vamstad 2013).

CHAPTER 4

Weak supervision, multiple demands, and teachers' professional identities

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, my argument unfolds in two steps. The first part examines how formal supervision shapes teachers' performance and why top-down accountability fails to produce uniform quality of childcare services. The second part argues that these institutional failures combine with numerous organizational demands and pressures allowing teachers to cultivate different professional identities. These professional identities, mediated by bottom-up accountability, determine when and how teachers act on their perceptions about parents' childcare needs, and seek quality or compromise it.

The weak mechanisms of formal accountability, based on top-down delegation of tasks engender teachers' accountability only to some extent and some tasks, such as reporting of beneficiary data but cannot ensure improvements in childcare quality. First, the ICDS lacks incentives, such as adequate wages, promotions and career opportunities, or professionalization that could induce all workers to seek quality. Second, direct supervision of care activities is fragmented and weakened by understaffing and the heavy workload of supervisors. Supervisors also have relatively few effective tools to motivate workers and often resort to threats and sanctions which can negatively impact teachers' performance. Block officers cannot easily fire underperforming teachers, because hiring authority rests with the government in power.

To cope with the workload, supervisors tend to categorize workers as either good or poor performers. They offer more support and independence to the former, while closely monitoring and applying sanctions to the latter. These approaches result in either virtuous or vicious cycles of

performance. To prevent excessive scrutiny or sanctions, many teachers who struggle to meet all workplace demands tend to focus on tasks that carry the most accountability, like reporting, and overlook less monitored care responsibilities.

Truly supportive supervisors, who can mentor and guide all teachers are rare. Their work approach emphasizes the development of workers' competencies and granting them autonomy to customize work strategies according to community needs. This approach can enhance teachers' performance and the quality of care. However, it is uncertain whether this approach can overcome institutional limitations that prioritize data collection and reporting over caring activities, even with the presence of supportive supervisors.

In these institutional conditions and partly in response to neighborhood social distinctions, teachers construct different professional identities. These identities are teachers' perceptions of themselves as workers, their institutional goals, and how they define success in performance. These identities shape teachers' sense of autonomy, actions and practices in care provision. I identify four professional identities: *preschool professional*, *social worker*, *rule follower*, and *survivalist*. *Preschool professionals* highlight their educator's role, whereas *social workers* orient care work as a social mission, to help poor and marginalized children and women. These workers embody the ideal type of frontline worker as they possess a high level of professionalism and a clear understanding of their role. In delivering services they prioritize the needs of their communities, and coordinate with stakeholders to solve problems.

Rule followers and *survivalists* struggle to cultivate a strong sense of purpose at work. The former is overwhelmed with responsibilities, so they prioritize tasks and orders that are most monitored and sanctioned, mainly data collection and reporting. The survivalists aim to fulfill the minimum work requirements to avoid sanctions, often by cutting corners. Both worker types

struggle to view themselves as professionals and feel they have little autonomy in decision-making. Paradoxically, because relational aspects of care work are hardly monitored, these teachers use their discretion to compromise childcare quality while demonstrating accountability for quantifiable tasks.

The professional identities of teachers are centered around their autonomy, which allows them to tailor their activities and respond to the needs of the community. Autonomy is, to some extent, an intrinsic part of teachers' professional identity. However, it can also be influenced by supervisors, who tend to loosen monitoring for good performers but tighten it for poor performers. Consequently, teachers who are more professionalized have greater autonomy compared to those who focus primarily on task implementation and survival. Having this autonomy is crucial for teachers' job satisfaction and leads to better performance (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Importantly, more professionalized teachers can deliver the highest quality of care services when their autonomy is activated by bottom-up accountability pressures (through parents' exit threat or claims-making). Such teachers, namely preschool professionals and social workers, possess some competence and flexibility to provide services in accordance with the needs of the community. Without these pressures, professionals will still fulfill their duties but may be less proactive in meeting the needs of parents.

The less professionalized workers feel considerably constrained in their decision-making and have lower levels of autonomy. Thus, they tend to prioritize the orders from their supervisors over the needs of parents and quality in childcare practices. These teachers are also somewhat influenced by bottom-up accountability; when it is present, they are more pressured to work better, but when it is absent, they may only deliver the bare minimum. While bottom-up accountability cannot outweigh the significance of teachers' professional identity and autonomy, to a degree it

mediates performance regardless of identity and is crucial for successful co-production of high-quality childcare.

Finally, I suggest that besides lacking incentives and monitoring, the divergent identities arise from conflicting goals and demands from the institution and beneficiaries. The ICDS focuses on data gathering to reduce malnutrition, supervisors seek accurate data but also insist on stable children's attendance, whereas parents want childcare that promotes children's socialization, and school readiness. Thus, as teachers are pulled in different directions, they are forced to decide for themselves whose demands they should prioritize. Besides institutional cues, how teachers view their role and task implementation is also informed by their experiences, exposure, and personal, and workplace constraints.

My arguments are structured as follows. First, I will discuss the mechanisms of institutional supervision, the introduction of the new *Poshan Abhiyaan* scheme within ICDS, and explain how it fails to generate workers' accountability in caregiving. Second, I show how teachers construct different professional identities which arise from wanting institutional professionalization and conflicting workplace demands. In the last part, I also suggest how teachers' orientations to work can be influenced by different experiences and personal and professional constraints.

VERTICAL ACCOUNTABILITY: INCENTIVES AND MONITORING

In the introduction of this dissertation, I discussed how the ICDS departs from the models of Weberian bureaucracies: hiring involves bribes, teachers' training is short and technical, and promotions are given only to a few excellent performers but even then, it takes decades. In this section, I will delve into the mechanics of monitoring and supervision. I argue that supervision of care work is largely ineffective because it suffers from understaffing, overload of tasks, and limited use of sanctions. The kind of supervision that is effective involves collecting data, verifying it, and

responding to orders from higher-level authorities. These orders often request for more data “extraction” from the field. However, frontline workers often struggle to reach the same or new populations, leading to difficulties in collecting and updating data accurately. Although some supervisors may strive to provide genuine support and mentorship to teachers in specific tasks, such individuals seem to be rare, and their interactions with teachers are often constrained by their heavy workloads. Taken together, these issues explain why supervision cannot enhance performance of most teachers, and that teachers’ actions and approach to caregiving are shaped more by their self-conceptions, and less by their shared, institutionally-induced understanding of the teacher’s role.

Shifting institutional priorities

In 2018, the ICDS introduced the *Poshan Abhiyaan* scheme (by India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi), which altered institutional priorities and introduced new accountability methods. These changes emphasized data collection and reporting over quality caregiving, making it even more challenging to monitor care work effectively. *Poshan* is a central government scheme to strengthen palwadi services to combat malnutrition, namely, stunting, under-nutrition, low birth weight, and anemia, among children and women. The program was introduced when the Global Hunger Index 2017 termed India’s growing malnutrition concerns as “serious” (SP, Vaghela, and Pal 2022). The *Poshan* program created new incentives and modes of accountability, which complemented the traditional system of supervision through in-person palwadi visits.

The *Poshan* program has introduced a new monitoring and tracking system that aimed to improve the nutrition and growth of pregnant and nursing mothers and infants, and to better support the workers who provide these services. *Poshan* requires palwadi teachers to conduct home visits of pregnant and nursing mothers and infants to check their nutrition and growth, run monthly

community awareness events, and upload information about these activities on a government-issued mobile phone app. Many of these activities were also done before but they were not based on a strict timetable and rules. Teachers are provided with phones to track beneficiary health and growth metrics, which are captured through the Real-Time Monitoring System. The mobile phone app prompts teachers when they should visit certain categories of beneficiaries and provides instructions on what they should do (e.g., measure weight, and height, ask mothers specific questions about breastfeeding, etc.). Importantly, workers need to upload pictures demonstrating their task completion, such as children eating lunch or beneficiaries attending an awareness event in the center. In the beginning, the ICDS used these pictures to reduce teachers' salaries if the attendance of children was lower than the enrollment, but the teachers' union opposed such sanctions, arguing that salaries were already low and teachers had to bear significant personal expenses to operate palwadis.

New activities and monitoring were accompanied by a small monetary incentive. Teachers can receive an extra Rs 500 (US\$6) with their monthly salary for uploading at least 65% of the nutrition data and helpers can get Rs 250 (US\$3). Yet, when I started my fieldwork in February 2020, teachers complained that none of them had received any incentives since the program was introduced. Later, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the incentive system was paused.

Despite the potential benefits of digital technology, the implementation of a mobile app for data collection has faced significant challenges due to mistrust and limitations of technology. In theory, phones could lessen the workload somewhat by having all the data stored and updated easily on the app. Yet because trust in digital infrastructure was still low, workers continued to maintain 11 physical registers as a backup for potential data loss or to cross-verify data that seems incomplete, inaccurate, or erroneous. This speaks to persistent India's bureaucratic obsession with

paperwork and distrust of local functionaries (Aiyar 2023 quoting Hull 2012). Besides that, during the time of my fieldwork, the first app was changed to a new one and all the data entered previously was lost. Workers had to collect beneficiary details afresh, and phones crashed or were discharged often. To operate the app and upload information workers needed access to internet data which was often unreliable. In short, everyone was extremely frustrated about the new app and for some time continued to work with paper registers.

In addition to the mobile app, the *Poshan* program introduced new supervision guidelines that emphasized quantifying care outcomes, while potentially undermining high-touch aspects of caregiving. As part of *Poshan's* efforts to promote a “synergized and result-oriented approach” the Ministry of Women and Child Development issued “supportive supervision” guidelines. Supervisors and other officials were expected to use a new checklist during their field visits. This checklist is a 3-page form, that mostly captures statistics on the distribution of benefits, such as numbers of beneficiaries receiving ration, hot meals preschool, vaccination, growth monitoring, number of home visits completed by teachers, and so on. As Azhagu Meena SP and colleagues (2022) note, the new system focused on assessing outcomes in quantitative terms while ignoring relational aspects of care work on the ground. In short, the institution defined success largely in terms of gathering and uploading “correct” data, and incentivized report completion over childcare practices and interactions with beneficiaries.

Supervisors

Supervisors were the first line of superiors for teachers. They gave instructions and monitored workers. Each supervisor was responsible for managing a geographic cluster of teachers and helpers from about 25 palwadis. The next level authority was the child project development officer (CDPO) or block officer (hereafter block officer), who managed 4-5 supervisors and a geographic

cluster of 110-124 palwadis. During my fieldwork, across 5 blocks that I studied only 20-60% of supervisor positions were filled, meaning that supervisors had double or triple their usual workload.²³ For example, when I interviewed one block officer, she had only one supervisor out of five, who monitored over 100 centers alone. In short, many offices were highly understaffed and supervisors who had to monitor several clusters were particularly stretched.

Supervisors were mostly older women, who were promoted to the position after working as teachers for about 30 years. In the past, supervisors could be recruited from outside the organization but the palwadi teachers' union fought to get promotions for teachers, so now most supervisors are recruited through promotions. Yet, such positions are few, and even then, teachers are usually promoted about 10 years before they retired.

Table 5. Supervisors' characteristics

Name	Age	Caste	Education	Years in ICDS	Years as supervisor	Block officer	Block
Sharmila	56	OBC	10 th + Several diplomas*	37	3	Ramya	North 1
Moshika	58	OBC	10 th	29	10	Ramya	North 1
Vasanthi	60	OBC	11 th + MA in History*	40	6	Rangini	North 2
Preethi	53	SC	12 th + BA Tamil literature*	34	4	Rangini	North 2
Valli	57	SC	12 th + MA Population studies	37	4	Akhila	South 2
Mary	61	OBC	10 th	34	4	Akhila	South 2
Saritha	55	OBC	MA Sociology	34	4	Kanmani	South 1

Note: * marks distance learning. All supervisors, except for Moshika worked as teachers before becoming a supervisor. Previously Moshika worked as a nurse in the ICDS.

I observed one supervisory visit and interviewed seven supervisors and five block officers. I asked them about the nature of their work and the strategies and techniques they used to motivate, incentivize and monitor workers. The interviews took place in block offices. Supervisors' characteristics are presented in table 5. Supervisors were mostly in their 50-60s, from Other

²³ In Chennai there are 16 blocks, or as the ICDS calls them 'projects.'

Backward Class (OBC) and Scheduled Caste (SC) communities, and educated at high school level (10 or 12th standard), Many of them also completed master's or bachelor's degrees via distance learning. These women spent most of their careers—for over 30 years with the ICDS. Supervisors were most likely to be former teachers, who were recognized for their excellent performance and had won best teacher awards.

The main supervisor's duties included visiting centers and preparing reports. They had to complete 15 reports or 'forms,' as they called them, with details of centers visited, teachers' availability, numbers of children attending the centers, food distribution, numbers of specific beneficiary groups and nutrition mix required for each (e.g., how much sathu maavu is needed for women in as antenatal (ANC) and pregnant (PNC) categories and by children's nutrition status, with severely underweight children receiving higher shares). Each month these reports are submitted to the state-level office. Some of these reports may also be used to guide supervisors in focusing more on areas with more malnourished children. Supervisors conduct at least two or three meetings with teachers in their cluster to collect reports and tally statistics. Because of various errors and mistakes, these meetings can become time-consuming for staff.

Supervisors spent about two days per week completing reports in the office and three days visiting centers in the field. Most perceived that field visits constituted about 60-70% of their time. Officially, supervisors had to visit at least 15 centers per month. The actual number of visits a supervisor conducted varied by month and by each person. It also depended on the transportation available to the supervisor and the distances between the centers in their area. In a densely populated city like Chennai, many centers are nearby, which makes it easier to cover more than one center during one day. To do a proper visit and to check everything takes an entire day but since supervisors were pressed for time, they usually rushed through the visits to cover more

centers. Thus, the number of centers visited by each supervisor ranged from about 12 to 24 per month.

During a palwadi visit, supervisors checked children's attendance, interacted with children to understand whether they were learning what they were supposed to (e.g., rhymes, songs), and checked food quality, stocks, cleanliness, and palwadi registers. They also had to step out into the neighborhood and meet with beneficiaries to cross-check the growth measures of a few children and pregnant women, and generally gather feedback about palwadi functioning. However, they often did not have time for such activities. They would sometimes take phone numbers from a few beneficiaries and call them from the office. Supervisors, like Sharmila, complained about how compressed their time was: "the time is very less. There is a lot to do, we have to visit the centers, have to go for area visits, etc. and after that, there are lots of reports to complete from the office." Besides inspection of centers and reporting, supervisors occasionally conducted training for workers, attended events organized by teachers, or visited municipality offices for palwadi infrastructure issues.

Given the high workload and understaffing, supervisors could not complete all their tasks and had to prioritize what to focus on. When planning inspections all supervisors prioritized visiting poor-performing centers and skipped the "good performers." Most supervisors would visit an underperforming center once a week, about four times a month. Supervisors Valli, Preethi, and others explained that frequent visits incentivized workers to step up:

Valli: If someone is not performing well, we will go for a visit, they will fear us and automatically they will start doing the work.

Preethi: There is no restriction for us on how many times we visit a center in a week. If there is a problem, we will visit the center many times. If we go to a center for four days, teachers will come to centers on time automatically.

Closer monitoring through visits was one of the main strategies for supervisors to coax workers into working (or working better). Meanwhile, centers that were perceived to be performing well were “left alone,” and would be visited rarely (once in two or three months). Sharmila explained how she and many others strategized their palwadi visits:

Ieva: How do you choose which centers to visit among the 55 centers you have to supervise?

Sharmila: I have been here for 3 years, so I know which ones to visit. In the beginning, I categorize them into 3 groups, ‘A’ groups are the ones that do well, ‘B’ groups are average and C groups are poor. So, I visit the “C” category often as they are poor performers. I go there more than once a month. I visit the ‘B’ and ‘A’ category centers once in two months. Since I have two clusters, I am unable to visit all the centers in a month. I must make a report every time I visit a center. So, it is difficult to visit more centers. There are vacancies for supervisors and teachers. Once they are fulfilled it will be easier. One teacher in some cases handles 2-3 centers. They find it very difficult to handle more centers. Vacancies must be filled by the government.

Ieva: Do the teachers know that they are assigned to a different category?

Sharmila: They don’t know. We assess them and categorize them. But in the last one and a half years they have been asking. They want to know what category their centers are in. We don’t tell them as it would demotivate them.

Ieva: What are the differences in performance between A, B, and C centers?

Sharmila: ‘A category’ centers (teachers) do whatever work is assigned to them as quickly as possible. If you ask for the register book, they will have it ready. They even do extra work like collecting things and donations, as I do. If a teacher is good, children’s attendance is good and teaching is good, and preschool is good, we classify that center as an ‘A’ center. ‘B category’ centers do their work, and you don’t have to follow up much. If teaching is good, but there are issues with the maintenance of registers, it can be classified as B. Also, for an A center, all aspects should be good, including a good water facility, toilet facility, etc. If everything is *pakka* (good) the center will get an A grade. In the case of B, quality will be lesser than A. C means quality will be lesser than B. For example, in the C grade center teaching will be good, but the building may not be good, the toilets may not be good, or vice versa. ‘C category’ centers won’t listen to you, you will have to yell and push them to get work done. They won’t have the reports ready.

Ieva: How many centers are there in each category?

Sharmila: In the first group there are 26 centers. Out of that 3 are in the C category, 10 are A category and 13 are B category. In the second group, there are 29 centers where 9 are in the C category, 10 are A category and 10 are B category.

Sharmila followed a strategy of classifying centers into three categories based on the quality of teachers’ performance and the quality of facilities. The ICDS officials did not want to share how they evaluated and ranked centers into letter grades and reported that they transitioned to following

the “supportive supervision” checklist issued by the Ministry. Yet, supervisors’ accounts revealed that some of them continued following their old methods of classifying centers into letter grades. In the new system, superiors had to use the checklist, mentioned earlier, during their field visits. The checklist, however, captured only the statistics on the distribution of benefits but not how teachers conducted preschool or interacted with children. This meant that supervisors had to make their notes and “system” to assess teachers’ performance in care and identify who needed more incentives.

Even during palwadi visits supervisors’ priority was requests from the “top.” Supervisors noted that with *Poshan*, data collection, and reporting tasks have multiplied. Besides their regular duties, every week or so they received ad hoc requests from the state-level office for some kind of data from the field, such as beneficiary numbers by caste or other parameters. Technically, the district office should possess these data but due to inefficiencies in data storing and management, as well as the need for data in different formats or different periods, many requests asking for some urgent data “extraction” from the field. Teachers and supervisors complained about it as a tiring practice. They often did not know the purpose of these requests. Supervisors also noted that every time the state-level director changed, they asked for “some new kinds of data.”²⁴

Similar to Yamini Aiyar and Shrayana Bhattacharya’s (2016) case of education officers in north India, requests from higher officials had to be prioritized by everyone. If a supervisor was on a visit, they had to drop everything and run to the office to act upon the request. Supervisor Moshika explained how she might even forget to note that she visited: “if we get a call from the office for a report when I am in the field, I will rush to the office even without signing about a visit (in the palwadi visitor’s book). Higher officials will ask for reports in half an hour for some

²⁴ An IAS officer is frequently transferred and does not stay in a position for about more than three years.

emergency, how can I submit it if I am in the field? I have to inform the teachers and other officials to get these reports, so I will rush back to the office...and my area is far away from the office....”

Apart from instructions from their officials, supervisors’ skills could also inform which tasks they prioritized. Those lacking computer skills may need to find someone to help them whereas those who were good with computers may be asked to cover for others, lacking such skills. For example, Vasanthi struggled to even read an email and had to rely on her colleagues or teachers to help her:

I will get help from teachers to open the email and see what is in it. But I will have the data at my fingertips. We will have the reports handy, but I do not know how to type the data. I will instruct others on what to enter and from where to take the data. I will say all those things. I learned all these things in the past 5-6 years. But if I type, it will take more time. My English knowledge is limited. I will get help from teachers and fill in the data, we will ask a teacher to come in the afternoon. In the morning they will be engaged with children. If they come in the afternoon, they will help for some time—not for long—and we will send them back. Our office time is morning 10 am to evening 5.45. PM, but if it takes up to 6 pm or 6.15 pm, we will finish the work and go. We don’t keep them for a long time. We will keep getting follow-up phone calls (to get the reports). We cannot manage (the pressure).”

Thus, supervisors’ tasks could sometimes be imposed on teachers too, making them unavailable at the center, or doubling their workload.

In another area, supervisor Moshika knew how to use a computer and in her office, she was responsible for uploading all the data: “since I am the only one who knows how to operate a computer, I will mostly be working on it and because of it I will not be visiting my area often. There is a lot of reporting work in the office. Fieldwork is the priority, we can come to the office even in the afternoon. But usually, fieldwork is twice a week and that is enough”. Compared to other supervisors, having to cover a distant area and with a higher workload, Moshika visited her palwadis less frequently.

Health problems tied to aging could also inhibit supervisors' priorities and effectiveness. Health factors could reduce the frequency of center visits, especially if centers were spread out and required significant travel. Older supervisors (similar to older teachers) often complained about leg pain from walking and standing and sought to find ways to reduce palwadi visits. In sum, supervisors' priorities and routines were often shaped by office requests, their skills, health, and dynamics of a particular office and palwadi coverage area.

Supervision styles: promoting or limiting autonomy

Effective supervision is crucial for enabling frontline workers to deliver high-quality services, but it must strike a balance between monitoring and guidance to workers and allowing them the autonomy to solve problems and carry out tasks in a way that works best in their context. Well established psychological theories suggest that employees are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and exhibit higher performance when their jobs provide them with autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). Autonomy allows individuals to exercise choice and discretion in their work, while competence involves feeling capable and valuable to the organization. Relatedness pertains to feeling connected to clients and colleagues. These feelings could be enhanced by effective supervision styles.

Even in the highly demanding ICDS system, effective supervision can alleviate some institutional constraints by enhancing workers' psychological needs, specifically their competence and autonomy. Supervisors can provide training to workers in how to approach and interact with beneficiaries, which can be the most challenging part of their job. For teachers, building trust and support from the community is crucial to success. Supervisors can also empower competent workers by loosening monitoring and granting more autonomy in their work strategies. Having a sense of autonomy allows workers to take ownership of their tasks and find the best solutions to

the unique problems they face. In short, by promoting competence and autonomy, supervisors can help workers feel more confident and motivated in their jobs, which can ultimately improve the quality of care.²⁵

Although supervisors were officially expected to support and empower workers, the lack of training and professionalization has resulted in a variety of supervisory styles and approaches that differed by supervisors' perceptions of themselves, teachers' performance and particular situation. Depending on how they viewed their occupational role, supervisors invoked different styles and frameworks of working. Since many supervisors had previously been teachers themselves, they had firsthand knowledge of the challenges that teachers can face. As a result, they often empathized with the teachers and tried to be supportive and kind, especially towards those who they felt deserved it. Some supervisors were exceptional in that they viewed such workers as their daughters and tried to train them like they were their mentees. However, with greater power and status, many supervisors viewed themselves as authority figures and adopted a more rigid and controlling management style.

At first, supervisors could appear kind and supportive when meeting teachers. However, as they observed their performance, their supervisory tactics could change based on their assessment. Even among supervisors who aimed to be sympathetic and helpful, their behavior and attitudes were frequently inconsistent. For instance, supervisor Saritha's strategy was to inform teachers that they should view her as a mother rather than a superior: "on the day when a new teacher joins, I ask them to assume me as a sister or a mother or a friend. I say to them 'if you have any issues, tell me, and I will solve the issue'. I say like this when they join." However, her behavior towards

²⁵ I argue that in the case of palwadi teachers, relatedness was less important in seeking quality care compared to competence and autonomy. The majority of centers had only two workers so relatedness might not have been as significant as in larger settings. However, I suggest future research should explore how it could be an important factor in influencing teachers' intrinsic motivation.

teachers who she perceived as slacking could quickly shift. During an interview, a teacher who worked nearby complained to Saritha about being unable to bring in children that day. Saritha responded rudely telling the teacher to ‘shut up’ as she attempted to evade my observation. Saritha was annoyed with the teacher who complained that her efforts in attracting children were hampered because her center did not have a helper.

As mentioned earlier, due to the high workload, supervisors had to prioritize which teachers to supervise more closely and determine the most effective methods to do so. As a first step, they classified workers into different categories and adapted their monitoring and interactive styles based on whether they assessed a worker as good and sincere or a ‘slacker.’ For example, to get work done from teachers in the “B” category Sharmila would talk with affection, as they needed only reminders, whereas with “C” category workers she had to be “strict and stern.” To incentivize work among good performers (type “A”) they took hands-off approach: they monitored them loosely, granted various accommodations and flexibilities. Supervisors perceived such workers as highly motivated who did not require incentives but needed to be supported for doing well. Meanwhile, with underperformers (type “C”), supervisors were more likely to use threats and sanctions, which fixed problems temporarily. In practice, supervisors often balanced between a variety of tactics that involved accommodations, motivational talks, and occasionally mentoring on the one hand, and sanctions on the other.

Overall, because most supervisors invoked various types of tactics depending on the teacher and situation, and because I did not conduct systematic observations of these interactions, it is difficult to differentiate the exact effects of how supervisors impacted workers’ performance. However, based on the interviews with supervisors and teachers, I argue that different techniques could have differential impact on teacher’s autonomy and performance.

Mentoring and/or loose monitoring could facilitate teachers' autonomy and performance, whereas threats and sanctions were likely to undermine it. Autonomy is a critical aspect of a teacher's job because it provides them with the opportunity to customize activities and interactions with children and the community—one of the most fulfilling aspects of care work (Folbre 2012). In the context of high workplace demands and low pay, the ability to tailor work strategies allows teachers to derive intrinsic rewards from interactions with community which they may not get from the extrinsic rewards (Marwah 2021a; 2021b). When teachers can freely talk to residents about their problems, provide advice, and offer assistance in ways they find meaningful, it grants them a sense of purpose, respect and authority. These feelings are critical to their job satisfaction and can ultimately lead to better performance (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Research in public administration indicates that when frontline bureaucrats have greater autonomy to tailor policy goals to specific situations and are equipped with mechanisms for ongoing error detection and correction, the quality of public services is better (Pires 2011). Following this, I suggest that ICDS supervisors who provide this space for autonomy can help facilitate better caregiving practices. By giving teachers the freedom to do what they believe is best (provided they are competent), supervisors can help create an environment that fosters creativity, problem-solving, and mission-driven work. This is the ideal image of effective supervision, which helps workers do their jobs well and enhances the quality of childcare.

On the other hand, overbearing supervision that focuses on ticking boxes, micromanaging and sanctioning workers can have adverse effects on their motivation and performance. For example, in a study of labor inspectors in Brazil, Roberto Pires (2011) finds that the introduction of quantitative performance indicators from high-level management interferes with workers' professional autonomy, undermining their commitment and performance. In the current ICDS

system, but also across many social welfare programs in India, the increasing centralization, control and micromanagement are also likely to significantly hinder frontline workers' autonomy and performance (Aiyar and Walton 2015). Rather than privileging care and meaningful interactions with children, supervisors focus on monitoring data collection based on predefined rules and routines, which can actually lead to inaccurate and manipulated data. But more importantly, this focus diverts workers' attention from the essential relational high-touch aspects of care work.

In addition, the use of threats and sanctions can cause workers to concentrate solely on tasks that are most likely to be sanctioned, limiting their ability to take initiative and be proactive in providing care services better. For example, a study on the implementation of Right to Public Service Acts in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar found that lower level officials prioritized processing applications over their other work due to widespread fear of penalties (Robinson 2012). This type of supervision also worsens the pre-existing issue of frontline workers lacking problem-solving capacity, which was discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

Because all supervisors reported that they were more supportive of “good” workers and more punitive of “bad” workers, these approaches likely fortified a vicious or virtuous cycle of performance. Accommodations and disengagement from close monitoring were likely to have a positive effect on good teachers, as it empowered them with greater autonomy to innovate and problem-solve in their centers. On the other hand, sanctions and intimidation, which were targeted more towards underperformers or slow-learners, were likely to have the opposite effect by inhibiting teachers' sense of autonomy, reducing their efforts in caregiving and curbing willingness to solve problems.

Regardless of how workers were classified certain approaches to supervision could also depend on how officials perceived a particular situation. Supervisors often viewed teachers' personal and family issues as women's problems (to which they could relate) that could affect their performance. Teachers dealing with family issues could be granted more leniency than those, who did not indicate such problems. Supervisor Vasanthi believed she could not be strict and often considered that mistakes in teachers' work could arise from problems at home: "They may commit mistakes due to problems at their home. If we gently tell them, they will work better. If you say harshly, they see you as an enemy and work will not happen properly." Still, others argued that workers with family problems should not use them as an excuse to avoid work.

The incentives and sanctions also varied by teachers' task. Some tasks, like reporting could be delayed but eventually had to be done, whereas it was more difficult to enforce teaching or cleaning of children without supervisors' presence. Because supervisors could not continuously observe teachers and had few tangible incentives to motivate workers, depending on the worker, the task, and the situation, they accommodated workers' constraints, engaged in various performative acts, such as motivational talks and cajoling, and used warnings, threats and shaming to temporarily "fix" issues. I argue that these techniques were important to ensure that most teachers feared supervisors, made them respond to requests, and generally enforced a basic level of palwadi functioning. Yet, these methods were not sufficient to incentivize *all* workers to seek quality. In the following two sections I delineate how different supervisory techniques were likely to promote or cripple teachers' autonomy.

Promoting autonomy: support and accommodations

The supervision style that approximated the ideal type focused on building teachers' key competencies, fostering a culture of quality, accommodating their needs, and providing assistance

in problem-solving within the field. Although I was unable to directly observe the impacts of this type of supervision, I propose that its emphasis on facilitating teachers' autonomy and performance through supportive approaches may have been more effective than other tactics that relied on sanctions and threats. Supervisor Vasanthi's strategies and style exhibited the ideal type against which effectiveness of supervision can be analyzed.

Vasanthi was an exceptional supervisor because she took on a mentoring role, showing compassion and support towards the teachers she supervised even in light of high institutional constraints. Vasanthi was a compassionate 60-year-old woman who showed deep empathy towards the teachers' issues and demonstrated a high level of solidarity with them. She sought to inspire and motivate workers to perform at their best, by conveying the potential benefits of doing so. She explained that if workers completed tasks properly and on time they could gain greater power and no one will be able to challenge them. In addition, she highlighted that seeking quality could earn teachers respect from the community and the office.

When dealing with poor performers or mistakes instead of scolding workers, as was common among supervisors, Vasanthi taught them how to do a particular task, and shared her experience about how she did this job when she was a teacher. Vasanthi took on a maternal role figure: "if we say anything with anger, teachers will never listen. If we treat them with care, like our daughters, then there is no room for such a situation (teachers not listening to instructions). If they make any mistake, immediately they will say 'sorry madam.' I will also accept it." If teachers struggled to do their reporting, instead of warning them as most supervisors did, she would sit and teach them how to do it or she would tell them she would do the work for them:

We should make teachers work without warning them. That is the technique. If something happens, we will not complain to officers, because they will also be in the middle of their work. If teachers are not writing reports, I will ask them to bring the reports and I will tell them that I will complete them. I was a teacher, so I know how to write. After hearing this,

teachers realize that a senior person getting a higher salary is doing all this work (that they are supposed to do) and they will come forward to complete the work. If they are not doing it, I will say bring the document, I will write instead of you. When I say this, they realize that even though I am a supervisor, I am helping them. So, they will fill in the document immediately and give it to me for signature. I follow such a method for smooth operation. They are working for less salary. They are not permanent; teachers are getting a salary of 10,000 INR and helpers are only getting a salary of 6000 INR. They are working here due to their family situation. They have come forward for public service. If they are making any small mistake, we have to correct them.

Compared to the other supervisors I interviewed, Vasanthi's approaches stood out as an exception. While many others relied on intimidation and sanctions, especially when dealing with poor performers, Vasanthi embraced a kinder and more supportive style focused on mentoring and assistance to encourage all teachers perform their duties well. Vasanthi's methods were based on a deep understanding of the struggles faced by teachers, making her an ideal supervisor who did not resort to disciplinary measures but instead worked with her team members to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to improve their performance. Her exceptional style demonstrates that some individuals (to some extent) can overcome institutional constraints and become truly supportive and empowering supervisors.

Vasanthi's unwavering commitment to the goals and directives of the ICDS program was further demonstrated through her proactive efforts to guide and support teachers in increasing children's enrollments—one of the major challenges for staff and supervisors. Vasanthi explained that rather than blaming teachers she would go to the area and help teachers by talking to beneficiaries about the benefits of palwadi services:

Ieva: What will you do if you discover that there are less than 25 kids in a center?

Vasanthi: The strength of the children may be less. This may be due to an area issue. Only children from slums will come. A child may get sick and not come to AWCs. We cannot blame the teacher, that doesn't improve the situation. They will try their level best. In such cases, we will support the teachers. We are [formally] called 'supporting supervisors.' We are here to support the teachers. We will go into the area and speak to pregnant women and those trying to get pregnant, we speak to people for several hours. When others see what we are doing they get to know about the things happening in the center and they will send

their children. We will ask pregnant women to take care of these important aspects for their children's well-being. We will tell them how they play in palwadi, which is the most important for children's development. We tell mothers to read books. Only if we speak to people engagingly, they will start using the palwadi more. This is how we help the staff to increase the strength.

Thus, Vasanthi, unlike many others, tried to tackle enrollment problems herself, by talking to beneficiaries to help workers attract children. But if nothing worked, and teachers continued to struggle Vasanthi was willing to ignore it. She knew how difficult it was to work under low pay and high workload, especially when some teachers had to cover for vacancies or had problems at home.

Vasanthi's approach to sometimes "let go" chasing enrollments was informed by cues from her officials. When she was promoted to supervisor, she identified two centers with no children. Teachers were old and disengaged and one helper's position was vacant. When Vasanthi brought up the situation to her officer, she just laughed about it, saying that there were many centers like that, and if she had just two centers with few enrollments, she should not worry much. This was a hint that the problem of low attendance was much more widespread than Vasanthi had imagined, and she should not spend much effort on it. Still, later on, when new younger teachers were appointed in those two centers, Vasanthi made them introduce themselves to all the households in the area through surveying, which helped to attract children. In the end, Vasanthi like most supervisors, came to terms with multiple constraints that were often beyond her control and did not "squeeze" teachers. She was also retiring soon so there was no reason to be strict.

I would like to highlight Vasanthi's hands-on support to teachers to increase enrollments because building trust with communities is a challenging task for most teachers. Teachers often require practical guidance and support to learn how to communicate effectively with mothers and community members, especially in the initial stages and because they do not receive such training

from their head office. In this regard, accompanying a friendly supervisor to visit the area can facilitate more productive, hands-on learning compared to mere verbal instruction. Effective interpersonal skills require practical training and experience, and field visits with a supportive supervisor are a good opportunity for training. Thus, Vasanthi helped teachers develop long-lasting skills, which was not very common among other supervisors.

Because supervisors were constrained for time, many did not have the capacity or willingness to spend time in the neighborhood like Vasanthi did. While supervisors had to visit the area and interact with parents to diagnose reasons for low enrollments, they did not necessarily determine the root-causes, implement the best solutions, or they applied solutions selectively. For example, supervisors commented that in poor areas parents may not send children if teachers are irregular or tardy, whereas in better-off areas parents may find palwadis below their standards. In the former case many supervisors would use sanctions to threaten teachers, whereas in the latter they may motivate workers on how to talk to parents and meet their expectations. Thus, depending on the issue and their perceptions about the teacher, supervisors customized their strategies to increase enrollments.

For instance, Preethi tried coaching teachers on how to address low-enrollments in better-off areas. Preethi argued that if they wanted to convince parents to at least “try out” the palwadi, workers had to demonstrate the benefits of their services. She believed that palwadis were now as good as (private) kindergartens because the staff does activities with children, gives out educational materials, tracks children’s development using profiles, and so on. This was not happening uniformly across all palwadis, but according to her, learning activities were especially important in better-off areas. She explicitly instructed teachers in middle-class areas to run their palwadi like a private kindergarten. While Preethi said that she would go to the area to talk to

parents, her other accounts indicated that she would do so mostly in cases where enrollments were at rock-bottom levels:

We will advise teachers. If the strength is low, we will find the reason for low enrollment and we advise teachers. We will go to the area along with the teachers and meet the parents and ask them to send their children to school. PRK Colony is like that, it is not a slum area. The area will be good, and middle-class, and parents will be a little hesitant to send their children. We ask them to send their children. There is no problem in a slum. In a slum area, there is no need for us to go to the area. Children will automatically come. Since lunch is given to children, parents will send their children. In the PRK area, the expectations of parents will be high. I advise teachers to perform to fulfill the expectation of teachers. We insist on running the center like LKG. We say to teachers, 'if we run like that, parents will send their children'. Based on the efforts of the teacher the situation of the center will improve. If a teacher works dedicatedly, definitely, the center will be one of the best centers.

Many supervisors held this perception gap, that poorer parents needed mostly food and safety, whereas better-off parents needed more education and care. Following this logic, their instructions to teachers were also conditioned by place-based distinctions. In better-off areas, teachers were told to focus more on children's activities to attract parents, which was not necessary in poor areas.²⁶ The degree of motivation and compliance among workers to invest more in learning activities remains uncertain, but it is likely that receiving advice and encouragement would prompt at least some level of consideration of potential actions, as opposed to receiving no guidance or facing threats and sanctions.

The key insight here is that in many cases improving enrollments required hands-on training and assistance to teachers, but most supervisors had little time and capacity to do so. Instead, they merely instructed the teachers to manage their centers better (by doing more learning activities or visiting beneficiaries) and allocated time to interact with parents selectively. I will come back to how supervisors dealt with other reasons for low-enrollments in the next section.

²⁶ Still, supervisors also recognized that if staff were not regular or often came late and worked sluggishly, parents might not send children even in poor areas. Especially if they needed to go to work and wanted reliable daycare.

Moving away from the ideal type of supervision, a common method to motivate workers among most supervisors was by accommodating their requests and constraints. The extent to which accommodations helped improve workers' autonomy and performance is unclear, but having flexibility at work was one of the biggest job benefits reported by teachers. Being allowed to take time to run personal errands could induce their willingness to reciprocate by completing the required tasks on time or better.

Many supervisors realized that staff may have personal matters that could interfere with teachers' work. For example, Vasanthi explained that she had to be considerate and accommodating: "If it is in our mind that they are also human, then there won't be any issue. There may be a need for them to go to the bank during working time, and there may be a need for them to go to pay fees or get a loan. There may be some need for them to go during working time." Accommodating teachers' requests to run personal errands during working hours marked a sense of solidarity between workers and supervisors who both had an incentive to demonstrate good performance to their superiors.

Supervisors had a motivation to accommodate teachers' requests and work constraints to show their own superiors that they were capable of effectively managing their centers without needing to escalate complaints to higher levels of authority. One such example was in how supervisors notified teachers to prepare for their "surprise" visits. Teachers could be in trouble if they were absent during a supervisor's visit. The supervisor could deduct salary for that day. Yet teachers usually knew about supervisor visits through their proximate co-workers or supervisors could notify workers in advance to prepare for a visit, though they were not supposed to. Many supervisors also adjusted their visits to increase the likelihood that teachers would be present. Sharmila explained how she calibrated the visit timing to avoid conflict-prone encounters:

I usually do not visit very early and will prefer to go around 10 AM. If I go by 9 AM, it would be very difficult for both of us. We have made adjustments to make it comfortable for both of us. As it is fieldwork, we cannot be very strict as they will be disappointed to perform the next tasks. I visit around 9.45 AM or 10 AM and have never experienced uninformed absences during that time.

Thus, unsurprisingly supervisors claimed that it was rare to find teachers absent when they visited the center. However, workers also knew that the center could not be closed because beneficiaries expected it to be open and functional or that any official could visit the center unexpectedly. Teachers and helpers thus coordinated that at least one of them was always present in the center and informed one another if anyone came for an unannounced visit. Teachers themselves often informed supervisors if they were late or were away from the center, ensuring that their helper was there to cover for them:

Vasanthi: They will call me in the morning and inform me if they are taking leave or going to the bank or if there is any death. I will authorize their request.

Ieva: What if they have not informed you?

Vasanthi: We have a phone. I will call and ask ‘where are you? What happened?’ Once in a while, it will happen. Mostly the helper will be there in the center. If the helper is also not there, they will call and inform me. They know that it will become a big issue if the center is closed.

Ieva: What if the center is locked when you visit?

Vasanthi: It will not happen like that. Sometime centers may be opened late during holidays. Nowadays we have the phone. If we make a call, they will come immediately.

Teachers could avoid being caught off-guard by requesting leave or absence during work hours. Thus, while phones helped in monitoring workers, with the changing nature of work and new pressures, staff could also use phones to negotiate some flexibilities. Before, when teachers’ workload was lower, supervisors could cut salaries for when teachers were absent or late during supervisors’ visits. But with the addition of new tasks and strengthening of the teachers’ union, cutting salaries for late coming was no longer allowed.

Supervisors often granted favors and leave allowances to coax teachers into completing certain tasks, particularly reports, in a timely manner. Some supervisors made teachers aware that

if they completed reports on time, they could be allowed to take leave without having a salary cut. Teachers were allowed to take one day of leave per month. If they did not use their leave day, they could take two leave days the next month, but they could not accumulate more than that. Working six days a week and having only Sundays and one day off per month was often not sufficient for teachers' personal matters. Thus, some supervisors, like Moshika leveraged leave allowances to get teachers to do the work:

I will permit leave whenever teachers ask and because of this, they will complete the task. This is what I can do, I can't be giving them awards. Teachers will ask permission to go to a shop, or school, or attend a funeral and I will let them go by saying 'it is okay, you can finish tomorrow', I will not force them to work when they want to go somewhere. If I don't permit them, they will lose concentration at work and in their personal life. They will complete work because they know I empathize with them and complete it for the sake of me. These situations happen everywhere and I am just speaking practically. According to the official rules, teachers should complete the task without any extra time, be it report or growth monitoring but teachers are humans too who have physical and mental concerns. I can't force them to work. I provide this flexibility for the teachers, not the government. The government wants them to complete everything on time according to the rules.

When the system did not consider the practical concerns of workers, and with few (efficient) accountability mechanisms, supervisors had to create techniques for incentivizing teachers to get work done. This meant that for some work to be done some rules had to be relaxed. When supervisors allowed flexibilities and gave space to teachers by non-interfering in their daily activities, they facilitated teachers' autonomy and sense of control over their tasks and activities. This autonomy could empower 'good' performers to continue seeking quality in childcare provision. Meanwhile, more passive teachers could use their discretion and compromise on quality in order to lessen their workload.

Other supervisory techniques, like motivational talks tied to salary and a sense of mission, were largely performative and not very effective in incentivizing teachers to work better. However, I suggest that as opposed to disciplinary measures, motivational talks could boost morale for at

least some workers. Supervisors and block officers mentioned that they often used motivational talks to incentivize teachers to work (better). Officials often tied motivation to salary. They would remind workers they are getting paid, so they have to do the work. As one official noted: “my duty to motivate my worker is by paying her the salary and other remuneration for her”. Supervisors would also remark that everyone is paid the same salary for carrying out the same duties: “this teacher also gets the same salary as you, how can you not do the task (while she is doing it without complaining)?” Sometimes, as I will note later, supervisors would make such shaming comments to workers in front of their colleagues.

In addition to salary, they also tried to invoke a sense of mission, as supervisor Moshika remarked: “we will motivate them by saying this job is a service for children and it’s a god’s gift you receive.” They sought to orient workers to see their work as social service for vulnerable groups, that it was their mission and privilege to benefit others. Superiors’ motivational ‘toolkit’ also included words of appreciation in group meetings. Officials believed that being praised in front of a large audience motivated others to strive and gain a reputation as a good workers among their colleagues and beneficiaries. They believed it fostered good competition among workers. Yet, teachers reported that it often antagonized them and caused fights rather than healthy competition. While some workers developed a sense of mission (though not necessarily through institutional messaging), others felt that “motivational” talks were largely performative and did not incentivize them to work better.

Limiting autonomy: disciplinary fixes

To motivate teachers, especially those who were deemed poor performers, supervisors resorted to disciplinary measures, such as increasing the frequency of visits and implementing tighter monitoring, issuing warnings or threats, especially when previous attempts of requests and

reminders were ineffective. I argue that these methods limited teachers' sense of decision-making autonomy. Sanctions could motivate teachers to accomplish tasks, but it could also lead them to focus on tasks that supervisors considered the most important while ignoring other kinds of work (Aiyar and Walton 2015). This was especially likely in the current system, where supervisors prioritized monitoring data collection and reports, and could do so relatively effectively using phones, but where their capacity to systematically monitor caregiving was low.

Merely implementing sanctions to enforce compliance without addressing the underlying reasons for teachers' struggles in completing certain tasks, or providing better care in general, was unlikely to be effective in the long-term. Sanctions could lead to temporary compliance, but teachers could revert to previous behaviors once the immediate threat was lifted. This is often the case in labor regulation, where strict sanctions tend to generate temporary fixes but cannot address root causes of non-compliance among firms (Pires 2008). Similarly, supervision based solely on sanctions was unlikely to produce sustainable changes in teachers' performance.

A common technique supervisors used to address low children's attendance, which according to supervisors correlated highly with workers performance and practices in care, was to increase the frequency of palwadi visits. During these visits, a supervisor would demand explanations for low attendance and teachers could give excuses, legitimate or not, by referring to children being sick or out of town. To assess the validity of these excuses, supervisors would visit the center more often to observe attendance on several days. If supervisors witnessed children roaming around in the area during a visit, it signaled that the staff was not doing their job properly. Supervisors then would take corrective action by asking the teacher or helper to 'bring' the children to the center.

In cases where supervisors realized that enrollments were low due to staff's tardiness and inactivity, they tried to visit the center more frequently, as explained by Sharmila: "frequent follow-up is required. If we don't follow up, then the attendance will stall at 2. There is very less chance for 100% attendance." Another supervisor Preethi commented that parents were reluctant to send kids to the center if a teacher was late to work. Preethi would instruct the teacher to not be late but would still need to visit the center to check if she complied: "If there is a problem, we will visit a center many times. If we go to a center for four days, teachers will come to centers on time automatically." However, supervisors' follow-ups were limited by multiple other responsibilities, and sometimes they were not able to visit the same center even once a week. Therefore, although the issue may be fixed for some time, the problem could re-emerge later.

Overall, addressing low enrollments proved to be a daunting challenge that often went unaddressed due to the substantial effort required from both teachers and supervisors. Due to the high burden of other tasks and responsibilities, many supervisors tended to rationalize low enrollments citing a range of structural reasons. This allowed them to let go of seeking improvements, leading to looser monitoring and control over teachers. Resultantly, teachers who were unwilling to put in the effort to attract parents could get away with it without serious sanctions. With such teachers, this kind of leniency was unproductive, and enrollments could stagnate at very low levels for extended periods.

Whether intentionally or not, many supervisors expressed solidarity with teachers, and criticized the ICDS system for not mandating compulsory attendance for children and failing to issue preschool certificates that some primary schools required (though it seems this process was already started). This explanation masked the underlying reason for low attendance: many parents were dissatisfied with the quality of care provided by palwadis and preferred private services.

Some supervisors recognized this and acknowledged that many better-off or even poor parents sought out private services offering higher quality care or looked after children at home. But they also argued that it has become harder to attract children with high teachers' workload and increasing competition with public and private kindergartens. According to Valli and others, to attract children "teachers have to run the preschool well and teachers should speak to mothers very well. They have to conduct a mother's meeting. We have to inform mothers about the work we are doing. Mothers visit centers and look at the cleanliness, only then do they decide to send children. Preschool is the main factor for success."

Some supervisors justified low attendance, citing the difficulty of encouraging parents to send very young children to palwadis. For example, Moshika accepted low attendance when parents were hesitant to send small children: "handling children is very difficult so even if the number of children is low it is okay. If we force the child to attend palwadi, then the child will continuously cry which will make their face red leading to fever, diarrhea, or fits. The child will be scared to come to AWC if we make them attend forcefully, so if the child is hesitant to come to AWC we just let them be." Others also agreed that mothers may be unwilling to send children for various reasons and "may be rigid and say that they will keep their child at home."

Thus, if workers could not compel parents to send children, many supervisors, like Saritha adjusted and let go: "in some places, children will not come to centers, mothers will not send their children despite whatever efforts teachers put in. In such a case we will reduce the strength." Supervisors explained that eventually, if nothing can change the situation, the office would reduce the children's headcount, from 25 to 15 for example. Alternatively, officers could assign teachers to serve other uncovered areas in the vicinity.

During the last few months of my fieldwork, the district office had identified that registered beneficiary numbers were concerning low in Chennai, including children, and pregnant and antenatal women. They requested all workers to conduct a new household survey to identify new beneficiaries. This led to some centers gaining additional coverage areas and teachers became angered by the additional workload.

For many other tasks that were relatively easier to monitor, such as reports and stock counts, supervisors could threaten teachers with several actions: write down negative remarks in the teacher's visitors' book, complain about workers to the block officer, or give a disciplinary memo. Most supervisors engaged in threatening and intimidation to some extent but some, like Valli, were particularly fond of this method. Once during a supervisory visit, Valli discovered that a beneficiary did not receive the ration from the palwadi. She confronted the teacher and reprimanded her about the scolding they would face if another official caught her: "is this how you work?! What if some other higher official visits? We will all be in trouble! Please don't lie, at least tell me what is really happening!" Valli ordered the teacher to ensure this never happened again, and if it did, she threatened to make a note about it in her visitor's book. Valli perceived that teachers feared negative comments in their visitor's book— "it would be a bad remark on them" and so teachers asked her not to note it. They promised to rectify and not repeat their mistakes (at least for the time being).

Preethi also noted that if a teacher did not act on their warnings, writing notes in the book was the first action she took: "one time we will warn teachers. The second time also we warn. If it continues for a third time, we will write in the book that 'we warned many times, but the teacher is committing [the same] mistake'. If the mistake is not rectified, we will complain to the madam (block officer)." According to Preethi, Valli, and others, threatening with notes in the book or

threatening to escalate the issue to higher officials was a technique that made teachers fearful and worked relatively well to at least get some things, like reports, done. Valli believed that the book collected evidence about workers' performance incentivizing them to work better: "if I write remarks in the book and someone sees it, they will get a bad impression about the worker. We can motivate workers. If we write in the note (about their behavior), it will only (further) demotivate them."

Supervisor Sharmila made it her practice to write down notes in the book whenever the teacher missed a task or did something wrong. For Sharmila, this strengthened teachers' accountability and credibility:

If they do something (wrong) or do not do something, I note it down. So, they know it is fair. In case we do not note it down, they will think it is OK not to do the tasks given to them and we lose credibility. When I visit the center next time, I will ask them if they have done the task that they missed out on the last time. And they would have done it. That's why we write everything down.

The notes in the book itself did not have many immediate tangible consequences but could instill fear and lead to more visits and disciplinary action later. If a teacher collected many bad remarks, she could be issued a memo. A memo represented a more serious level of threat. For instance, if a teacher had persistently low attendance and it did not improve even after multiple warnings and notes in the book, the block officer could get involved, and start threatening the teacher. If that also did not help, a teacher could receive a memo.

Although memos were rarely issued, according to Valli, teachers feared them as it was "a record of inefficiency and wrong opinion. No one should get three memos." Memos were issued only by block officers upon recommendation by the supervisor. Teachers were suspended after three memos, but it happened very rarely because if a teacher was suspended or fired it took a long time to hire a new one. Moreover, someone else had to cover the vacancy which then compromised

the performance of that center. The hiring of teachers had to be sanctioned by the government. According to Sharmila and others, teachers were afraid of memos and tried to improve before the memo was required:

Ieva: Why do you think suspension never happens?

Sharmila: Teachers tend to get scared, even if they receive one memo. So, such extreme situations usually don't happen. Also, I don't stay for that long, as it might affect my promotion. I was in my previous project for 2.5 years. Here, it is my 3rd year and I will be moved to a different project in another 6 months (or possibly retire). After me, a new supervisor will come and the entire process will happen again. So, a single supervisor will not be monitoring the center throughout.

Weak monitoring also stemmed from frequent changes in officials (block officers and supervisors changed about every three years). On the one hand, it could disrupt any entrenched coalitions between poor-performing workers and superiors. On the other hand, performance tracking could be lost with frequent staff changes. After being appointed, a supervisor had to learn which centers in her cluster worked well and which needed more incentivizing.

Another technique to get work done involved shaming. Since the ICDS started using mobile phones, supervisors used them to convey requests, give instructions and monitor workers. To do so they relied heavily on WhatsApp group chats. Group chats also functioned as a forum for praising and shaming workers. For example, teachers had to post pictures of children eating lunch or mothers attending an awareness event on the same day. If anyone in their cluster delayed uploading a picture, the supervisor would send reminders. This accomplished two goals. First, teachers were “digitally” monitored—pictures were evidence of a worker completing her duty. Second, by singling out the teacher who missed the task in a group chat, supervisors shamed them. Everyone would see the messages questioning the teacher “in public.” Supervisor Valli was again a master of such techniques, especially when teachers delayed submitting their reports:

If someone is not completing the work, I will put a message in the group that this person has not submitted this report. All 27 (workers) will see my message. Since everyone is

watching I will get a reply immediately. When we say this, they become shy and complete the work. They will ask for time to complete the work.

Valli would also do the same in group meetings: “we cannot complete the report without conducting a review meeting. We will say all these things during the teachers’ meeting. We will say ‘see you have not completed this work, but she has completed it, both of you are getting the same salary, and she is also having the same working time as you’.” Shaming on WhatsApp or in person made a teacher uncomfortable. To prevent it, a teacher would try to do the task on time.

Yet not all teachers would be treated the same. Those who were perceived as ‘good workers’ would not be scolded for small lapses. One day Divya, with whom I spent the day forgot to send the pictures and I asked her if she would get any comments from her supervisor. Divya said that for her it was enough to just send a message later:

Ieva: If you don’t send the picture but just tell them you completed the lunch, will they accept it?

Divya: Yes, they will accept it.

Ieva: Will they accept it for everyone?

Divya: No. They scold them for not sending the photos to the group. In the group, they mention the name of the person and question them for not sending the photos. Usually, I don’t fail to take photos and send them to the group. By talking to you (laughs), I forgot to take the photos now. But still, I would take some photos for the day and send them to the group. Therefore, they will know that I am available for work today.

Divya was perceived as one of the “good” ones, who usually did all the tasks well and often went beyond what was required. Therefore, she was trusted and not micromanaged for small lapses. This gave her a sense of autonomy and likely motivated her to maintain good performance, thereby sustaining the trust and goodwill she had established with her supervisor.

In their efforts to improve the performance of underperforming teachers in their group, some block officers employed a tactic of conducting review meetings in the centers of the poor performers, hoping that the pressure of appearing competent in front of their peers would motivate them to perform better. They believed that poor performers would clean the center, bring kids, and

do everything well because they would want to look good to their colleagues. Officer Ramya believed that even if it was for one day it, the effort was worth it. According to teachers, some of them were responsive to shaming and praising but others were not. Those who did not like being criticized tried to do things on time. Yet others, who had a strong sense of detachment from the institution, did not care much about shaming.

Taken together, I suggest that the supervision of teachers had unintended consequences that granted more autonomy to good performers but hindered struggling teachers. Weak supervision allowed good performers to customize care provision and have greater flexibility in time use. Supervisors monitored good performers less frequently and were more forgiving of their mistakes. However, this autonomy was not always beneficial, as some teachers did not always use their discretion for positive outcomes. Moreover, good performers were still required to complete all data collection and reporting, and sometimes even asked to do additional tasks due to their good reputation. To maintain the trust and autonomy granted to them, they had to fulfill all responsibilities.

Meanwhile, supervision manifested in greater control and sanctions for those who were viewed as underperformers. This had a perverse effect in that it directed such workers' efforts to following orders and requests from the top (mostly tied to data collection) while neglecting caregiving. For such teachers the sense of autonomy and control over their work was diminished. Paradoxically, because supervision of care activities was generally weak, underperformers had greater discretion to compromise on caregiving than on other tasks, in which they were monitored and controlled more, namely data collection and reporting. The incentive to seek quality in care was further diminished when supervisors abstained from addressing low enrollments.

TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Weak supervision, lack of professionalization, and high and conflicting workplace demands allowed workers to develop particular occupational identities which corresponded to different levels of their autonomy, care practices and performance standards. Notably, these identities constitute the last part of my argument: they interact with community accountability to produce variations in the quality of care.

In chapter 2, I argued that teachers drew from their perceptions and interactions with the residents to adapt childcare standards to the neighborhood context. But not all teachers could act on what they perceived parents wanted and demanded, especially in better-off areas. Occasionally, in some poor areas, some teachers also delivered more than what they perceived parents needed. Drawing from Watkins-Hayes's (2009) conceptualization of professional identities, I argue that professional identities can explain these variations, that is, why teachers' behaviors departed from their perceptions about parents' needs and standards. By examining the professional identities of workers, we gain insights into why their approaches to work varied even within better-off and poor areas.

Following Watkins-Hayes, I suggest that teachers operationalize their professional identities through discretionary toolkits, that is, their capabilities, perceptions, and resources which ultimately shape actions and approaches in care provision. These discretionary toolkits help workers align their professional orientation with how they perform their institutional mandates and tasks. For example, discretion allows teachers to create their own standards of how children are fed, whether eggs are fed in the center or given to eat at home, whether children are taken to the bathroom or let to pee outside, how workers console crying children, and so on. These practices are customized over time, as teachers draw from their own values and beliefs, as well as

interactions with parents to decide what standards are adequate and appropriate in their center. Teachers can also invoke different behaviors in different situations and their interactions may vary from child to child, but as they develop day-to-day rituals and practices in operating their centers, it is possible to differentiate systematic patterns denoting how each worker understands their occupational role.

Drawing on teachers' accounts about how they see their work, and their actual approaches, I distinguish four types of professional identities: *preschool professionals*, *social workers*, *rule followers*, and *survivalists*. The first group—*preschool professionals*—are teachers who see themselves as educators and are highly committed to meeting the needs of parents and enhancing children's school readiness. The *social workers* view their work as a social mission to support children and mothers with nutrition and care needs. The third group—*rule followers*—prioritize tasks that are important to their supervisors and ICDS and are less inclined to address specific needs of parents. The fourth group, whom I call *survivalists*, are the most disconnected from the institutional mission. They do the bare minimum required to avoid getting into trouble and often make excuses for their underperformance. Although these professional identities can emerge in any type of setting, I suggest that certain identities, such as preschool professionals, are more likely to develop in areas where parents place a strong emphasis on quality education (see table 6).

I suggest that *preschool professionals* and *social workers* approximate the ideal type of frontline caregivers. These professionals drive teachers' sense of autonomy which is pivotal for seeking quality in care provision and responding to parents' demands (Ryan and Deci 2000; Mangla 2022). The workers who adopt these occupational orientations leverage their autonomy to proactively advance children's development and support parents with various childcare or maternal

health needs. They gather information, diagnose problems, and coordinate with stakeholders to address them.

Table 6. Teachers' professional identities across neighbourhoods

Poor			Better-off		
Area name	Teacher name	Professional identity	Area name	Teacher name	Professional identity
1 Mamalpuram	Meenakshi	Survivalist	1 Narrambai	Veena	Rule follower
2 Tiruvum	Sumathi	Survivalist	2 Sirupuram	Renuka	Social worker
3 Tangapuram	Divya	Social worker	3 Sambpur	Indira	Social worker
4 Kolapatnam	Geeta	Social worker	4 Cherpur	Revathi	Preschool professional
5 Seypetai	Pushpa	Rule follower	5 Chinnapuram	Mala	Survivalist
6 Kandivakkam	Kripa	Social worker	6 Nagapuram	Vidya	Preschool professional
7 Kannarpuram	Girija	Survivalist	7 Langapatai	Selvi	Rule follower
			8 Jeypetai	Ramani	Survivalist

Note: all names are pseudonyms.

As previously discussed, the autonomy of workers—which is essential for quality-seeking behaviors—can be further enhanced by their supervisors. When supervisors deal with professionals whom they perceive as good performers, they often take a hands-off approach to monitoring these workers. Most supervisors tolerate their mistakes and give them greater flexibility in how they carry out tasks. Even if these workers are late in completing certain duties, supervisors trust them to deliver and do not discipline them. If an “ideal type” worker is supported by an “ideal type” supervisor, such as Vasanthi, who strives to empower her workers to excel and aids them in addressing any issues that may arise, they can create a superior caregiving environment and deliver exceptional services. The service quality, as I will argue next, can be further enhanced with high-levels of bottom-up accountability.

The well-established governance theories argue the best standards in public services are attained when capable and professional bureaucrats are allowed to make independent decisions without being micromanaged (Fukuyama 2013). By examining each type of professional identity in the following sections, this argument will be substantiated by revealing that professionally oriented teachers with a strong sense of autonomy are more inclined to prioritize quality and respond to the needs of parents compared to those who do not view themselves as professionals and have a weaker sense of autonomy.

Notably, both preschool professionals and social workers seek quality in the aspects of care they deem important, but they are distinct types of workers because they prioritize slightly different issues at work. The primary distinction between the two types lies in their focus; while preschool professionals prioritize children's education and learning, and maintain high-quality care environment, social workers offer a broader range of social support services to parents, tailored to the specific needs of the local community. This can include enhanced counseling and nutritional support, ensuring reliable daycare for working mothers or connecting residents to other welfare schemes and benefits. However, social workers, unlike preschool professionals, do not necessarily focus on comprehensive learning activities and may not maintain high standards in toileting or cleanliness.

Other types of workers—rule followers and survivalists—deviate from the ideal type by prioritizing requests and tasks that are closely monitored, such as reports and data collection, in order to avoid sanctions. This leads to a reduced sense of control and autonomy, and results in less attention given to caregiving practices, which are less supervised. Unlike the more professionalized workers, rule followers and survivalists are reactive in nature and limit their engagement in local problem-solving and coordination with stakeholders.

While professional identities have a strong influence on teachers' practices in caregiving in their own right, these identities also interact with community demand to produce varying standards and quality of care services. The most important content of professional identity is autonomy, which can be activated by community demands to enhance quality of childcare. I argue that community demand, that is, bottom-up accountability (as discussed in chapter 3) exerts pressure which then activates the autonomy of teachers. As I have already explained, this pressure tends to be greater in better-off neighborhoods, where parents demand accountability through credible threats of exit. But pressure can also be exerted in poor areas through claims-making induced by residents' collective agency.

Figure 2 depicts these interactions between autonomy and bottom-up accountability, the two key dimensions that shape care quality. When teachers experience high levels of both autonomy and bottom-up pressure, childcare quality is at its highest level. These teachers possess the necessary capabilities and enjoy the autonomy to respond effectively to parental pressures, resulting in the development of innovative activities and solutions to address problems on-the-ground. Meanwhile, at the other end, teachers experiencing low autonomy and low bottom-up pressure produce the lowest quality childcare services. Without pressure, teachers with little professionalization and sense of autonomy will not seek quality. Instead, they will aim to deliver the minimum level of care with minimal efforts, as long as they are able to survive.

Figure 2. Autonomy and accountability in shaping childcare quality

Autonomy	High	Low
	Accountability	
High	1 (best outcome)	3
Low	2	4 (worst outcome)

Note: care quality is ranked on a scale of 1 (best) to 4 (worst).

The situation in the other two cells is slightly more complicated. In both cases, the quality of childcare is somewhere in between the best and worst cases. However, the (3) cell—where autonomy is low but bottom-up accountability is exerting high pressure—represents worse childcare than the (2) cell—where autonomy is high but pressure from bottom-up accountability is low. This is because, to be able to respond to bottom-up pressure, teachers must first have high levels of autonomy. In the following sections, I will describe how the interactions between these two dimensions manifest itself in practice.

Preschool professionals

Preschool professionals see themselves as agents in fostering children's growth and development, they emphasize building children's physical, social, and language skills and teach them habits to prepare for kindergarten and primary school. They want to run their center professionally, to make it feel like a "real" preschool. Teacher Vidya and Revathi were the two preschool professionals in my study who worked in better-off areas of Nagapuram and Cherpur, respectively. Both Vidya and Revathi articulated their mission as instilling in children cognitive and socio-emotional skills that could help them succeed at school and beyond.

They believed that in other tasks, their duty was to help children grow, learn, and impart skills and good habits. Vidya's mission was to prepare children for school, and she gave parents her assurance that she will get them admission to one of the good nearby schools. The ICDS does not require teachers to do this, and most teachers do not make such promises. Vidya took this initiative because she saw herself as a teacher, not simply a caregiver. Of course, it was also important that parents wanted this too. Vidya used portfolios for each child to track their progress and preserved their drawing materials or even "some scribbles" in their individual files. She felt her center was better and more educationally oriented than most kindergartens, as she taught older

children writing or reading until 4 pm, whereas most kindergartens sent kids back at 2 pm. The best teacher's award from a non-profit Rotary club, which Vidya proudly hung on the wall, validated her identity as a teacher and served as a signal of quality to parents.

This group of teachers also internalized the purpose of learning activities, that they were designed to stimulate children's development. Revathi, while not going as far as to keep and teach children until first grade, prized the program she implemented for its developmental purposes and benefits to children:

Here we give them so many activities targeting particular development and growth areas like language, movements, sense of direction, etc., which helps kids to do everything normally. Even if you send your kids to a creche, there is nothing like a prescribed syllabus to teach like we do. I am not saying this just because I am working in a government institution, they do take care of the kids in private schools too, but it is not as specific as we have it here. They don't have weekly and monthly themes. The private schools give this fidget spinner to kids that became popular recently. We should avoid giving this to the kids as it just keeps spinning and the kid doesn't learn anything, whereas if you give them clay, they will mold it into something, create an object out of it for which we encourage and appreciate, and they become happy and learn so much! They learn that the clay needs to be shared with other children there and given it to other kids after their turn is over. They learn the discipline of standing in queues and waiting for their chance to wash their hands or eat. But parents who earn *lakhs* (hundred thousand rupees, denoting high earnings), don't send their kids here. They just hire a caretaker who switches on the TV and feeds the food to the kid. The child doesn't learn to talk or do anything that children their age usually do. We should teach them everything and help them do it if they're struggling.

These workers took pride in giving what they believed to be a holistic approach to early childhood education. For example, Revathi believed they should impart not just skills but also moral values in children: "I believe in setting a good role model. I also tell the mothers, please take good care of your children. I believe that if the child can move freely and talk openly with their parents by age 5, the child will be on the right path. Even if kids (when growing up) were to take the wrong path, they would immediately think about whether it's even the right thing to do and immediately rescind it. To date, I remember some of the things my teachers have taught me, and I believe that whatever I teach them will remain with them, even subconsciously. I believe that this

is a God-given opportunity to guide young children with life and soul. So, I want to do a good job. In matriculation schools, children are over eight years of age, whereas I have an opportunity to mold two-year-olds and show them the right path. So, I believe in imparting everything I know and whatever I feel is right.”

Being a professional also meant that teachers followed routines, and schedules and conducted preschool activities systematically. Before the pandemic, Vidya shared her center with a volunteer teacher who used to conduct Montessori-style activities. But that teacher often arrived late, “did not follow the correct procedure in singing *Tamil Thai Vaazhthu* (literally “Invocation to Mother Tamil” which is the Tamil Nadu state anthem) and National Anthem” and her presence was not consistent. This annoyed Vidya because that influenced children’s attendance—they would not come if that teacher was not present and their learning was slow. So Vidya decided to take control: “I will be correct (perfect) in everything. I insisted that the teacher also cooperates well. I told her there was no other way but to work properly when I am there and if she wasn’t willing, I asked her to leave. We have to start (school) at 8:30 am.” Vidya said that afterward the Montessori teacher became “terrified” and then they both were doing prayers in the morning and following the schedule properly: “after prayers and classes, we had a lunch break. We teach kids to wash hands and sit for lunch and they will sit properly.” To Vidya, punctuality and following schedules were a marker of what a school looks like. Making kids come on time meant it was a professional institution rather than a free relaxed daycare where parents could drop kids off whenever they liked.

Similarly, Revathi also liked following schedules, rules, and structure, which she deemed was important for children to learn and get used to as part of their education. Revathi explained that children had to come at the same time so they could start classes on time:

I prefer that they come in at 9.30 am, warm up by playing with the toys for half an hour, and then all these kids, those that cry and those that don't come together as one unit. So, I start the class at 10 am with a prayer. The kids would observe me and repeat after me. Things will be smooth. If a kid were to come at 10 am, as a late entrant being dragged by the mother, it would spoil the rhythm of the class. I would have to step out and note his/her name and in the process, the class is disrupted. Because of one child, the entire class would then have to suffer.

Demanding punctuality sometimes got Revathi into fights with parents. If they didn't bring the children on time, Revathi would threaten them that she would not let them attend the class next time. For Revathi and Vidya, running palwadi like a school also meant that children had to wear ICDS-distributed uniforms. Yet other teachers in my study did not require them if parents did not want their kids to wear them (as they were often associated with the lower status given that uniform signals that children attended government school). Professionals insisted on uniforms and Revathi would even demand parents to go home and change their kids if they came not in the uniform attire. Similarly, she would also insist that all kids came clean, neatly dressed, and with hair combed, and if anyone did not look neat, she would ask them to go home and wash up. Revathi would say, 'if we send once then they may not repeat the same mistake'. They believed that it was important to bathe children and change undergarments to avoid infections, and occasionally would shame parents about this if they did not bathe their kids before sending them to palwadi. Revathi's helper Maria thought this was a bit excessive and that she would not send them back, but this was Revathi's "regime". They were educating not just children but parents too. Revathi knew she was strict and she knew her parents grumbled about this, but she felt strongly about being an educator and being right. She also realized her approaches in preschool were appreciated by many, as parents flocked to her center even from other areas. This indicated to her that most parents valued her professionalism and authority even if that annoyed them sometimes.

Professionals stood out from most others in seeking to constantly innovate and tailor children's activities creating a more interesting learning experience. Revathi browsed the internet and YouTube for ideas on how to make lessons more interesting. Many teachers sit while teaching rhymes, songs, or alphabets, but Revathi and Vidya engage children by jumping and dancing. Revathi believes her movements capture children's attention better. She would be shy to dance in front of people, but because it is just children she can do it. She acknowledges she cannot sing as melodiously as others, so she embraces dancing.

Revathi also enjoys that she can have the flexibility to tailor preschool activities to her liking. In her previous center, Revathi got exposed to Montessori teaching methods which she thought children liked a lot, and now she tries to integrate some of their techniques in her palwadi. When a charity approached her center for help, she requested some Montessori materials which she uses to teach, even though she acknowledges it is not exactly Montessori but something similar. For example, on Tuesdays and Fridays, they work with children on puzzles. Revathi cannot innovate too much and do different activities only on certain days because officials want her to follow their syllabus which focuses more on singing songs.

Vidya's and Revathi's centers also looked different from many others, in that they had many educational pictures, charts, and posters prepared by workers and children themselves. These materials hung on the walls and strings around the center and there were arts and crafts materials and many different types of toys. These teachers prepared these materials themselves to help children absorb and memorize words and information better, not just by listening to teachers. Revathi and Vidya observed how children learn and built on those observations to improve their teaching methods.

When workers talked about their routines and tasks, interactions with children and the respect they gained from parents were among their biggest job rewards. These teachers talked about how interacting with children, seeing them play, do ‘silly things’, and grow made them feel happy. Revathi was smiling when talking about kids: “Every child would be cute in their way and we would notice and tell each other (with the helper) how cute they are. Some children would dance very beautifully and some children, even if they can’t dance, would attempt to dance like me which really makes me happy. Even if they don’t know how to jump, they will try, which will look funny!” Revathi also realized it may be interesting for parents to see what they are doing, so she started taking little videos of children’s activities and sent them to the parents’ group on *WhatsApp*. She received positive feedback which encouraged her to innovate even more. Now parents ask her to send the songs she teaches over the phone so that they could sing along with their toddlers when they come back home. Interactions with children allowed workers to escape and forget problems at home.

Gaining respect from parents was important in validating teachers’ professionalism. Vidya did not like when her supervisors reached out to her beneficiaries to check if she distributed benefits properly. She felt it made her lose the respect of mothers if officials questioned parents about her performance. To her, it was an interference undermining the trust she earned from the community: “Officials are calling the parents to check if they have received the ration, I feel ashamed. If I don’t distribute properly, then it is all right to make calls, but I distribute everything properly. The mothers will not respect me If officials call and question like this.”

Vidya enjoyed becoming an authority in the area. When councilors (elected politicians at the ward level) were present, she engaged with them to obtain support for the center, and she continued engaging with local intermediaries wherever she worked. She built a strong relationship

with Rajeev, an area association leader, who helped Vidya install a new RO (reverse osmosis) water purifier, and helped with various other things whenever Vidya asked him. In return, Vidya enjoyed it when the association asked for her advice on what could be done for the area or the children: “Whenever they (the association) ask (for anything they could do), I give them ideas on what is required.” These relations with a local leader who was well respected also helped Vidya gain more credibility as a trustworthy teacher.

Revathi also appreciated that her job provided more recognition compared to working in the private sector or a private school. She felt that her responsibilities which extended beyond the center, helped her gain authority in the entire neighborhood: “in a private school, I will be recognized only among the 20-30 children who attend my class but not outside. Whereas here, people identify me as a teacher, not just my students, but also in the neighborhood. What matters is the large number of people who respect you.”

In this position, Revathi also liked having autonomy and flexibility to tailor how she wanted to conduct classes, and that she did not have to strictly follow the rules. While this flexibility also allowed her to sometimes skip classes or do teach less than she would have to otherwise, Revathi had a strong sense of accountability to parents. When she was asked to participate in election duty she refused to do so. She felt that being away from the center could have compromised activities in the palwadi: “As I’m in the profession of childcare, I am responsible to parents. I am required to provide good care and they should not throw me in a spot (not to be questioned by parents about my performance).”

I argue that while more educationally oriented teachers are likely to work well in any area, such teachers’ efforts and skills may be invoked and activated *more* when they serve more demanding parents. For example, Amanda Lewis and John Diamond (2015) show how in a racially

integrated American school anticipating parental pressure or concern teachers subconsciously helped and guided white students more than black students, whose parents were perceived as less concerned. Similarly, in Chennai working in a social space with more demanding or class-advantaged parents, the socially or educationally oriented, motivated teachers co-produced higher quality childcare than what they would do if they worked in a poorer area, or where they perceived parents as completely unconcerned. This might explain why I have not met teachers embracing a *preschool professional* identity in poor areas. Workers may be more likely to develop this professional identity in places where parents explicitly or implicitly create pressure to perform. In this case, it was parents who often activated professionalized teachers' skills and abilities to focus on preschool education and other aspects of care.

The matching between teachers' identities and the neighborhood class could help co-produce better childcare services. For example, preschool professionals were more motivated to seek higher quality in childcare in neighborhoods where they perceive parents as having higher standards and demands.

Social workers

A second professional orientation that a group of women took on was that of a *social worker*. Divya, Kripa, and Geeta were social workers serving poor areas, and Indira and Renuka served better-off neighborhoods. These teachers interpreted their work and responsibilities as social services for children, mothers, and the community. They sought to improve children's nutrition and development, and perceived their work as a social "mission". For example, Kripa illustrated her views about her job with a Tamil proverb: "When we feed other children and help them grow, our children will grow on their own (*Ooraar kuzhandhaya ootti valartha, than kuzhandhai thaana valarun*). Kripa believed in good karma rewarding her for helping raise other children. Compared

to preschool professionals, more than teaching social workers emphasized services and counseling aimed at improving beneficiary health, nutrition, and women's ability to work.

Similar to preschool professionals, social workers also felt accountable to their beneficiaries. But unlike the previous group, these workers perceived that their purpose was to provide a safe daycare for working mothers and not necessarily impart education to children. For example, Geeta considered how her job enabled parents to work: "people would suffer if we get late. They would have their day planned based on us – only if we come on time, they would be able to go to work... if we do this consistently (come late), then the number of children coming would go down. If we ask why children are not coming regularly, they (parents) would ask us back, 'why should we send the kid when you are not coming regularly?'".

Like Geeta, Divya also noted that more than lunch or preschool, it was important to open the center on time, so that mothers could be freed to go to work or do their household chores. Her role was to provide safety and care, and her presence in the center itself was a marker of that: "If a mother drops her child before the teacher comes, then she will keep thinking about the kid all day, 'only the helper was there at the center, will she be able to take care?' she would then think whether she should continue to send the kid to the palwadi or not." Perceptions about beneficiaries' concerns guided Divya's conception of her professional role. These teachers often empathized with parents' concerns and sometimes sacrificed personal time to look after children longer if parents were late to pick up their children.

Besides providing daycare services, beneficiary growth monitoring and nutrition status was another aspect that social workers focused on. For example, Divya thought it was very important to track the health of antenatal mothers and infants, and by all means to avoid "death". Registering pregnant women in the palwadi was interpreted as a critical component of the job to ensure the

state had tabs on these women's health status. Divya had good relations with the community and would learn about pregnant women even if they did not come to register at her center. She was proactive to ensure they obtained the nutrition mix and connected them to nurses for regular follow-ups.

Similarly, whenever Divya identified severely underweight children in her area, she reached out to NGOs to support such children with nutritional supplements. Divya took the ICDS mission to fight malnutrition to heart: "I feel I am responsible if any child in my area dies, I don't even want to say the word death but that's how I feel. I want to save the children who have health issues."

Divya's efforts often got her in trouble with her colleagues. Divya fought with her the palwadi teachers' union about coming to work on holidays to do awareness events or engage in other work tasks. The union has advocated for workers to have one day off per week and its leadership was irritated that Divya sometimes came to work on Sundays, on their day off. The union did not want to signal to higher officials that they could happily work more if needed. Some of the union leaders told Divya that her individual efforts will not change the world, but Divya believed that saving even one child was worth her time.

By initiating more activities Divya also upset colleagues in her group, who did less than her and in comparison looked "underachieving" to her superiors. Divya recounted them saying: "Are there no underweight children in other areas? why are you acting like only you have underweight children?" Divya was disappointed that her colleagues did not appreciate her, but she stood by her beliefs and felt it was right to do beneficial work. Especially, because she received support from the community and her supervisors.

Social work identity was operationalized through counseling too. Conducting awareness events and counseling on nutrition and public health was part of teachers' jobs, but for social workers, it was central to their identity. Social workers learned about families' circumstances, and health conditions and gave advice even to non-beneficiaries. Kripa saw herself not just as a teacher but as a community authority on health issues. She advised women on what to do when they missed their period or when someone fell sick, she brought in doctors for checkups in the palwadi, and they even discussed personal matters. For example, when going around the neighborhood Kripa checked for stagnant water and told people to close those areas for malaria prevention. She laughed that sometimes residents were annoyed with her "interventions", and commented that "if a teacher comes, she will always tell us something". She was proud to be able to share her knowledge and give advice to people which granted her a sense of authority.

Social workers also prized in their ability to identify and care for children with disabilities. Kripa had an interest in identifying disabilities in toddlers and attended training for it. She shared stories of how she identified children who had problems with hearing or vision. She would gently encourage parents to do a checkup before saying they had any issues as she did not want to scare the parents or make them feel ashamed. Working with children with disabilities created additional challenges but social workers did not shy away from it. Divya recounted a story of how no palwadi would admit a boy with a mental disability but she agreed to take care of him. They struggled with the boy but she was proud that they helped him improve: "initially he had fits of shivers. After one month in palwadi, he was normal. He will call all of us *ayah* (helper). He will talk to all in a bullying tone—'enna?' (meaning what)? That mentally retarded child (*moolai valarchi illatha paiyan*) learned to talk after coming to palwadi. He didn't know how to name objects. He learned that too. If we tell him to pick up a thing by saying its name, he will pick it up correctly. Now they

(parents) wanted to enroll him in a school but they are not giving him admission.” Divya and others derived satisfaction from supporting struggling families and improving children’s well-being.

Social workers also conducted preschool activities but they did not invest as much of their energy into them as preschool professionals. Social workers were less particular about following routines and schedules strictly, and they had a more relaxed attitude to teaching. For example, they thought it was important to let kids play on their own and when conducting activities, they were more casual. Compared to private playschools that imposed more discipline and “grooming”, Geeta thought that palwadi should offer a more relaxed atmosphere, where children could play and be “free”. For these workers, preschool attributes like uniforms were not important to follow. None of the social workers insisted on children wearing uniforms as the preschool professionals did.

However, some social workers expressed interest in being more professionalized. They wanted the ICDS to innovate in more diverse programming and meals for children, as Geeta articulated: “we need to prepare something more. Let us not repeat the same things (for preschool). They (the department) too must think, they need to come up with new ideas. They give *sathu maavu* (nutritious mix), but this is the same old method.” They viewed professionalization and more creative programming as an institution’s responsibility, not something that workers could do much on their own, at least not in the current working conditions of low salary, no promotions, and heavy workload. Geeta explained how she tied these conditions to teachers’ performance:

Geeta: There is not enough salary to enable our growth, they should give us a better salary and pay the gas cylinder fee. If that is given, I will provide quality education, we too have talents, and we will not remove ourselves from teaching. We will definitely teach...

Ieva: If you received support from the government, what would you do?

Geeta: We will take more classes, we will do more service, and we will also do the same elsewhere too. We are already doing it but we will be able to do it much better. We are not shying away from doing so.

While Geeta and many others, highlighted low salary and lack of promotions as the main demotivators to exert effort, others like Indira blamed workload for their inability to spend more time with children, which she really enjoyed:

If AWC teachers are given more freedom, we could do a lot more to make classes better. Instead of expecting us to work on so many things, they (ICDS) could reduce the workload and make us concentrate only on preschool education. I think if they do that, we can beat private school standards. Making us measure the height and weight of children, educate adolescent girls, and conduct these meetings for the community and parents is a lot of pressure that we could do without. Instead, they can make us concentrate on a specific group like pregnant and nursing mothers in addition to the children. A single teacher cannot be expected to do all this work.

To reconcile low salaries with workplace demands, teachers often adopted social worker identity allowing them to derive intrinsic rewards, like respect and authority from the communities they served. These teachers enjoyed talking to and advising residents on various welfare schemes and benefits, asking about their health and referring them to doctors, or providing food to non-registered beneficiaries, like older kids, the elderly, or people with disabilities. They often developed reciprocal relationships with some mothers, and when needed helped out each other. For example, Geeta allowed nearby mothers to fetch water from her center. Kripa helped mothers involved with an NGO conduct their activities promoting mothers' and children's health. Kripa provided them with information on the children's weight, while in return those mothers supported Kripa in the center with feeding or other tasks when requested.

Rule followers

Another group of teachers, whom I call *rule followers*, did not exhibit either a strong educational or social orientation to their work. Their purpose at work was to just get things done. As they felt inundated with tasks and requests from superiors, they found it difficult to determine what they were supposed to prioritize. Lacking a sense of purpose or direction they often cut corners in tasks they deemed unessential, like feeding eggs in the center or helping children wash up. They largely

held on to the job for the salary and job flexibility, which allowed them to combine family responsibilities with work demands. Some of the *rule followers* wanted this job because there was a vacancy in a center near their home and they thought it would allow them to manage household obligations easier than working in a different job, with longer working hours or being far away from home. Among rule followers, there was Pushpa in a poor area and Veena and Selvi in better-off neighborhoods.

Rule followers viewed their job as multi-tasking and prioritized tasks that officials required to do at a particular moment. While this group, like social workers, also sought to provide safe childcare for parents, for them, it was just one of the many tasks they were responsible for. Pushpa and others were frustrated that people perceived her simply as a caregiver—a sentiment shared by most teachers: “public thinks that palwadi is for taking care of children, teaching activities, giving lunch, etc. But we actually do several jobs. We go for house visits to record the height and weight of babies, we give counseling to parents, and so on!” To guide their daily routines and actions rule followers focused on requests and instructions from their office. For example, if they received a call to send a particular report or do a certain activity, Veena would drop teaching and focus on attending to the request:

Veena: We will be teaching and suddenly they will ask for a report immediately and wouldn't give us time.

Ieva: Can't you say “we have classes and so would send reports shortly”?

Veena: No. We have to submit it.

Pushpa also admitted that teaching is not an activity they had much time for: “When we are not called to the office, when there is no training, no office related work, no urgent report submission, then we will be able to focus on teaching from 10-12 pm. If we are asked for a report, then we cut off a few activities and focus on report submission.” Preschool professionals would rarely allow office requests to interfere with teaching. They would call back their superiors later explaining that

they were engaged in teaching. For instance, during lunchtime, Revathi's phone would be buzzing but she would ignore it and focus on feeding the children. In fact, teachers were routinely bombarded by phone calls from supervisors, other office personnel, or their colleagues. There was always some matter they had to talk about. Yet, rule followers wanted to present themselves as responsive to their officials and felt it was fine to let kids play on their own or be supervised by the helper. All teachers were dissatisfied with the workload, but social workers cast the multi-dimensional nature of their role as social work, while preschool professionals foregrounded their educators' position. For rule followers, as they tried to accomplish their tasks to the best of their ability, it was a constant struggle to identify what it was they were supposed to do and be.

Compared to others, this group of workers felt a stronger sense of accountability to their supervisors and institution than to parents or the community. They feared being reprimanded or being shamed in the meetings in front of others or on their *WhatsApp* groups for not completing tasks properly or on time. They also looked forward to praises from their office for easily observable tasks, like events. During awareness events on nutrition and health, teachers had to prepare small exhibitions displaying healthy vegetables, fruits, and grains. This activity involved making *kolams* (கோலம்)—decorative mosaic art drew on the floor using rice flour. When drawing *kolams* workers would create mosaics of pregnant women and babies or other objects associated with ICDS themes. For many rule followers, these events were an opportunity to shine. Pushpa was one of these workers. She would bring decorations like tablecloths, candles and idols from home (which was nearby the center) and create very intricate *kolams*. She would then send pictures and look forward to responses from her superiors.

One day I complimented her on the *kolam* she had made and Pushpa immediately started showing me pictures on her phone of *kolams* she had done in the past. She explained that she liked

being appreciated by her supervisors and colleagues: “I feel happy when I get praised for the work I do passionately. Officials will put a message in our WhatsApp group saying ‘you all did well’, but that is it. We would be looking forward to and expecting that message and wonder if they will ever say something good. Other than this there is nothing, it is our job, and we have to do all this without expecting any praise.” Pushpa revealed that there was very little praise for doing well, and these events were one of a few opportunities to receive a modicum of esteem.

However, for parents, these events were mostly a time waste and they tried to skip them especially if they were busy with work. While information about healthy foods and behaviors was sometimes useful, going to the same events all the time (as they were organized every month) without receiving anything more tangible was a nuisance.

Rule followers also minimized their engagement with the wider community. While social workers and preschool professionals built ties with community leaders, counselors, or NGOs, rule followers avoided interactions with such actors. Taking initiative to meet with party members or other influential people in the area, who were mostly men, was not an activity many women wanted to engage in. They viewed that asking for donations from powerful men might put them in a compromising position as women or require favors in return. When I asked Veena if she had any connections with local NGOs or community leaders, she denied saying she did not want to “meddle” in such issues: “others ask for donations when they conduct functions but I don’t do that.” Veena believed that engaging with political members and asking for donations could attract “unwanted attention and criticisms”. By that, she meant two things. First, she wanted to avoid unnecessary talks about her because “she had a husband at home”. Second, donors could start checking how she was doing her job, which she did not need as she already had supervisors calling

her constantly. Finally, asking for donations also felt embarrassing for many, it made women who already had little power within the state “system” even more inferior and indebted.

Rule followers were not disengaged from their work, they had aspirations to do better but the workplace constraints were too taxing to make meaning and value from this job. It was clear, however, that if some of the organizational conditions were relaxed, this group of women had the potential to become more like social workers or even professionals. For example, Pushpa had skills and aspirations to organize more educational activities with children but she was demotivated by workplace pressures, numerous tasks, and also by her attitude to beneficiaries from the slum. Pushpa wanted to serve a middle-class part of her area but these residents were reluctant to use the palwadi because they did not want their kids to mingle with and be influenced by the slum kids. Pushpa resented the situation and focused on just “getting things done”.

Survivalists

The final group of street-level workers was *survivalists*. These teachers did not cultivate a professional identity. They felt withdrawn from the institutional mission and sought to minimize investment in their work efforts. For them, work was just for money and so they tried to do only as much as necessary to not get into trouble. Meenakshi, Sumathi, and Girija served poor areas and Mala and Ramani worked in better-off neighborhoods.

Some of these teachers, like Sumathi and Meenakshi, were reluctant workers from the beginning. They never wanted this job and did not like it from the start. Meenakshi began working three years after she got appointed. She delayed her starting because she was busy taking care of her son with disabilities and did not have the capacity or desire to work. Sumathi was from a respectable community in Madurai and she hated having to work in a smelly and dirty slum. Eventually, as she built relations and trust with the parents she adjusted. Yet now many of the

families she got along with had left the area, and Sumathi was serving many new, “less decent” residents, who relocated to this area from “living on the platforms.” After working for 14 years, Sumathi had little capacity left to build connections with the new residents.

Survivalists often felt overwhelmed by workplace and other constraints leading them to withdraw from sense-making about their occupational position. They did not articulate any kind of orientation and tried to pass each day with minimum effort in the center. They would cut corners in various tasks and try to take leave often. For example, they would send eggs home instead of serving them in the center, skip preschool or growth monitoring, fake awareness events by taking pictures with residents without counseling them, and so on. Some would also not complete their reports on time or vice versa—try to complete reports but skip other tasks so that they could present themselves as accountable since supervisors hated having to remind workers to complete reports. But they often struggled to derive value from their work.

Although most teachers tried to maintain good relations with beneficiaries by distributing benefits, they made little effort to attract new parents and cultivate relations with the wider community. They needed just a few loyal parents to vouch for them in case supervisors questioned parents about teachers’ performance. In short, their goal was to spend as little time in the neighborhood as possible and they did not mind beneficiary disengagement. As I will discuss in the next section, specific workplace challenges contributed to teachers’ apathy and withdrawal from their institutional mandates.

Workplace pressures enabled some survivalists to take advantage of a weak supervision system. For example, Girija and Mala took days off frequently as their supervisors were lenient or the block office was short-staffed and could not monitor them properly. Girija counted on her relationship with her supervisor to take frequent leave of absence without serious consequences.

She laughed that the ability to take unannounced leave was the only good thing about her job: “This is the advantage. The supervisors will not know whether we have come to the center or not. Suppose when we are on leave for a day and they come for a visit, then we will be caught. Otherwise, not. This is the only benefit. Also, if I get to know that supervisors are coming today, then I will rush to the center even if I am on leave on that particular day. This is the only benefit of this job.” The constraints of poor infrastructure (e.g., no toilet), out-of-pocket expenses for the center, and difficulties with beneficiary engagement (to name a few) induced Girija’s withdrawal from her organizational mission, and in her eyes skipping work was justified.

Sumathi had a tacit “quid-pro-quo arrangement” with her supervisor. She helped her supervisor consolidate and tally monthly reports which enabled her to be more “relaxed” in the center. She could skip preschool or send food home instead of serving it in the center and not fear getting in trouble. Still, Girija and Mala took manipulated pictures in the center, such as if they were serving full meals to kids, as evidence of their good performance.

The survivalists I interacted with were likely not the ‘worst’ performers as they still went to work (even if not daily) and completed the minimum necessary. I heard stories about teachers who did not show up to work for weeks, who appropriated stocks, or engaged in other highly questionable behaviors. While I tried to reach out to a diverse group of teachers, some teachers were unreachable or refused to participate in the study, suggesting there was another category of workers who were even more detached as their jobs were at risk of suspension or layoff. Block officers and supervisors acknowledged that in each cluster (of about 100 palwadis) there were several workers from whom they could not “extract” any work. done. Yet, such workers were likely a minority.

Compared to teachers in better-off areas, it was easier for workers in poor areas to reconcile their “survivalist” selves with how they approached and delivered services. Because they believed that whatever they provided was good enough, they were relatively content being a *survivalist*; they were not concerned about *what kind of workers* they were. Teachers working in better-off areas, like Ramani and Mala, felt a stronger discordance between what they needed to do and what they could realistically accomplish. Both Ramani and Mala reported strong parent demand for good early childhood education and care, English language instruction, and well-maintained facilities. Both teachers had relatively good facilities, but they found it difficult to provide quality care or even learning activities, let alone teach English words. For the most part, Mala and Ramani could not deliver what the (lower) middle-class parents desired: they did not engage children in learning, their palwadis were less clean, and resultantly they had low levels of children’s enrollments. Their professional existence was grounded in hopes for some institutional change, higher salary, or retirement.

This section discussed four prototypes of professional identities which informed in which aspects and to what extent teachers sought quality in caregiving. The efforts of teachers who were the most professionalized (preschool professionals and social workers) approximated the ideal type as these teachers responded to both institutional and parents’ demands in providing education and care services at the highest levels. Educators went the extra mile in providing quality developmental stimulation. Social workers were less focused on educational goals but excelled in delivering nutritional services and providing safe and reliable daycare for working mothers. Teachers characterized by both identities were creative and coordinated with stakeholders in solving problems and supporting their communities.

Teachers who were rule followers or survivalists were more detached from the institutional mission and more likely to draw on their perceptions and beliefs about residents' class and caste status to justify rationing care quality. Many survivalists also used their workplace or personal constraints to justify their minimized presence in the center and in various care practices. In the following section, I will elaborate on how conflicting institutional goals and teachers' personal and workplace experiences contributed to the development of diverse professional identities.

INSTITUTIONAL DEMANDS AND OTHER SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

I argue that professional identities are formed in response to multiple influences, stemming from the organization, locational factors, and workers' personal history and dispositions. A large part of workers' identity is informed by organizational cues (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Multiple institutional directives and underinvestment in the support of the frontline workers leave it up to workers to decide what professional self they seek to cultivate. First, the ICDS has invested very little in teachers' and helpers' professionalization. Second, the demands to provide various services coupled with changes in recent policies, workloads, and monitoring have resulted in significant anxieties and uncertainties among frontline workers regarding the program's priorities and goals. Azhagu Meena SP and colleagues (2022) argue that *Poshan Abhiyaan* and the introduction of phones have altered the nature of teachers' work, shifting their attention and priorities from childcare and care of pregnant and nursing women, towards data collection, collating, and uploading.

The doubling down on nutrition interventions and data collection imposed through *Poshan Abhiyaan* made it painfully evident that one staff member cannot be responsible for all tasks while

simultaneously providing childcare, at least not without changes in implementation rules.²⁷ Forced to juggle multiple tasks, workers had to decide what to prioritize each week or even day, whether its growth monitoring, awareness events, reporting, childcare, or other tasks. On the one hand, institutional directives and incentives signaled that workers had to focus on growth monitoring, awareness events, distributing ration, and seek improvements in children's nutritional status. The monetary incentive was tied to data uploading. On the other hand, during palwadi visits supervisors emphasized children's attendance and preschool (in addition to completing reports and other tasks). It was important that staff attracted children and maintained stocks in accordance with enrollments. Meanwhile, beneficiaries did not care about reports or growth monitoring that much, they mostly wanted good care, safety, and developmental stimulation for children. Taken together, these competing demands pulled workers in different directions forcing them to sacrifice something. For example, when teachers received constant calls and requests for new data and reports from supervisors it distracted them from learning activities, and signaled that teaching may not be a priority for the ICDS, as articulated by Ramani:

There is too much reporting work and there is not much importance given to preschool like before. Before they never gave us work or called us for a meeting in the morning (during preschool time). Now it is not like that. They themselves do not give importance to preschool. They ask us to come for meetings in the mornings or ask for reports or to attend programs, so we are unable to engage with children. They think that fewer children are attending many centers and so they don't take it seriously.

Ramani's comment suggests that teachers may be drawn to prioritize orders from "above" complicating workers' sense-making of their professional role. Yamini Aiyar and Shrayana Bhattacharya (2016) observe this among block-level education administrators in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, where a lack of clarity in organizational goals and hierarchical norms forced officials to

²⁷ In the past, Tamil Nadu had two childcare/nutrition workers per center but following recommendations of the World Bank, staff numbers were reduced for the sake of efficiency.

prioritize commands from higher authorities gradually molding them into disempowered cogs. These administrators became implementation machines, who followed orders, and rules and gathered data instead of focusing on how to respond to school needs and improve learning. Such accounts, grounded in experiences of health and education sector personnel, reveal how the state's attention is shifting from relationships between care providers and clients towards "statistical performance of care" and the responsibility of frontline workers from the community to the state (SP, Vaghela, and Pal 2022).

Accomplishing some organizational goals could also impinge on others. For example, many teachers complained that conducting three awareness events per month was unnecessary because parents were too busy and did not perceive these events as particularly useful. Indira complained that sometimes parents became annoyed for being called to attend meetings often and would not send children to her palwadi for a few days. And some parents may altogether stop sending children. Other scholars also noted how parents in different parts of India perceived group counseling sessions as not useful and were reluctant to attend them (John et al. 2020; SP, Vaghela, and Pal 2022). While the ICDS demanded awareness events no matter what, teachers had to find tactics to implement them without antagonizing parents who needed to send children to preschool. They often invited a few loyal community members and conducted events for five minutes just to take a picture for evidence. Thus, policies that the ICDS promoted were often detached from the realities on the ground.

These types of institutional cues, like multiple competing demands, sudden and urgent requests for reports, and pressure to conduct "useless" events and upload pictures created ambiguities in what was rewarded and valued. It allowed for multiple interpretations of worker's role and the construction of diverse professional orientations. Institutional cues also interacted with

teachers' own beliefs, social identities, personal histories, and frames about the neighborhood. At the same time, residents' claims-making activities, and interactions with teachers, mentioned in Chapter 3, could also activate certain occupational identities. Disentangling specific causal forces behind identity formation is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Yet I will delineate how teachers' socialization, exposures, and personal and workplace constraints could inform their self-conceptions and approaches to service delivery.

Workplace constraints

All teachers faced multiple constraints at work, but some had to deal with additional challenges, like staffing problems, strained relations with their superiors, or significant infrastructure deficiencies. These larger challenges were especially important because they could influence or alter workers' perceptions of their role.

Covering staff vacancies was one of the biggest constraints for teachers and helpers. Work became doubly hard when teachers had to take over a center with a teacher's vacancy, when a helper's position was vacant, or when a helper was not performing her duties (like cooking or cleaning, supervising children) properly. Both teachers and helpers need to work in tandem for the successful functioning of the center. Without helpers, teachers had to do all tasks by themselves or plead with officials to send them help from other centers. Those, who had to cover vacant centers usually visited them once a week or so to distribute benefits and complete reports, without spending time with children. Having to do two people's jobs was impossible and it was inevitable that teachers without helpers would not complete some tasks, like preschool.

These insurmountable struggles could shape a teacher's views of her job radically. For example, Ramani did not have a helper who could help her improve her center's appearance and attract children. Ramani had a temporary helper who came only to cook and clean. According to

some believable rumors (mentioned by several other workers), Ramani verbally abused her former helper who could not stand it and left for another AWC. I was inclined to believe this because Ramani also abused and humiliated her colleagues in front of me. Ramani mocked and made fun of some children's clothing or hairstyles and behaviors which signaled that she harbored some biases. Thus, it was likely Ramani's fault that she pushed her helper out. And now without a helper, it was difficult for Ramani to attract children because helpers are crucial in building "client relations" by visiting the area often, picking up and dropping off children, and generally making parents trust AWC staff. Ramani could not carry on this task and gathered almost no children to her center. Yet, she could avoid sanctions from officials because she used structural problems—no helper, long distance from poor beneficiaries' residences—to account for her low enrollments. Importantly, she also held a position in the AWC teachers' union which empowered her to shed accountability.

Thus, when faced with extreme workplace constraints, like no helpers or having to cover an additional center due to vacancy, teachers could change how they viewed their role. Those who viewed themselves as professionals or social workers could become survivalists, at least for some time. A lack of support from officials could undermine motivation even further. For example, one block officer Akhila complained about one poorly performing teacher. There was no helper in that center so it may have been an issue for the teacher. Yet Akhila blamed the teacher, saying that the teacher could use Rs500 (US\$6) from her salary to pay someone to help her. Akhila reasoned that if the teacher was interested in the job, she could do it. The office did not view that the staffing problem could prevent the teacher from working well. Understandably, workers were angered by such attitudes, which they considered as complete disregard for their difficulties, and some used it to justify their survivalist strategies.

For example, as mentioned earlier, in Ramani's area parents were keen on English language instruction. But Ramani could not offer English instruction and instead suggested her office let her serve another area with beneficiaries that were poorer and "didn't care about English". Yet their location was further away and it was difficult for them to commute to Ramani's center. For many years Ramani tried to convince her officials and local politicians to open a center closer to the poorer beneficiaries' homes but as her attempts failed, she became disgruntled and too tired to put more effort to change the situation.

Mala was another survivalist, who like Ramani, faced similar challenges and on top of that, had strained relations with her block officer. Working in a better-off Chinnapuram area Mala did not see her role as very beneficial to the middle-class residents. They wanted better quality facilities and care, but Mala could not offer it partly because of the problems she faced at work. As Mala could not deliver up to parents' standards, she excused herself by claiming that her "real beneficiaries," whom she *wanted* to serve, i.e., poorer parents in need of a palwadi, lived further away and were reluctant to travel a long distance to her palwadi. She used this logic to justify herself in "rationing" the quality of care.

Besides that, Mala also struggled with her helper Vera. Vera was lethargic, did not maintain hygiene and cleanliness in the center, and put little effort to bring more children to the center. The center attracted only a handful of children. Finally, Mala also blamed her block officer for her inability to spend more time in the center. The officer made her frequent the office for administrative work "as a punishment" for doubting her authority. Mala once questioned her officer why she did not support her when Mala had reported on her former helper refusing to clean a toilet. The block officer did not like being talked back to and started retaliating by asking Mala to complete various administrative tasks that are supposed to be completed by a superintendent in

the office. This resulted in Mala being frequently absent from the center leaving Vera alone to manage the children. Mala's story illustrates workplace constraints contributed to her withdrawal and apathy toward work.

Another teacher, Girija also explained how the dual pressures from the neighborhood and supervisors allowed her and many other teachers to justify why they were disengaged from work. Working in an old tenement area Girija was constantly "pestered" by parents about the conditions of her palwadi, which had no toilet, or tiles, was small, had drainage issues, and overall was in a very poor condition. Parents also wanted better food and teaching. Meanwhile, Girija's supervisors demanded more enrollments, and "tortured her asking for reports constantly and immediately." Moreover, Girija was also annoyed that she incurred many expenses, for cylinders, vegetables, or school supplies, that were not reimbursed or took a long time to do so. She had to run her family with an already low salary. Girija could not satisfy either parents nor supervisors' demands and felt constant tension which made it difficult to stay motivated at work: "how do you expect us to work with so little salary and such burdensome tasks?" In short, additional workplace problems, such as having to work with underperforming or without helpers, strained relations with the supervisors or block officers, lack of support from officials and poor infrastructure, were among the key issues that informed how teachers viewed their role.

Personal constraints

Professional identities can also be shaped by individuals' personal constraints. Apart from factors, like education and social identity, street-level bureaucrat literature generally talks very little about how personal matters may interfere with bureaucrats' work responsibilities. But there is an emerging literature, mostly from the Majority countries that highlights how individual and family circumstances affect frontline workers' discretion. For example, Christopher Hyun, Alison Post,

and Isha Ray (2018) investigated what influenced valve operators' compliance with a new initiative to make water schedules more transparent in a water utility in Bangalore. They find that valvemen's compliance with this transparency task was affected by their individual and family financial circumstances. Valvemen who struggled to meet family obligations and had to earn additional money through other means complied at lower rates. Struggling to cope with multiple demands, they perceived the new task as an "add-on" and deprioritized them compared to their core responsibilities. Personal matters can thus interfere with street-level work, especially when bureaucrats operate in highly under-resourced environments, and are extremely underpaid and overworked.

Women who are ICDS foot soldiers are particularly stretched for time. They are usually the primary caregivers at home and have to complete many time-consuming duties, like cooking and cleaning before they leave for work. Having family support at home is crucial to alleviate some pressures at home and prevent them from spilling over into women's work life.

Heightened family care responsibilities could inhibit the meaning-making of one's professional role, steering workers towards a less demanding occupational orientation. Teacher Meenakshi's story could help illustrate this. Meenakshi had two children, one of whom was a 20-year-old son with significant mental and physical disabilities. Meenakshi was the primary caretaker of her son since birth and received little support from her husband. Every day Meenakshi had to take her son to a special school and had frequent doctor's appointments. He was also the reason why Meenakshi did not want to start this job as she could not imagine when she would have time and energy to work. But somehow, she was convinced and started working with some leniency from her officials. Because of heavy time demands that her son's care required Meenakshi had permission from her office to come to work later. Supervisors pitied her and let her skip some

meetings or leave early. Meenakshi did not articulate that her son was an excuse for compromising on service delivery, but during my visits, it was visible that she did worry about him while at work. She attended many personal calls regarding her son and sometimes brought him to work with her. Meenakshi's personal problems spilled over to her workplace and even if she wanted to do a good job the constraints were too high.

For many other teachers, their health conditions or age also impelled them to slow down and think more about which tasks were most important and what could be left undone. For example, Sumathi used her health and family obligations as an excuse to limit her engagement with beneficiaries. Sumathi was 45 years old and suffered from diabetes and leg pain, which she attributed to the heavy weight she put on after childbirth. After doing her household chores in the morning she would arrive at her center nearly exhausted and would try to sit or even lie down. Instead of sitting at her desk (a common way how teachers are physically situated in their centers) or going around the neighborhoods, she used to lie down on the floor and stretch her legs. The minute lunch was over she would go to do reporting work at home or in the office. Deteriorating physical well-being necessitated some workplace sacrifices.

Individuals' age is a noted factor that can affect bureaucrat discretion (Portillo 2012). Sharon Portillo finds that middle-aged and older local government officials in the US were more likely to derive their authority from their rank and social status allowing them to bend rules, whereas young officials had to rely on and invoke rules to establish their authority. Aging allowed white men to change their response strategies to various challenges at work. This was not true for women and people of color. Although in my study I did not seek to systematically identify how age shaped workers' perceptions of themselves and their role, many teachers and officials believed that there were differences in strengths and weaknesses between younger and older teachers. Block

officers recognized that for teachers above age 50, it became difficult to complete certain tasks, such as entering data on mobile phones or mobilizing people for events. Yet older teachers were often more experienced in preschool activities and had practical knowledge of how to interact with beneficiaries. Younger workers often lacked skills in handling children and doing preschool. Thus, it is likely that the effects of age manifested in one's role consideration.

Some teachers acknowledged that their age was a factor in how they perceived what they were able to do at work. Mala was 48 years old and opined that "no one should expect a 48-year-old teacher to perform at the same level as a 28-year-old teacher," especially in organizing events. Mala was unsettled that even teachers who were about to retire were asked to implement tasks the same way as younger workers. According to her, it was not fair and older teachers should not have to go to the same extent as younger ones. Mala admitted that she reached a point where she was too tired, and "could not keep running to the office for reports." She preferred to stay in her center with children "but not running around." Age was not a determining reason for how one performed, but age correlated with poorer health making it difficult to cope with challenging workloads.

The official rhetoric was that all workers received (the same) salary, so no one could be excused or given favors. In practice, higher officials often considered teachers' personal and family circumstances and how that may have affected workers' performance. As mentioned earlier, they granted more favors or concessions when they felt that workers had genuine struggles with their health or at home. They did not want women to lose a government job that was important to the family. Yet, they also knew it was difficult to replace the worker, as hiring was not in their control.

In sum, many teachers had various health and personal problems or faced greater constraints at work. Sometimes these constraints were extremely high and pushed workers towards withdrawal and survivalism. At other times, workers who held on to the constructed meanings of

their role managed to minimize the impact of their challenges. Teachers with heightened educational or social work orientation placed greater importance on their occupational role and were able to manage difficult situations and conflicts without radically compromising on their key duties.

Socialization

Teachers' perceptions of their occupational role were also informed by their socialization and social position. Teachers, who came from very different social contexts than their beneficiaries, often grappled with differences in people's behaviors. This required nurturing empathy and understanding of residents' circumstances. To do so, workers had to suspend judgment and build connections. It does not mean that teachers who were more similar to their beneficiaries were naturally gifted to be more empathetic towards their beneficiaries, but the barriers to understanding their position were lower. For example, teachers and helpers who grew up in villages often remarked on how they perceived the urban environment, and slums in particular, as a hostile and unpleasant space to work in. Such teachers often struggled to accept that they did not receive automatic respect and authority when working in a slum area. This often diminished their self-perceptions as superior unless they exerted effort in connecting with the community and demonstrating the value of their presence.

For example, Meenakshi was unsettled about how children and parents in Mamalpuram addressed her, and in general, how differently they behaved compared to the village where she grew up. In Mamalpuram, residents called all workers the same name, *ayah* (helper), without distinguishing who is the teacher and who is the helper. Meenakshi was irked by people's inability to recognize who had the higher status in her center:

Here, half the people do not see (or address) us as teachers. They call us '*Ayamma*' (meaning helper). We ignore it. It's not possible to correct them. A few call us teachers.

They will call the helper ‘akka’ (sister) or ‘teacher’. Children will call us both teachers. Sometimes I would have hit a kid for being mischievous, or she (the helper) would have done something (hit the kid). We don’t hit them generally, only when they don’t sleep, do we hit them. And the child would have reported at home. Parents would ask the following day, ‘did you hit my child?’ I will ask the kid, ‘when did I hit you?’ Then he will say, ‘not you, that teacher...’

Meenakshi explained how confusion was unavoidable when both she her and helper Kanmani were addressed by residents the same way. Figuring out the details about various incidents was an additional burden working in a slum.

Another point in Meenakshi’s comment was about how she had to explain to parents why she or her helper hit their child, which was more acceptable in a village context. She would tell parents that she hit only lightly and that there was probably a good reason for why she did so—“the kid must have made some mistake.” She would tell parents that they should first interrogate their child for what ‘misbehavior’ they were hit before they talked to Meenakshi about the incident.

Meenakshi would also turn the complaint into an opportunity for ‘educating’ the parents: “I tell them to teach the kids not to make mistakes (be mischievous). Only then kids will also understand that the mistake is on their part and that is why their mother is also scolding them.” Meenakshi’s interactions with parents were colored by her judgment and perceptions of slum residents’ ignorance and cultural inferiority.

Meenakshi often spoke about how many parents in Mamalpuram had little understanding of the role of the teacher and parenting in general. She attributed the lack of respect conferred on her by her parents to their lifestyle and culture. As discussed in chapter 2, residents here were dirty, and rowdy and did not know how to live a ‘decent’ life. It was impossible to change them. Meenakshi also deemed the area rather unsafe and had stored a police contact in case of any problem. She described how difficult it was for her to work in the area and visit the homes of beneficiaries for surveys or other work:

so many nasty incidents have happened—they would use vulgar words to scold us. We have to conduct this survey every year. If they were drunk, they would ask ‘how much do you want?’, in a filthy tone from where they are sitting or lying down. They would be drunk and we would be afraid, and won’t stand there...”

While it was true that the area had some “anti-social” elements, many parents were relocated to the neighborhood against their will and were themselves worried about the well-being and safety of their families. For Meenakshi, the area remained a hostile and foreign environment, especially when compared to her native village. Meenakshi grew up in a village and moved to Chennai after marriage, as was common for many women in my study. Meenakshi longed for the calm village life where she would be respected, and where her work would be much easier:

in the village, work would be “free” (meaning relaxed). There will not be so much running around like here. Children in villages will listen to what we say. Most importantly, the beneficiary population would be smaller and more controllable. There is respect for teachers in the village. They have high regard. The teacher herself would feel happy. I belong to a village—my mother’s village. In my village, the palwadi teacher comes from a nearby city which is about 7 km away. The village looks up to her; they say the teacher is here. During corona vaccination also, she went all over the village to cover people and educate them. I have heard people talk about the teacher with respect. I feel so happy to note that. They treat the palwadi teacher in the same way they treat the school teacher.

Meenakshi’s socialization in a rural context shaped how she perceived the “slum” neighborhood and how she adjusted her role and approach to work. Being already overloaded with work and dealing with family responsibilities, Meenakshi became a survivalist and adjusted by doing the minimum. She could not command automatic respect simply by just telling residents that she was a teacher. Working in a place like Mamalpuram and attaining respect required consistent presence, building ties, and developing compassion. For a teacher to see oneself as a professional or social worker in such a context necessitates a relentless effort to develop an insight into the position of the “other” and their actual needs. It was thus an additional challenge for teachers who were already struggling with various constraints.

Other teachers and helpers who came from villages also remarked how different their work and interactions would be in a village compared to the city. The social norms of many villages, where caste was still a large structuring force, carried over to the city, allowing workers to explicitly classify residents by caste and attach subtle markers of inferiority. The palwadi job in the city required a shift in the mindset or at least some coping strategies to serve people whose background and socialization were different from that of workers’.

For example, when she first came to this job in the Sambpur area, helper Sushila had to repress her prejudice to be able to work with poor, low-caste parents and children. Sushila was from a decent OBC community from a village, and it was extremely hard for her to get used to cleaning children’s poop, vomit, and other nasty things of lower status children. While she adapted to doing this, because cleaning was her main and unavoidable responsibility, she still missed the village life, where the entrenched caste relations would have allowed her some escape from such duties. Socialization was a strong but not a determining force, and new personal and professional experiences could change workers’ views and self-conceptions.

Exposure

Teachers’ professional identities were also informed by their experiences outside the ICDS. For example, Vidya, who was a preschool professional, created meaning in her job not just through interactions with parents, but also through experiences she gained working as a primary school teacher previously. Before the ICDS, Vidya worked at an NGO-based school where she picked up teaching techniques and work ethics, such as punctuality and following schedules, from a senior teacher who acted as her mentor. When she joined the ICDS, Vidya brought her experiences and ideas about teaching to the palwadi. She ‘professionalized’ her center by maintaining a lot of toys, charts, pictures, and other educational materials, based on how it was done in her primary school.

Support from Montessori teachers introduced both Vidya and Revathi, discussed earlier, to new ideas about how to effectively engage children in learning. Vidya also had an incomplete bachelor's degree and could teach children some English. Thus, the interplay between Vidya's training, exposure, and matching parents' expectations for schooling facilitated Vidya's professional orientation.

Teacher Divya represented another case, where exposure to NGOs and interactions with communities fostered a 'social mission' orientation to work. Divya confessed that she was not always socially minded, but awareness about the importance of investing in children's growth and development came to her gradually, as she internalized it through the ICDS training but also interactions with local NGOs. Divya recounted how several years ago she was going through some family issues and did not care much about what was going on in the center or the neighborhood. She described feeling like she was going through depression. At work, she completed her duties as required but she did not cultivate an attachment to the area or the job. But at some point, she started noticing the activities that were carried out by local NGOs, especially one local activist Tarun, who sought to improve children's educational attainment through sports. Looking at Tarun's efforts Divya realized that his involvement with children and the wider community could be a meaningful endeavor for her too, and she thought to herself:

Even Sir would have some personal issues, but he is still doing things for society, so why cannot I do something too instead of being stuck in my problems? Only later did I understand that it is not our problems that compose our life, but it is helping others. After realizing this my thought processes changed towards helping others. Some people constantly think only about others and put others' needs in front of theirs. I feel bad for losing so many active years. If only I had realized it earlier, I could have done and learned so much.

One thing led to another and for four years now Divya has collaborated with Tarun and other NGOs in helping children and improving her center. They worked on identifying donors for children who were severely malnourished to get them nutritious food supplies or Divya would reach out to other

NGOs to obtain resources for her center. At the same time, Divya also internalized her accountability to the institutional mission, that having underweight kids in the area posed a risk. She would be blamed that she did not do her job well if any one of them died. So she had to find ways to ensure kids in her area gained weight.

It was not always easy to put in extra work because some NGOs rejected her and told her to ‘ask for things from the government.’ Yet Tarun’s support and engagement have helped her to stay motivated. Now, whenever she needs some help in organizing events or activities she reaches out to Tarun or some other NGOs that appreciate her efforts and views her favorably. For example, recently there was an event called “Green day celebration” to promote the environment, prosperity, and healthy eating habits. For the event, Divya decorated her center with various green attributes, asked parents to send children in green colored clothes, and obtained tree saplings from an NGO to distribute to children for planting at home. Divya’s goal was to instill in children the benefits of eating green leafy vegetables.

Interactions with community organizations reinforced Divya’s social orientation. Over time, Divya became known as a good and dedicated teacher who cared about the community. A local NGO would invite her to talk to adolescents and other people about nutrition. She would be paid some Rs 300 (about US\$3.5) for taking the class. To her it felt like big money, though she had a comfortable life and money was not her biggest issue. But being selected to address a gathering made her feel special as her colleagues were not invited to do so. Divya enjoyed talking to people and gaining respect as an authority on the subject. These interactions and engagements helped to compensate for the low pay and lack of job benefits. She used to be disappointed in not getting any rewards or promotions for doing a good job. To console and motivate herself Divya kept reminding herself that she was doing “service work”.

In sum, interactions with communities and NGOs produced intrinsic rewards contributing to the construction of meaningful occupational self. Literature has long established how the nature of care work produces significant intrinsic rewards (Morgan et al. 2013). Yet for many palwadi workers without adequate compensation, intrinsic rewards were not a sufficient incentive to become altruistic quality-seekers. Following Vrinda Marwah (2021), professionalism in care work requires the integration of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards, in other words, the co-constitutive power of love and money.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has elucidated how weaknesses in top-down accountability, extending from workers to their supervisors and their organization, have contributed to uneven quality of childcare provision across place. On the organizational design front, the main issues were the lack of professionalization, ineffective supervision and few incentive mechanisms. From the implementation perspective, there were insufficient staff at all levels, high workloads, and conflicting demands. These constraints combined to result in weak supervision. Even supervision that was relatively effective prioritized data collection and reporting, while neglecting the relational aspects of caregiving.

Supervision also involved distinguishing between good and poor-performing teachers, who received customized monitoring, support, and discipline. Supervisors took a hands-off approach with the former group, monitoring them less frequently, allowing for greater flexibility, and being more lenient. In contrast, underperforming teachers were subject to tighter monitoring, sometimes even micromanagement and sanctions. These approaches contributed to an uneven sense of autonomy among teachers, which affected how they prioritized and carried out their work tasks. Ultimately, good performers were rewarded with more autonomy, while poor performers had their

autonomy diminished, resulting in cycles of virtuous or vicious performance. Nevertheless, it was noteworthy to find supervisors like Vasanthi, who instead of micromanaging and sanctioning, were supportive and empowering to all teachers. This demonstrated that with appropriate conditions and training, more supervisors could be encouraged to follow Vasanthi's example.

The organizational constraints and various demands from both ICDS and parents allowed teachers construct their own meanings about their job role and adapt services in ways they deemed suitable to themselves and their residents. Teachers developed diverse professional identities that influenced their autonomy and willingness to act on their perceptions of parents' care needs and expectations.

Teachers, who were socially or educationally oriented, were more inclined to feel that they had the autonomy to adapt care services to meet the needs of parents. They were able to seek and deliver quality in order to reduce the likelihood of parents' withdrawal of their children from palwadi. In their everyday activities, *preschool professionals* prioritized children's educational and developmental needs, viewing themselves as teachers whose role was to contribute to children's school readiness. *Social workers* did not concentrate as much on children's preschool activities as they sought to provide a variety of social supports to their communities in ways they considered important, such as improving children's nutrition, ensuring reliable daycare, counseling pregnant mothers and the wider community.

In contrast, *rule followers* and *survivalists* exhibited a diminished sense of autonomy. They prioritized following immediate orders, mainly focusing on data collection and reporting. Their engagement and interactions with children relied heavily on their rationalizations about parents as acquiescent, leading to minimal and sometimes insufficient or unacceptable care practices. Moreover, they often sought opportunities to skip work or reduce their effort.

Finally, I have also argued that the extent to which more professionalized workers sought quality and achieved it, was mediated by bottom-up accountability. The interactions with better-off parents activated teachers' educational or social orientation among those who had the capacity to do so. In some poor areas, bottom-up accountability pressures also induced social workers to seek more quality in childcare practices. Without these bottom-up pressures, 'professionals' could fulfill their duties adequately, but they were unlikely to be proactive in meeting the needs of parents. On the other hand, teachers who were less professionalized and worked in areas lacking bottom-up accountability pressures (credible exit threat or collective agency) were the least likely to seek and deliver quality childcare.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined a critical question of welfare provision: why do public childcare centers, which are supposedly standardized, offer unequal levels of care? Through multi-sited ethnographic research, including numerous interviews with childcare workers and parents in 15 neighborhoods, I have demonstrated that childcare quality is profoundly shaped at the delivery level through feedback loops between teachers and parents. My primary focus in evaluating the quality of childcare has been on children's vital basic needs: encompassing feeding, toileting, learning, and hygiene. These may seem like trivial routine practices, but their impact on a child's life can be far-reaching and long-lasting. In a country where malnutrition is persistently and stubbornly high, fulfilling these basic needs can be crucial for children's survival and healthy development. Examining whether a child is served eggs at the childcare center or given to eat them at home, or whether a teacher assists a child during mealtimes or allows them to eat independently can significantly impact their nutrition outcomes.

My findings offer a new mechanism to explain why the quality of standardized public service may vary across places. The dominant explanations point to organizational factors, à la Weberian incentives, monitoring, professionalization and career opportunities. In places characterized by deep scarcity and where meritocratic structures are lacking, scholars point to bureaucratic norms, tacit rules, procedures or bureaucratic ethos as drivers of workers' performance. Yet while highly significant, these organizational influences still do not explain variations on the ground. Others point to downward accountability and argue that pressure from citizens operationalized through political agents, brokers or neighborhood associations can help explain why some areas attain better public goods than others. I show that these explanations are also insufficient, as childcare quality often varies regardless of the presence of local intermediaries.

Nevertheless, building on this literature and integrating it with the theory of street-level bureaucrats, I advance the notion of *place-based class and caste distinctions*, which shape bureaucrat accountability and efforts on the ground, ultimately influencing how care services are delivered.

My argument centers on how the *social space* of the neighborhood infuses state-society relations. I have shown that teachers draw on the social markers of the neighborhood, namely class, caste, and the strength of collective agency to form perceptions of parents' needs and expectations. These perceptions inform teachers about what standards and quality of care are acceptable in their neighborhood. These perceptions tend to classify residents into distinct categories of poor slum dwellers and better-off residents. In most poor neighborhoods, due to their lower-class and lower-caste status teachers view parents as less demanding for higher care quality. Conversely, in better-off areas, teachers perceive parents as 'decent' residents, with higher expectations for childcare quality. Whether teachers act on these perceptions and adjust care quality to the neighborhood context is mediated by their professional identity.

As noted by other scholars (Watkins-Hayes 2009), professional identities are fundamental to how frontline workers view their role and approach their tasks. The way workers perceive their occupational role and define success in their performance is crucial in determining their motivation to pursue high-quality work or compromise it. Due to the lack of training and support from ICDS, workers have developed their own interpretations of their role in the organization. Based on my research, I have identified four distinct types of professional identities among teachers: *preschool professionals*, *social workers*, *rule followers* and *survivalists*. Teachers who view their role in professional terms (*preschool professionals* or *social workers*) are inclined to deliver better quality care, especially when they perceive parents as demanding it. Fearing that parents would withdraw

their kids, which can invoke greater institutional supervision and loss of respect and reputation, teachers *preschool professionals* or *social workers* seek to satisfy the parents' demands for quality.

Teachers who struggle to derive meaning in their professional identities (*rule followers* or *survivalists*), are guided more by immediate demands of their superiors than by what they perceive parents and communities might need. In so doing, they often resort to shortcuts in fulfilling children's basic needs and at best provide only the minimum care required. Rather loose institutional supervision as well as structural challenges in attracting preschool children allows such teachers to escape responsibility, as long as they demonstrate some effort to their superiors. The self-conceptualizations of *rule followers* or *survivalists* are also informed by significant workplace or personal constraints which outweigh the pressures from residents. Thus, professional identities determine how teachers actualize their perceptions about parents' childcare expectations.

Importantly, the quality of care is shaped not just by teachers' discretion but also by parents' actions and inactions to which teachers respond. Contrary to teachers' perceptions of parents as acquiescent to lower quality care, parents in poor areas have similar desires for quality childcare as their better-off counterparts. However, due to their lack of alternatives and power to make demands, parents in poorer areas often engage in *pragmatic compromises*—they accept lower quality care as long as they derive some benefits that they value. Rather than being viewed as passive, parents are in a way strategic actors, who seek to improve their situations in the face of considerable constraints. Making trade-offs between certain aspects of childcare service to attain valuable support in caregiving is common among mothers with financial constraints in both high- and low-income settings (Chaudry 2004; Alfars 2015). Similarly, parents in poor neighborhoods of Chennai are often compelled to settle for the level of care they are provided with. Many residents also do not consider asking for better care, especially when they assume that the standards they

are receiving are commonplace. Some parents may even come to regard that substandard childcare they receive as good quality. This complacency and inability to challenge care providers is in turn constructed as acquiescence by teachers who feel that the quality and standards they offer are sufficient for the residents. These dynamics between parents and teachers reveal the intricate and hidden ways that state power operates in shaping the provision of care.

While in many cases parents concede to the status quo in childcare provision, others communicate their reservations regarding hygiene practices, feeding or learning. They engage with teachers through inquiries and various expressions of dissatisfaction but often without success. It is not uncommon for workers to justify their approach towards providing care or other issues, such as faulty restrooms, inadequate water supply or a lack of time for educational instruction, by pointing fingers at higher-ups and the government. Without proper channels for grievance redress, parents have few avenues for recourse. The best strategy for parents is then to compromise on quality until their children are old enough to go to school.

Occasionally, parents' concerns can be addressed, and care quality can be improved, but this usually requires demonstration of collective agency at the neighborhood-level. When parents engage in claims-making individually or together, they can exhibit power and achieve better care practices within the limits that teachers can operate in. This power derives from and is reinforced by the presence of certain social elements, such as a history of successful civic activism, social capital and cohesion, and/or effective intermediaries. These 'elements' can induce and amplify residents' agency to voice their grievances and facilitate their resolution. Parents' claim-making succeeds by making teachers aware that they are monitored by residents and that residents have the capacity to escalate issues if their grievances are not addressed. Although the specific configuration of the strategic social factors that induce collective agency may differ on a case-by-

case basis, it is evident that neighborhoods lacking these social forces are less likely to achieve their desired outcomes.

While poor residents lack the power to prevent teachers from compromising on care, better-off parents can avoid having to compromise by using their voices and economic (or social) capital to find satisfactory alternatives and exit from services they consider subpar. In so doing residents' voice and/or exit signal to teachers what parents prioritize and the potential repercussions if those priorities are not met. Concomitantly, teachers working in a better-off area are also more likely to develop a more professional orientation to childcare provision than working in a poor area.

Taken together, how people view and understand the state informs how the state views and acts towards its citizens, which then structures their subsequent political action, or lack thereof (Annavarapu and Levenson 2021). By documenting and explaining these feedback loops between teachers and parents, and between teachers and their organization, this dissertation answers calls for more dialectical approach to understanding state-society dynamics and offers an account of relational political ethnography (ibid). It also goes beyond interactions between state and citizens, to reveal how institutional structures and forces within the state, in this case the ICDS system, are also influential for the kinds of frontline workers the state "produces".

MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN CARE PROVISION

This dissertation challenges the prevailing narrative that ICDS centers in India are uniformly dysfunctional and plagued by corruption (Biswas and Verma 2009; Verma, Gupta, and Birner 2018). By examining the significant variations in teachers' childcare practices, I demonstrate that despite chronic underfunding and understaffing, some centers are able to provide relatively high-quality care. These dedicated teachers invest time and effort in creating nurturing environments, with clean and well-equipped spaces that foster children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and

nutritional development. However, such cases of *care* often go unacknowledged in academic accounts of public childcare in India. By examining the driving forces behind these cases, we can gain a deeper understanding of how frontline workers can create spaces of nurture and love in contexts of multiple organizational constraints and scarcity.

I argue that teachers' *capacity to care*, conditional on teachers having the capacity in the first place, is most commonly activated by the exit threat of parents. When parents have the option to withdraw their children from a center they find unsatisfactory, teachers are more inclined to invest in providing better quality care in order to retain enrollments, maintain their reputation, and avoid tighter oversight from the institution. Teachers' motivation and practices are thus informed by both residents' possession of economic and cultural capital that signals their expectations as well as teachers' internal consideration of their occupational role as an *educator* or *social worker*. To be able to meet the demands of parents, and to develop the capacity to care teachers require some degree of autonomy from overwhelming workplace and personal constraints. The capacity to care is then further activated and motivated by parents' potential withdrawal from services. Thus, the exit threat is the most powerful incentive when teachers develop a strong attachment to the institutional goal of providing preschool services. Such teachers exert more effort in learning, feeding and looking after other basic needs of children compared to those who are detached from institutional mission and lack a strong sense of occupational identity.

It is, however, important to acknowledge the efforts of all workers, even those who may lack the capacity to provide good care. Many teachers show up to work and provide at least a bare minimum of care, which is remarkable considering the challenging conditions under which they operate. Their daily schedule is hectic and filled with a range of responsibilities, including preschool activities, record maintenance, distribution of ration, growth monitoring, home visits,

counselling, and organizing awareness events. Juggling multiple tasks and being inundated with additional ad hoc requests and reporting makes it very difficult for teachers to stay motivated and even to identify their priorities at any given moment. In fact, the government's Planning Commission recognized many years ago that the job description of workers is too elaborate for them to cope with, and it is clearly not possible to put in 11 hours of work daily (Planning Commission 1982). Yet, despite this recognition, the government has done little to change the situation.

Working in the care sector can be incredibly challenging, both physically and mentally. The conditions of the workplace environment can make it difficult for teachers to even want to show up to work. Palwadi workers are often required to bring heavy ration bags directly to people's homes and travel around the area carrying heavy equipment for children's growth monitoring, even in scorching heat or pouring rain. Teachers may face resistance in certain communities where locals are unwilling to participate in programs. They may also have to deal with harassment from individuals in the area, which can make them feel uncomfortable and even unsafe. Despite these challenges, teachers must continue to show dedication and build trust in the community, because care work cannot happen without people's participation.

The challenges of care work extend beyond the workplace, spilling into women's personal and home space and time. During interviews, teachers often recalled how they brought reporting work home or had to work on weekends for election or vaccine duties. These responsibilities created tension at home, particularly when women were not able to prepare meals for the family. Sometimes even family members had to help out with teachers' work. With time stretched so thin, teachers may not have enough time to rest and take care of themselves. All these difficulties put a great physical strain on the workers and can have a negative impact on their health and well-being.

These challenges persist because the state continuously devalues women's care labor. While teachers are supposed to strictly follow rules and procedures, their work is considered voluntary and something that women are naturally equipped to do—with empathy to contribute to the welfare of society for a small honorarium (Sreerekha 2017). According to the Supreme Court of India, teachers do not hold “civil post” and do not carry out any function of the state, and thus their work remains ‘voluntary’ (ibid). Although in Tamil Nadu teachers view themselves as government workers, they are contractually honorary workers who receive an honorarium. This highlights the role of the state in perpetuating the devaluation of care labor carried out by women.

From the very beginning, the Indian government has positioned teachers as local women who voluntarily care for children, akin to parents (CIRCUS 2006). As a result, they are given an honorarium for their community service, rather than being recognized as professionals working for the government. This reflects the government's belief that women have an inherent inclination towards mothering and are best suited for caregiving roles, effectively categorizing women's caregiving as voluntary work. By doing so, the welfare state perpetuates the marginalization of women's labor, exploiting their status as mothers to produce care (Sreerekha 2017).

While economic benefits and improving their children's education are the main motivations for most women to work in this job, receiving wages does not automatically equip women with the skills needed to provide quality care to others, especially to the most marginalized groups. Being a mother does not inherently confer knowledge about caring for non-family members. In fact, I noticed that many teachers lack the necessary training and struggle with basic caregiving tasks, such as consoling toddlers or engaging them in activities. The inadequate training and professionalization of workers can be attributed to the presumption that women possess a natural

ability to care for children. This assumption ignores the need for proper training and skill development for effective care work.

Therefore, it is not surprising that many teachers may deliver only the bare minimum, but it is a surprise when they go the extra mile given the challenging conditions they face. Despite these difficulties, it is impressive that many teachers remain committed to their job and continue working with limited resources, support, and recognition. Perhaps one way for some women to cope with these constraints is to seek meaning in their work by focusing on what parents care about and dedicating themselves to the educational mission of their organization. Doing well at work provides pleasure and satisfaction when parents, and occasionally officials recognize their efforts. However, others may cope by withdrawing from the institution and not caring about how their work is done or what others think about it as long as they can avoid sanctions. Nevertheless, most women remain hopeful that their situation in terms of wages and benefits will improve one day.

RELATIVELY OPTIMISTIC TAKE ON EXIT THREAT

Scholars of civil society may find it disappointing that most parents' ability to secure higher quality childcare is largely driven by the threat of exit, but I argue that we should view it as a partial success of the welfare state. The Tamil Nadu government's sustained investments in housing, social protection, nutrition, education, and health over previous generations (Srinivasan 2015; Sinha 2016; Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan 2021; Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022) have facilitated the accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital, allowing parents today to opt out of public childcare when it no longer meets their standards. Palwadis, which were established in the 1980s-90s to target slum dwellers in Chennai, initially had high demand and uptake as they provided crucial services of nutrition and daycare for many poor families. But over time the state has facilitated gradual slum upgrading and improvements, transforming many slum areas into

better-off neighborhoods where residents now have the income for and options of multiple childcare alternatives. With increasing incomes and rising educational aspirations for English language instruction (and decline in fertility), the demand for palwadis has dwindled among many better-off residents.

Slum upgrading and development into vibrant, lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Chennai were the result of state-led public housing projects implemented throughout the 20th century. Chennai has historically been known as a slum city due to the influx of migrants, and formation of many large settlements of Paraiyar (Dalit) communities (Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022). Starting in 1950s, to address housing shortages for low-income residents and to “clear” slums, the Tamil Nadu state implemented many urban development programs, with varying degrees of success (Coelho 2016). The most successful programs were those that produced affordable housing through sites and services and in-situ slum upgrading schemes. They had significant impacts on improving the housing and livelihoods of the urban poor. In the 1970s-80s, 76,000 slum households were provided with loans, tenure security, and civic infrastructure, enabling residents to construct their own houses and improve their neighborhoods (Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022). Due to their central locations or connectivity to transport, residents had a firm foothold in urban employment markets, and literacy levels had risen significantly due to their proximity to government and private schools (ibid). Over the next 30-50 years, many of these areas became thriving mixed-income neighborhoods with well-built single- or multi-storeyed houses, established amenities, and community infrastructure, including temples, schools, and clinics (Coelho 2016; Owens, Gulyani, and Rizvi 2018; Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022). Over the years, these massive public housing schemes generated significant positive effects not

just on neighborhood development, but also on people's sense of ownership, collective action, and capacity to command better public childcare.

However, since the 1990s, the government's approach to slum development has undergone a significant shift from upgrading to eviction and resettlement. I argue that this approach, in addition to its inherent problems, also has significant negative consequences on the provision of public services. The Tamil Nadu government's new policy to construct large-scale tenements on inexpensive land in the outskirts of the city was influenced by various national and global policy discussions on urban development. As part of this approach, households that are evicted from their previous homes are provided with small apartments at heavily subsidized prices through hire purchase agreements (Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022). These tenements, called 'integrated townships,' are equipped with schools, hospitals, palwadis, and playgrounds, but in reality, most of these amenities are installed several years after households are resettled (Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2022). Since 2000, nearly 60,000 such resettlement tenements have been built in the southern outskirts of Chennai alone (Coelho, Srivathsan, and Pattnam 2022).

The relocation of *slum* residents to the periphery, mostly from the central parts of Chennai, has led to segregation of low-income areas, further isolating working-class households from the rest of the city (ibid). Despite the government's efforts to provide all necessary amenities and social infrastructure, these resettlement colonies have been widely criticized for their inadequate facilities and poor living conditions. The negative impacts extend to the livelihoods, schooling, and socio-economic opportunities of resettled people (Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2022; Williams et al. 2022). Karen Coelho, Vanessa Peter and many others (2012; 2013; 2022) have documented at length how resettlement policies have disconnected people from their previous habitats and jobs, while poor quality housing and services, fears about personal safety, and stigma

associated with housing projects created downward mobility and sense of isolation. The alienation from the site has led to widespread vacancies. Additionally, many of these new sites suffer from a lack of social organization and collective activism, which could be harnessed to negotiate with the state and improve the living conditions in these habitats.²⁸

The government's policy, which marks a significant shift from self-help housing to the construction of large-scale low-income tenements can have a lasting effect on how public service providers, including teachers and health workers, approach and deliver services in these neighborhoods. By creating many stigmatized ghettos inhabited largely by Dalits (Coelho, Mahadevia, and Williams 2022), the state perpetuates neighborhood segregation by caste and class. This, in turn, reinforces how teachers (and likely other frontline workers) engage with differentiated neighborhoods, including whether and how they incorporate the "social status" of the place in service delivery. Despite its past successes in uplifting living standards of previous generations, the welfare state's current affordable housing policy diminishes economic opportunities and capabilities of the urban poor to attain similar levels of success.

While the history of housing policies can explain state's role in development of socio-economically diverse neighborhoods, rising aspirations for education have also contributed to better-off residents' desire to withdraw from palwadis. This desire is compounded by the growth of private preschools and increased aspirations for children's education. The liberalization of the economy in the 1990s provided a favorable environment for the proliferation of private playschools, kindergartens, and schools, enabling them to fulfill the increasing educational aspirations of parents. As English language proficiency becomes increasingly important for

²⁸ However, NGOs and activists have facilitated social mobilization in some early tenements, especially one of the first such colonies, called Kannagi Nagar, which has over time contribute to infrastructure and housing improvements over time.

securing jobs in the labor market and the decline in poverty rates, there has been a surge in parental demand for quality education and English-medium instruction, leading to the private sector outpacing the government in education provision (Kaul and Sharma 2017; Alcott et al. 2020). According to a survey of 4,300 parents across eight cities in India, some areas have witnessed private preschool enrollment rates as high as 90 percent (FSG 2015). Others report that even in rural India about 40% of children are enrolled in private schools (Kaul et al. 2017).

For many parents transitioning into middle-income status, the education sector can now offer relatively affordable private schools as a viable alternative (Kaul and Sharma 2017). Private schools, however, are not limited to the middle and upper classes, as many also offer low fees (though not necessarily much better quality) that make them accessible to poor households. As a result, many students have withdrawn from public schools across the country. To address declining enrollments, the Chennai government introduced lower and upper kindergarten (LKG and UKG) classes for children aged 3-5 in government schools in 2019. The initiative proved to be successful but the government is now considering discontinuing it due to lack of teachers and space to meet the demand (Express News Service 2022).

Education offers a path to social mobility and it also enhances one's position in the community—the affordability of private preschools itself demonstrates a household's elevated social standing. Children's capabilities, skills and exposure need to be developed at an early age so that they can succeed academically and in the competitive labor market (Donner 2008). Early childhood is presented as a phase during which children are particularly susceptible to the acquisition of skills, discipline and 'manners' through schooling (ibid). In particular, English language skills and English-medium education has become a precondition even for less prestigious jobs (Donner 2018). In lower-middle-class households, women with limited education often feel

inadequate in their ability to support their children's schooling in the English medium. To compensate for this, they turn to private institutions as a means of instilling English proficiency at an early age (Donner 2005). Despite facing severe financial challenges, many women working in domestic services or manufacturing strive to enhance their children's education to prevent them from being relegated to the same low-paying and stigmatized jobs (Pani and Singh 2014; Ray and Qayum 2009; Bowan 2015). Children's education as well as the right marriage alliances offer chances for better life not just for them but also for their parents (Dickey 2016).

The capacity to bear the expenses of private playschools or preschools, rather than relying on government schooling, is also regarded as a hallmark of a family's higher social status. On a personal level, education represents much more than just acquiring knowledge and skills. For many, it embodies their aspirations and ability for upward social and economic mobility, as well as their desire for personal refinement within a contemporary interpretation of 'tradition' (Donner 2008). Education, including at preschool level, serving as an ideology of middle-classness, plays a crucial role in shaping modern Indian citizens, and provides them with a means to signal their social status and sophistication in their everyday lives (ibid).

The ability of many low-income parents to achieve their educational aspirations for their children has been made possible by increasing household incomes, which are in part also a result of the welfare state's policies. According to Vijayabaskar and Kalaiyarasan (2021), the state's support for industrialization, sectoral diversification, and social protection policies for unorganized workers has resulted in higher growth rates of urban real wages compared to other economically thriving states like Maharashtra or Gujarat. The authors find that the average combined urban real daily wages in Tamil Nadu increased significantly, from INR 144 (USD\$1.75) in 1993-94 to INR 323 (USD\$3.93) in 2011-12, surpassing the growth rates of Maharashtra and Gujarat. In fact, wage

rates for urban casual laborers in Tamil Nadu are now the second highest in the country. Furthermore, the authors note that wage inequality between formal and informal sectors, as well as between Dalits and other caste groups, is lower in Tamil Nadu compared to most other states. This is also attributed to strong affirmative action policies in higher education.

In addition to pro-poor housing policies, industrialization, and welfare support for the informal sector, since late 1960s the Dravidian governments in Tamil Nadu have also made significant investments in expanding access to and quality of primary health and education. For instance, programs such as the Midday Meal Scheme, provide free meals to children in government schools. The reservation of seats in higher education and public employment has also ensured a socially diverse pool of talented and responsive professionals in the public sector. Taken together, all these investments have enabled a more inclusive accumulation of resources and capabilities among disadvantaged groups.

These welfare state policies that directly or indirectly increased the affordability of childcare alternatives for many lower-income people, put pressure on palwadis to provide quality learning if they want to attract and retain children. Palwadis, which have traditionally focused on nutrition, are finding that lunch meals and basic care are no longer sufficient, even for parents with limited financial resources. While the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program has been successful in universalizing access to childcare centers throughout India, it has failed to adequately address the issue of quality and institutional capacity (Kaul et al. 2017). The centers are often perceived solely as nutrition centers and are not seen as spaces for early learning and education. Consequently, palwadis are witnessing a decline in enrollments, with only the most economically disadvantaged families sending their children to these centers. To remain relevant,

ICDS and its frontline workers must pay heed to the aspirations of parents and become more responsive to citizens' needs.

There are some indications that the ICDS in Tamil Nadu is acknowledging the emerging trends and attempting to address them, but its current efforts are largely superficial and offer only minor improvements in quality. The system has yet to address the systemic issues related to the teachers' working conditions, which are essential for ensuring quality care. In an effort to attract more children, the Tamil Nadu ICDS has revised its focus to provide care for toddlers between the ages of 2 and 3, as opposed to the original target age range of 3-6. This change was prompted by the fact that children aged 3 and above can gain admission to public kindergartens. Additionally, the ICDS has introduced individual profile books to track children's development and certificates that can be used for admission to private schools. However, most teachers have not utilized these profile books, either due to a lack of time or inadequate knowledge and skills. Furthermore, parents still feel that palwadi certificates are insufficient or not considered valid by private schools. In recognition of the difficulties in attracting children, supervisors have also become more lenient and accepting of the status quo when teachers cannot bring children. Consequently, they often give up on working with teachers to improve quality, recognizing that palwadi standards cannot compete with those of private or even government kindergartens.

Many people, including ICDS functionaries and parents, are hopeful that the DMK government will bring about more significant changes. The government has promised to regularize palwadi teachers into the government payroll but so far there have been no signs of such efforts. Another reason for hope is that soon after being elected in 2021, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Stalin inaugurated a refurbished palwadi in his Kolathur Constituency in northern Chennai. The pictures of the palwadi posted on social media depict it as a high-end private playschool, complete

with colorful play equipment that parents would love to send their kids to. Yet, it might have been merely a one-time effort for his constituents. It remains to be seen if the state will take any serious steps towards investing not only in symbolic attributes and easy fixes but also in supporting and strengthening its frontline staff.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation offers implications for policy regarding the provision of early childhood care and education services. The world is facing a multi-dimensional crisis of care. Over 35 million children under five are left at home without adult supervision globally, while many others are raised in suboptimal environments, negatively impacting their development and lifetime opportunities (Samman et al. 2016; Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020). Additionally, an estimated 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries are living in ‘learning poverty,’ unable to read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school, with this figure rising to 80 percent in the poorest countries (Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020).

Childcare provision has both high costs and inadequate benefits for paid caregivers, who are often undervalued and undercompensated. Similarly, mothers’ economic opportunities are curtailed when they cannot access good care. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of childcare as an essential service that enables parents to work. As Elizabeth Warren has pointed out, childcare is a basic infrastructure similar to roads and bridges. Therefore, investing in childcare globally is now more critical than ever.

As many countries launch new childcare programs or expand existing ones, prioritizing investments in frontline workers and the contexts they work in can lead to significant payoffs in care quality, child outcomes, poverty reduction and benefits to society at large. The ICDS program is a valuable model that can provide important insights into other childcare systems and services

worldwide. By focusing on ICDS frontline workers and understanding the system's strengths and limitations, this dissertation offers some strategies to improve teachers' work conditions and care quality that may be relevant not just for India but also in other middle or low-income countries. I suggest that success of any positive change will depend on systematically enhancing the capacity, intrinsic motivation and support for all childcare workers.

Research shows that clarity of organizational goals is crucial to motivate and improve the performance of workers. However, constant shifts in policy priorities at higher levels, from nutrition to health to preschool education (Kaul and Sharma 2017) has limited ICDS's ability to focus on all care domains evenly and achieve desired outcomes. The ICDS has primarily focused on health and nutrition, while education has received inadequate attention (Rao et al. 2021). The perception of ICDS as primarily a nutrition program remains one of the most significant challenges, resulting in inadequate prioritization and implementation of preschool education (Rao 2005). To address this issue, ICDS needs to establish effective structures and communication strategies that prioritize all critical domains in children's development, including learning, nutrition, and health.

Akshay Mangla (2022) suggests that bureaucracies can achieve high-quality services by embracing norms that encourage deliberation and problem-solving. This requires assessing what tasks need to be completed, anticipating potential challenges such as ambiguity, interdepartmental coordination, societal engagement, and power differences. Deliberation can help bureaucrats and frontline workers clarify goals and establish means to achieve them. However, this may require a radical and long process of change.

Improving the quality of childcare also requires significant efforts to increase staff, provide training, and professionalize the workforce. Currently, a single service provider—consisting of a

teacher and a helper—caters to the needs of children from childbirth until age 6 and other beneficiaries, including pregnant and nursing women. While the holistic approach to children's development starting with pregnancy is commendable, the integrated provision of childcare, nutrition, and growth monitoring has generated challenges for planning and implementation. Teachers need comprehensive training in nutrition, education, and health to effectively implement tasks in each domain. Yet, experts question whether it is realistic to have one multi-purpose worker deliver all these services at once. With the current high workload that teachers have, it is unlikely that one person would possess all the necessary skills to provide all services to a high standard. This problem is exacerbated when teachers have to split their time between two centers due to unfilled vacancies.

To effectively tackle the issue of malnutrition and early childhood education promotion, the ICDS should consider increasing its staff numbers. Early childhood education experts, as well as workers themselves, suggest that at least one person should be dedicated solely to childcare, and another staff member should focus on nutrition and growth monitoring tasks. In the past, Tamil Nadu had both TINP and ICDS programs operating in parallel, with dedicated staff for nutrition and childcare domains. However, after the programs were merged, the Community Nutrition Worker position from the TINP workforce was not filled when it became vacant. The responsibilities of the palwadi teachers and the Community Nutrition Worker were combined into a single job position of palwadi worker/teacher. The World Bank, which financed these projects and demanded efficiency by cutting staff numbers initially, criticized this move in its completion report. The report noted that one person could not realistically manage all tasks, including pre-schooling, supplementary feeding, and health/nutrition education and counseling effectively (World Bank 2006).

There is a prevalent idea among policy-makers that the inclusion of an additional worker in the centers may yield positive outcomes. Notably, a recent large-scale randomized controlled trial conducted in Tamil Nadu demonstrates that an increase in staff numbers can contribute to improved learning outcomes for children. The experiment finds that adding a part-time worker in palwadis doubled net preschool instructional time and led to 0.29 and 0.46 increases in math and language test scores after 18 months for children who remained enrolled in the program. Rates of stunting and severe malnutrition were also lower in the treatment group. The benefits of increasing ICDS staffing also are expected to significantly outweigh the costs, even when considering conservative assumptions (Ganimian, Muralidharan, and Walters 2021). Considering the established understanding that lower student-teacher ratios are conducive to better educational outcomes for children, these findings are hardly surprising. Nevertheless, they could be valuable in convincing policymakers of the benefits of increasing palwadi staffing.

However, merely increasing staff numbers is insufficient to enhance quality without intensive training programs. Teachers need much more than one month of training to understand not just the technical aspects of child development but also practical, hands-on training on how to engage and care for children's needs. This is especially important when working with highly marginalized communities. Training needs to be oriented towards real-life scenarios and problems that workers encounter in the field. Besides training in early childhood education and care, professionalization should also address workers' cultural beliefs tied to individuals' and neighborhood social status.

Childcare providers' ingrained stereotypes can be challenged through cultural competency training and practices that are commonly used to train healthcare and social work professionals (World Bank 2013). Making cultural competence a performance indicator and holding providers

accountable for it can help guarantee that disadvantaged groups receive the same quality of service as advantaged groups, and make these groups feel at ease while accessing services. Cultural competence training teaches professionals to listen to and understand all individuals, regardless of their group identity, and to question preconceived notions and beliefs about certain groups and neighborhoods. It is essential for caregivers to fully embrace such training as a fundamental aspect of learning what constitutes high-quality care, rather than simply an optional addition. To address the demands of disadvantaged individuals, it is crucial for teachers to cultivate empathy and gain an understanding of their social and economic circumstances, and their background.

Care work is emotionally (and physically) intensive labor that produces multiple public goods, and thus should be accorded adequate compensation and recognition. There is a prevalent notion among economists that caregivers are paid less because they can be rewarded intrinsically through meaningful relationships with care recipients (England 2005). Other policy-makers and scholars fear that greater monetary rewards may dampen the intrinsic motivation of bureaucrats in public services or care work (Folbre 2012; Banuri and Keefer 2013; Rasul and Rogger 2018). However, these ideas contrast starkly with the desires of care workers, who often leave the workforce due to the lack of adequate monetary rewards and career opportunities (England 2005; Whitebook and Sakai 2004; Folbre 2012; Morgan, Dill, and Kalleberg 2013; Marwah 2021). Scholars have also argued that pay and work conditions also matters for how care work is delivered (Morgan 2005; Smith et al. 2007; Rush and Rush 2006; Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020). In a study of community health workers in north India, Vrinda Marwah (2021a, 2) shows that ‘love’ in care work cannot make up for a lack of monetary rewards; rather, adequate compensation keeps the care work going. In my study, the overwhelming demand of teachers, their union, and many supervisors was for higher salary and regularization of the workforce (Neelambaran 2022;

Sampath 2021), demonstrating that higher wages and career opportunities are critical motivators for care workers. Teachers and helpers expressed their willingness to work even harder if they were paid adequately. Others also show that low pay for palwadi teachers is also a significant demotivator in other states (John et al. 2020).

Besides low pay, palwadi workers also lack social status and recognition. Despite the respect and support that some teachers receive from their communities, this is not always enough to boost and sustain their morale. Teachers often compare themselves to other government workers and feel inferior within the larger government apparatus. The way in which municipal and state officials interact with teachers can also contribute to this sense of devaluation, with teachers feeling looked down upon as low-level cadres, akin to homemakers who are hired to feed and play with children for a few hours. This perception ignores the stress and complexities of their work and often leads to their labor being exploited for other government tasks, such as elections and public health campaigns. Additionally, the relative absence of men in the field has further contributed to the public perception of early childhood care and education as a low-status job (Rao et al. 2021). Overall, the situation of palwadi workers reflects a widespread devaluation of care work in capitalist societies, which cannibalize the provision of care and its infrastructure (Fraser 2022).

To augment the recognition of childcare jobs, which can improve the quality of early childhood care and education, it is important to consider how the organization can instill the *esprit de corps* or the intrinsic motivation among teachers. Research has shown that professionalization can be achieved through various means, such as meritocratic recruitment, better wages, greater autonomy and flexibility in role implementation, and public campaigns to enhance the prestige of care work (Tendler 1997; Schorr 1988; Honig 2018b; McDonnell 2017). Organizations and jobs that prioritize a sense of mission and purpose can be highly effective in attracting motivated

candidates who are passionate about the work they do (Resh, Marvel, and Wen 2018). This approach, when coupled with adequate recognition and support, can help to safeguard against shirking (Grindle 1997) and minimize the need for formalized monitoring and incentive schemes (Kaufman 1967). Additionally, recruiting workers who match the organization's mission could encourage them to perform better and live up to the expectations and trust placed in them by their clients and citizens in general. This is particularly important in childhood care and education, where supervision and measuring performance can be challenging (Devercelli and Beaton-Day 2020).

Re-institutionalizing parent-teacher associations is another important initiative that could be addressed relatively easily by ICDS. Although this is already part of the ICDS rulebook, it is not currently implemented in Chennai. According to one of the ICDS deputy directors, there is no need to enforce it in urban areas, as parents are busy and not interested in services.²⁹ However, activists and domestic workers' unions in Tamil Nadu have long demanded for parent-teacher associations to be institutionalized, as they are critical in facilitating co-production and improvements in care provision. Dedicated parent-teacher groups could bring parents and teachers together to deliberate on their concerns and solutions. However, for this to be successful, teachers need to be given time and support to participate in these meetings and parent selection should avoid elite capture.

At the same time, parents need greater awareness of what constitutes developmentally appropriate quality early childhood education. At present, parental demand for early education is often influenced by rote and repetitive learning, which may not be suitable for their children's developmental needs (Kaul and Sharma 2017). Consequently, parents opt for affordable private

²⁹ Author interview.

preschools that do not always offer desirable quality in developmentally appropriate practices (Kaul 2019). Parental awareness about quality could also strengthen community ownership of palwadis and generate co-production of better care services.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCH

To conclude, I offer two directions for future research. I suggest that by bringing urban and political sociology closer together, we can unlock productive synergies. Specifically, incorporating place-based analysis into studies on bureaucracy and state-society relations can offer new insights on how public services are shaped by local level social relations. Meanwhile, by examining state-society dynamics within and across neighborhoods, urban sociology has the potential to yield new understandings on how segregation interacts with state practices to perpetuate inequalities in childhood.

While there is a significant body of literature on welfare state and street-level bureaucracy that examines how public servants or frontline workers classify, categorize, and judge people, this literature often overlooks the role of place where services are provided. The concept of place-based social distinctions can help us examine how categorical inequalities based on caste, class, race, or others shape the perceptions, practices, and interactions of frontline agents with clients or citizens in the delivery of services. By incorporating place-based distinctions into state-society relations we can gain a deeper understanding of how the micro interactions between state agents and citizens are patterned and infused by social relations and characteristics of a place.

The concept can also help explain the kinds of frontline workers the state “produces”. Not only are public servants molded into specific types of agents by their organizations and personal experiences, but the unique environment and relationships they form *with the place of service delivery* also shapes their professional identity. Given rather high levels of social segregation that

exist in many metropolitan cities worldwide (Charles 2003; Ouyang et al. 2017; Heller et al. 2015), it is probable that frontline agents in these areas hold different attitudes and orientations to work dependent on the social characteristics of neighborhoods they serve. Public agents, who work in highly constrained environments and under a lot of pressure, are likely to be imbued with contextual knowledge (Lotta et al. 2022) that becomes an inseparable part of their professional identity. Thus, an essential area for future research is to investigate the extent to which good policies, organizational structures and bureaucratic norms can counteract the gravitational pull of neighborhood distinctions, leading to a professionalized workforce that is aligned with the goals of organization and delivers services consistently. This question is also relevant for policymakers and practitioners who seek to promote social justice and reduce disparities in urban areas.

I also suggest that urban sociology could benefit from integrating micro-level state-society dynamics to better understand how social processes produce place-based outcomes in childhood inequality. The scholarship on neighbourhood effects has a long-standing interest in how residential contexts affect children's outcomes. Extensive research demonstrates that neighborhoods impact children's cognitive and behavioral development, academic achievement, educational attainment, teen fertility, physical and mental health, employment and earnings, and crime (for reviews see Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sharkey and Faber 2014; Galster and Sharkey 2017). Another set of literature examines how children's development, including educational and health outcomes are affected by childcare centers or schools (e.g., Burchinal et al. 2008; Cloney et al. 2016; Hatfield et al. 2015; Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2016). Although both settings—neighborhoods and schools—play critical roles in shaping children's outcomes, most studies look at these contexts in isolation from one another (Rich and Owens 2023). Furthermore, in the United States, urban sociology often overlooks state actors and

relational processes that shape children's developmental outcomes through neighborhood inequalities (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019).

By bringing state-society relations into neighborhood and school/childcare effects literature, we can address these issues and better understand why childhood inequality arises not merely from selection effects of where families live (Sampson and Sharkey 2008) but also through interactions between parents, caregivers and educators. The relational political ethnography (Annavarapu and Levenson 2021) enables us to examine how the place-based social distinctions and collective agency influence the pragmatic compromises parents make (or are exempt from making) when accessing care and education services. Especially so in the contexts of “historically constructed and variably segregated and unequal systems that persist and change over time” (Rich and Owens 2023, 7).” Studying socio-political processes at the neighborhood level can provide valuable insights into how divergent outcomes in childhood arise for both urbanists and sociologists of education.

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