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MIRIAM O'REGAN

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**PROFESSIONAL CHILDMINDING IN IRELAND:
ECOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

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AT THE TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN**

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to address the dearth of research focussed on childminding in Ireland, despite its significant role in national childcare provision. The overarching aims of this research are to interrogate the concept of professionalism and to explore the cultural models and praxis of childminders.

The research has been conducted in an ecological theoretical framework: Ecocultural Theory (ECT) (Weisner 1993, 2002) predominantly, also referencing Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model (2006) and Attachment Theory.

The history of childminding and current policy in Ireland, Europe and the USA are reviewed, including an overview of international research into childminding in the last 30 years.

The study employed a mixed method approach including an online survey, and a World Café Forum initially before adapting the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh), which included holistic ratings, photographs, field notes and a case study survey, to gain an in-depth picture of childminders' practices.

Findings show significant professionalisation among childminders and willingness to engage in a sensitive regulatory system, once aligned with childminders' values and cultural models. In particular, two prevalent cultural models were identified: a Close Relationship model and a Real Life Learning model of pedagogy among childminders in the study.

Any proposed national system of regulation, support, and education for childminders should be aligned with these cultural models if it is to prove meaningful, congruent and sustainable for childminders and parents, and maximise the benefits of childminding for children in the 21st century.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for graduate study by research of the Technological University Dublin and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other third level institution.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the TU Dublin's guidelines for ethics in research.

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Signature _____ Date 14/1/2020

Candidate

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LIST OF ACRONYMS & TERMS

CCC	County Childcare Committees
CCCRP	California Child Care Research Partnership
CECDE	Centre For Early Childhood Development & Education
CoRe	Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECT	Ecocultural Theory
EFI	Ecocultural Family Interview
EFICh	Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders
EU	European Union
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
HLE	Home Learning Environment
HSE	Health Service Executive
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCMI	National Childminding Initiative
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services Skills (UK)
PRSI	Pay Related Social Insurance
QAP	Quality Awareness Programme for Childminders
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SAC	School Age Childcare
TUSLA	The national Child and Family Agency

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1 INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Childminding (or family day-care or family childcare as it also known), is widespread in Europe and North America, and childminders provide the majority of childcare for children under the age of three years in several countries, such as France, Belgium and Ireland (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). However, despite its widespread use, childminding has been relatively under-researched in scope and in focus (Ang, Brooker, & Stephen, 2016; Urban, Vandebroek, Lazzari, Peeters, & van Laere, 2011; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). Long considered the ‘Cinderella service’ (Osgood, 2004, p. 14) of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Brooker, 2016; Jones & Osgood, 2007), little research has focussed on childminding in Europe (Urban et al., 2011), and no research has been conducted into childminding in Ireland at a national level (Daly, 2010; DCYA, 2013; Garrity & McGrath, 2011).

The European Commission report on Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (Urban et al., 2011) highlighted the dilemma facing childminders across Europe, and emphasised the need for further research into and development of this childcare workforce:

One of the important aspects that remained underdeveloped is the issue of family day carers or childminders. In some parts of Europe (e.g. France and Belgium) they constitute the largest part of the care and education workforce for the youngest children (from birth to the age of three), and few formal competences or qualifications are required. In many countries, they work in very difficult conditions, with limited educational support and low income. As a consequence, professional

mobility (both horizontal and vertical) is virtually impossible for them. In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce, all too often considered as ‘what women naturally do’, that deserves particular attention with regard to its professionalism and could be the subject of a separate study (Urban et al., 2011).

In Ireland in 2018, home-based childcare of all types, paid and unpaid, formed the largest subsector in non-parental childcare (CSO, 2017b).

Childminding is defined as paid non-relative care outside the family home, in the home of the childminder (DCYA, 2018a). It differs from other forms of home-based childcare such as relative care, which is mainly unpaid, or in-home care by a nanny or au pair in the family home. Childminding is the only form of home-based childcare considered as part of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. Childminders are included in the Early Years Regulations (DCYA, 2016a) for those minding four or five preschool children, and the new School Age Register (DCYA, 2018b) for those minding seven to 12 school age children. Childminding also has its own strand within *Síolta* and *Aistear*, the Irish early years’ frameworks (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009, 2015). However, the Child Care Act (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991), exempts from regulation childminders caring for up to three unrelated children in the home, as well as all forms of relative care and in-home care.

The most recent government childcare survey (CSO, 2017b) indicated that just under one third of children (29%) up to 12 years were in homebased childcare. An estimated 10% of children from infancy to 12 years of age were with paid childminders, including au pairs/nannies, and a further 3% were in the care of a paid relative, often in combination with other forms of parental and non-parental childcare. Based on the Census in 2016, this equates to approximately

88,000 children (CSO, 2017a), with widely varying estimates of 19,000-35,000 paid childminders¹ (DCYA, 2018a, 2019a). However, due to the legal exemptions, only 81 childminders are registered with Tusla², the national Child and Family Agency, responsible for the registration and inspection of childcare provision. In 2017 a government Working Group considered the issues related to childminding in order to propose reforms and supports for the childminding sector in Ireland (DCYA, 2018a), as the Government moved towards mandatory regulation of all paid childminding, with the publication of the draft Childminding Action Plan (DCYA, 2019a).

However, since 2010, the decade long National Childminding Initiative, outlined in further detail below, has been gradually withdrawn; in practice, this has dismantled a nascent system of support, training and development for childminders within and outside the regulatory framework. In this context, it is worth highlighting the researcher position and professional background and experience. From 2004, I spent almost a decade working with childminders in County Wicklow as a Childminder Advisory Officer, implementing the support service for childminding mandated by the National Childminding Initiative until my role was made redundant at the end of 2013. The lesser status of

¹ Only estimates are available due to legal exemptions (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991) allowing childminders to cater for up to 3 unrelated preschool children, in addition to school age children, until 2019. Varied estimates result from different average numbers of children per childminder considered: 4 in the Draft Childminding Action Plan (DCYA,2019), 2.5 in the Working Group report (DCYA, 2018). The current study found an average number of 2.6 children per childminder in an online survey conducted in 2015.

² In September 2019.

childminders became increasingly obvious: firstly I was the sole officer supporting childminding in a childcare committee with three other development officer for centre-based provision. Secondly, childminders were progressively excluded from government subsidised mainstream provision during my decade long tenure, even though they remained sought after providers of childcare by parents on the ground. Finally this culminated in the withdrawal of funding from all Childminder Advisory Services across the country. It was the realisation that national policy decisions regarding childminding lacked any base of empirical evidence which motivated me to pursue research in this under-investigated field, in the pragmatic hope of advocating for more effective national ECEC policy on childminding.

The first phase of this research was carried out as part of a Master's degree by research, with a broad focus on accessing childminders' and parents' attitudes to professionalism in the context of childminding in Ireland. Methods included an online survey questionnaire of parents and childminders and a more in-depth exploration of 40 childminders' perspectives, using a World Café methodology. Findings from this first phase of the research generated a more detailed focus on the precise niche in which childminding in Ireland occurs, explored through an eco-cultural lens. At this stage in the research process, the researcher transferred to the PhD register in order to complete the second phase of the study.

1.1 AIMS OF RESEARCH

The present study seeks to address the dearth of research focussed on childminding in Ireland, despite its continued major role in national childcare provision. The overarching aims of this research are:

- To interrogate the concept of professionalism from the perspective of childminders and parents using childminders;

- To explore the cultural models and practices of Irish childminders, which can inform the development of childminding regulations and supports.

Initially, research was focussed on childminder and parental attitudes to the professionalisation of childminding as it was promoted by the National Childminding Initiative. However, later research explored in more detail the niche of childminding services in order to document and describe the cultural models and practices of Irish childminders from childminders' own perspectives.

1.2 BACKGROUND

In 1999, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) published the National Childcare Strategy Report, (DJELR, 2000) setting out a plan to integrate the different strands of childcare and early education services in Ireland, including childminding. Its recommendations formed the basis of the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI), which included national guidelines for childminders, training, grants, a tax relief, and a voluntary notification support scheme for childminders under the auspices of the local Childcare Committees and the national Health Service Executive (HSE) through local Childminder Advisory Services. The NCMI was introduced with a view to bringing registration to childminders as part of a national registration system for childcare services.

A registration system for all childcare services was introduced in 2016; however, the Early Years Regulations (DCYA, 2016a) exempt childminders caring for three or fewer preschool children, and the new School Age Services register exempts childminders caring for up to six children of any age (DCYA, 2018b). These exemptions effectively exclude almost all paid childminders from the national ECEC system. In addition, the closure of the Childminder Advisory

Services by the HSE throughout the country since 2011, effectively ended the voluntary notification and support scheme for childminders nationally.

While the Government aims to reform the system for childminding (DCYA, 2018a; Govt. of Ireland, 2019), no research has yet evaluated the impact of the decade long National Childminding Initiative on childminders nationally (Daly, 2010), nor has any research attempted to document what childminders actually do, or how they sustain their complex services. Such research is vital if a new regulatory and quality support framework is to be sustainable in the long term (Tonyan, Paulsell, & Shivers, 2017). This doctoral research aimed to address these gaps in childminding research in Ireland over two phases, involving a mixed method approach to data collection.

Initially, the intention was to develop an evidence base on childminding in Ireland to support national policy development. For this purpose, Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Model (2006) provided a broad framework in which to examine attitudes to childminding and its professionalism, and the contexts which influence them, such as national policy and the role of the family in the Irish context. Attitudes to professionalisation in childminding were explored in an online survey with childminders and parents, stakeholders within the separate microsystems of the childminding context and the home context, against the broader background and exosystem of the socio-political context and the macrosystem of the Irish cultural context.

However, the surprising finding that professionalised childminders were concerned that professionalisation might compromise the essence of childminding led to a significant shift in focus to describe the home-based ecological niche of childminding. Consistent with a focus on ecological systems, the study utilised the lens of Ecocultural Theory (ECT) (Weisner 1993, 2002) to describe the essence

of childminding as it theorises links between daily activity and cultural models and values in a local niche. ECT provides a theoretical framework for documenting the cultural models adults use to guide their everyday life, defined as “presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared ... by the members of a society...” (Holland & Quinn, 1987, p. 4). ECT has provided a framework for childminding research in California (Paredes, Hernandez, Herrera, & Tonyan, 2018; Tonyan, 2012, 2015, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014; Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017) and it appeared pre-eminently suited to the task of describing childminding niches in Ireland. Research in childminding in the UK and Northern Ireland (Fauth, Jelcic, Leo, Wilmott, & Owen, 2011; Fauth, Owen, & Jelcic, 2013; Shannon, Geraghty, & Molyneaux, 2014) has emphasised the need to highlight the strengths of home-based settings including flexibility, intimacy and nurturing. Ecocultural research seeks to better articulate the cultural models underpinning such childminder praxis (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

The study was further informed by current understanding of the psychological impact of childcare on the young child with reference to Attachment Theory (Belsky, 2006; Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Bowlby, 2007), mainly due to childminders’ own use of the terms of attachment theory in describing their relationships with children. Specifically, features of the close relationships which can develop among childminders and children and their families are considered against the broad principles of Attachment Theory. However, specific features such as attachment classifications, separation protest and the psychological outcomes associated with secure and insecure attachment classifications are not deemed appropriate or relevant given the focus of the present study.

1.3 KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There were three central research questions in this study:

1. What constitutes a professional childminder?

More concretely, the initial study interrogated childminders' and parents' understanding of professionalism and high-quality home-based childcare; the impact of the National Childminding Initiative (2002-2012) on the professionalisation of childminders; the future development of professional childminding in Ireland.

2. What cultural models of practice and pedagogy are prevalent among

childminders in Ireland? More specifically, given the absence of research documenting what childminders actually do, there was a need to observe childminding from the inside, on its own terms, without reference to other forms of childcare (Tonyan, 2012, 2015; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

3. What type of regulatory system would best support professional

childminders in Ireland? By gaining an understanding of how childminders manage to sustain their complex daily routines, it was hoped that this could inform the development of childminder-friendly regulations and support systems to effectively engage childminders within the broader ECEC system.

1.4 RESEARCH ETHICS STATEMENT

All instruments used in this research were approved by the Ethics Committee of Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University, Dublin) in accordance with its policies and procedures. This research is fully compliant with all legal and ethical requirements regarding the collection, storage, processing and analysis of data. Any results disseminated within the

public domain will be on an anonymised basis with a view to transparency, scrutiny and peer review.

1.5 OVERVIEW OF THESIS

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework presents an extensive review of the literature underpinning this research. Key principles underpinning Ecocultural Theory, which emerged from anthropology, socio-cultural psychology and comparative cross-cultural studies, are outlined and discussed in relation to describing childminding niches in Ireland. From the broader policy perspective, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model is reviewed where relevant to the present study focus. Specific features of Bowlby's Attachment Theory, relevant to the childminding context, are also explored and discussed, in the context of Ecocultural Theory.

Chapter 3: Reframing Childminding reviews the history of childminding in Ireland, its social and cultural background, the policy environment, and a summary of relevant Irish research. Similarly, childminding in Europe and the USA is also explored, including an overview of international research into childminding in the last 30 years.

Chapter 4: Methodology includes the rationale for the methodological approach in this project, in addition to the methods, instruments of research and protocols for the research. These include the online survey, with 325 participants, and the World Café Forum, a qualitative research instrument which was used with 40 participants.

Chapter 5: Ecocultural Methodology opens with a rationale underpinning the progression from a broad perspective on attitudes to professionalism in childminding to a more in-depth focus on the childminding

niche in the Irish context, and the associated methodology. It includes a description of the research instruments used in the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh) protocol with 17 participants: the semi-structured interview, participant photographs, the field notes and the background survey. It also describes its adaptation for use with childminders in Ireland in collaboration with the Californian Child Care Research Partnership.

Chapters 6: Attitudes to Professional Childminding presents the results and analysis from the online survey and the World Café Forum, concluding with a discussion of the implications of these findings for further research.

Chapter 7: Cultural Models in Irish Childminding describes the two cultural models identified in the ecocultural research: the Close Relationship model, and the Real Life Learning model, documenting respectively the praxis and pedagogy of childminders in Ireland

Chapter 8: Childminder Agency, Connection and Advocacy presents the ecocultural findings related to professionalism, including childminders' views of the existing ECEC system in relation to childminding and their recommendations for future policies for childminding.

Chapter 9 Discussion reviews all findings and relocates this research in the context of the literature on childminding and ECEC. It discusses the implications of an ecocultural perspective on the ecology of childminding, proposes an ecocultural understanding of professionalism and quality in childminding, and reflects on the possibilities of a childminding system in ecocultural alignment. The chapter concludes with policy implications and recommendations for future research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the focus of research in this study honed in on describing the essential nature of childminding in Ireland, Ecocultural Theory (ECT) was used as the predominant theoretical framework, in order to document the complex daily lives and routines of childminders (Tonyan, 2012, 2015). Since the culture of early care is not an abstract concept, but becomes visible in everyday activities (Cole, 1998; Gillen, 2014; Gillen et al., 2007; Rogoff et al., 2007; Rogoff, 2003), ECT uses the lens of daily routine as the primary unit of analysis. This permits the description of cultural models (Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Weisner & Hay, 2015) much as a prism permits all the colours of light to be seen. In this case, it facilitated the delineation of cultural models underpinning childminders' practice (Tonyan, 2015).

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994), was used as the framework in which to explore attitudes towards childminder professionalism and future regulation. The Bioecological model was chosen because of its reference to the social contexts, viewed as nested systems ranging from direct and immediate microsystems to more distant macrosystems, and "its explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 794).

In addition, features of Attachment Theory informed certain aspects of the research in relation to the development of relationships between children, childminders and families.

2.1 ECOCULTURAL THEORY

Ecocultural Theory (ECT) emerged from anthropology, socio-cultural psychology and comparative cross-cultural studies (Moore & Mathews, 2001; Super & Harkness, 2002; Weisner & Hay, 2015; Weisner & Lowe, 2005) as an ecological and cultural theory refining the psychocultural model undergirding the seminal Six Culture Study of the Socialization of the Child, a project that spanned over two decades (Edwards & Whiting, 1980; Weisner et al., 1977; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Building on research into the cultural learning environment and developmental niches in cross cultural contexts (Gallimore et al., 1989a; Super & Harkness, 1986, 2002; Weisner, 1984), Ecocultural Theory seeks to combine developments in several disciplines to create an approach to human development that would be cross culturally valid. Similar to socio-cultural understandings of human development through participation in cultural communities (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 1995), Ecocultural Theory “foreground(s) the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning” (French, 2007, p. 9), which also underpins Aistear, the Irish Early Years curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009). In particular, ECT focuses on ecocultural niches, in which families, or other groups, crystallize their cultural values in everyday routine activities as they negotiate the vicissitudes of life in their community (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, Baker Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995; Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, & Ganapathy, 2002; Weisner, 1984, 2002).

Principles underpinning Ecocultural Theory are consistent with many of the principles emphasised in Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model. However, ecocultural theorists considered that, in the early version of the Bio-Ecological model the cultural learning environment and the subjective experience of

participants in settings were insufficiently emphasized, being too distal, placed far out in the macrosystem (Weisner, 2008). Similarly, they found the emphasis on interrelatedness and the complexity of social-ecological influences on the family problematic because, while adding a rich array of variables to the impoverished list of earlier models, there was no road map to guide their application in practice (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Weisner, 1997). “If everything is plausibly connected to everything else, how should the different levels or units of analysis be organized? There is no criterion for choosing variables or features to include and exclude at each ecological circle” (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990, p. 220).

By contrast, Ecocultural Theory (ECT) seeks to be a predictive theory, which tests hypotheses regarding the relationship between variables, and the interactive influences of one variable on the other, in a pragmatic, positivist approach (Keogh & Weisner, 1993; Weisner, 2014), combining both qualitative and quantitative methods within ECT protocols. It is a psychocultural model that starts with the environment and the history of a community, which shape the maintenance systems allowing that community to thrive: means of production, patterns of settlement, social structure and the division of labour. These dimensions shape the child’s learning environments: the settings and who is in them, relationship patterns, teachers, caretakers, tasks, workload, which in turn form the individual learning and beliefs of each child and adult: behavioural styles, skills, abilities, values and priorities. These beliefs, in turn, both shape and are shaped by shared cultural models seen in religious practices and beliefs, rituals and ceremony, art, music and recreation, games and play (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990; Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989b; Weisner, 1997, 2007, 2008; Weisner & Hay, 2015; Weisner & Lowe, 2005).

Ecocultural Theory has defined these dimensions theoretically (Gallimore et al., 1989; Weisner, 1984), and operationally (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie, & Nihira, 1993) for practical application to real life problems in a pragmatic epistemology. The operationalisation of Ecocultural Theory was developed in the context of the provision of effective Individual Family Service Plans for use with children with learning disabilities within their families (Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993). Using extant longitudinal data to examine the predictive power of different risk models within an ecological and cultural framework in relation to the development of at-risk children and their families (Keogh & Weisner, 1993), quantitative ratings, derived from qualitative interviews and home visits, were used along with quantitative family assessment scales to predict child and family outcomes in an early version of the Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) protocol. It was found that “EFI-derived ratings added significant predictive ability compared to quantitative family assessment scales alone (Nihira et al. 1994)” (Weisner, 2014), which provided validation for the EFI protocol.

In sum, Ecocultural Theory is an approach that has grown out of anthropology and cross-cultural psychology, where the Bio-Ecological model started from the perspective of developmental psychology. While the concept of the microsystem and proximal processes bear some resemblance to the developmental niche of Ecocultural Theory, the focus is different, less individual and more communal:

...the ideas of developmental niche or cognitive developmental niche focus on the physical and social settings in which children develop; the customs of childrearing that parents negotiate; and scripts, routines, and rituals that instantiate cultural goals and values in

socially organized ways, along with material and symbolic tools used to achieve cultural goals (Rogoff et al., 2007, p. 5)

2.1.1 The Roots of Ecocultural Theory

Rooted in cross-cultural psychology and anthropology, Ecocultural Theory marries an individual's development to their environment (i.e. their ecology) and their culture (the meanings, beliefs, values and conventional practices learned and shared by members of a community) to understand and explain the variations in child development in different cultures (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie, & Nihira, 1993). On the one hand, Ecocultural Theory focuses on the physical and social settings in which the child lives, the customs of child care and child rearing, and the psychology of the caretakers as in cross-cultural theory, which posits that culture is a collective phenomenon, shared with people who live within the same social environment, where culture is learned and changed over time (Harkness, Super, et al., 2007; Hofstede, 2011; Rogoff, 2003; Super & Harkness, 1986). On the other hand, Ecocultural Theory also adopts an explicitly social constructivist perspective (Bruner, 1985) by incorporating the meanings people assign to the various aspects of their lives, and their ability to take action to modify and counteract the forces in their lives that they cannot control (Gallimore et al., 1989; Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993b; Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007; Grace & Bowes, 2011).

2.1.2 Culture and Child Development

The distinguishing feature of this particular ecological theory is its emphasis on and approach to understanding culture. Since the 1990's, the inadequacy of a universal, standardised image of childhood has increasingly been

recognised. Highlighted by cross cultural research, 'child development' has been analysed as an idealised construction of early childhood experts rooted in Western cultural traditions and values, incorporating culture specific assumptions, which undermines the diversity of childhoods in our world (Super & Harkness, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Woodhead, 2006). As a result, the range of early childhood research has broadened to include paradigms that recognise diverse environments and reflect on culture in an inclusive way (Levine et al., 1994; Nsamenang, 1992; Rogoff, 2003; Woodhead, 1999b, 1999a, 2006).

The growing fields of socio-cultural developmental psychology have influenced this evolution of broader theoretical frameworks of early child development (Carlson & Harwood, 2003; Hayes, 2002; Moore & Mathews, 2001; Rogoff et al., 2007; Shweder et al., 2007; Woodhead, 1999a, 2006). A socio-cultural view of child development was first articulated by Vygotsky in the 1930s, when he recognised that child development is a social process, historically and culturally rooted:

The fundamental aspiration of the whole of modern child psychology ..(is) the wish to reveal the eternal child. The task of psychology, however, is not the discovery of the eternal child. The task of psychology is the discovery of the historical child..... The stone that

the builders disdained must become the foundation stone.

(Vygotsky, 1987³, p. 91)

As Piaget's influence has waned, Vygotsky's challenge to discover the historical child has motivated research that is grounded in real life contexts, making allowance for individual differences, for gender differences, as well as for social and cultural differences (Cole, 1998; Gillen, 2014; Kagitcibasi, 2012; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff et al., 1995; Tonyan, Mamikonian-Zarpas, & Chien, 2013). Regarding culture as a dynamic dimension of the child's socialisation and development, a study on the 'thriving' child, for example, has conducted an ecological investigation of aspects of culture in the interactional construction of early childhood in diverse global communities: Peru, Italy, Canada, Thailand, and the United Kingdom, filming a 'day in the life' of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl in each location (Gillen, 2014, 2016; Gillen & Hancock, 2006). That research explicitly sought to understand "children as social actors, interacting with others in ways that shape culture and are shaped by culture" (Gillen et al., 2007, p. 4). Similarly, Ecocultural Theory as applied to family systems, such as childminding, draws on an understanding of culture that is visible in the patterns of interactions between individuals in order to analyse the social dynamics of child development.

³ This quotation comes from a collection of Vygotsky's work first published in 1987.

However, Ecocultural Theory differs from other ecological approaches in three significant ways. Firstly, it explicitly includes the family-constructed "meaning" of their circumstances through the lens of family goals and values, as well as their proactive responses to those circumstances and meanings (Weisner, 2007). This is well illustrated in the work on Individual Family Service Plans for families with a developmentally delayed child: different families were successfully supported in sustainable early intervention programmes, which varied considerably one from another, by applying the ecocultural approach with a social constructivist perspective, using family-level outcomes as well as individual child outcomes (Gallimore et al., 1989a; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). For example, families with more familistic values required different types of accommodations in raising a child with developmental delays, than career focused families: the first would believe that they are best placed to care for their child, and lack the means to pay for care, while the latter would have stronger beliefs in expert knowledge and care and possess the means to pay for such care. As a result, the Individual Family Service Plans for these two families were markedly different.

Second, in Ecocultural Theory, daily routines form a critical unit of analysis, revealing ecocultural forces mediated by the activity of the routine on the more familiar units of analysis— individuals, interaction dyads, families or childminding services (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993). The daily routine of activities reveals the underlying values and beliefs that pertain in the household; this is critical to understanding how and why childminders construct their daily routines in conjunction with their client families (Tonyan, 2012, 2017).

Thirdly, while rooted in a sociocultural, temporal understanding of development, ecocultural theorists believe that this approach is distinguished by its capacity for application to families in any culture, since its methods are based on cross-cultural research. Hence its usefulness to the present research: applying the ecocultural approach to Irish childminding settings will allow current childminding praxis to be documented, and reveal the underlying cultural values shaping the daily routine, and ideals of child development. However, this universal applicability of Ecocultural Theory has been contested. Gillen et al. (2007) contend that Weisner's approach amounts to an evaluation by expert outsiders in 'cross-cultural' studies that seek to instantiate a universal developmental outcome. However, a close reading of its philosophical roots suggests otherwise:

Ecocultural Theory is based on the idea of locally rational action [D'Andrade, 1986; Gellner, 1982; Shore, 1996; Shweder, 1991; Strauss and Quinn, 1997]. The 'local situation' consists of everyday routines and activities. Actors use connected, schematized, shared knowledge of this everyday cultural world to adapt and make complex decisions to survive in their local community. In this sense, culture is the preeminent tool that children learn for adaptation to life (Weisner, 2002, p. 277).

Furthermore, the main methodological tool informed by the ecocultural approach is the Ecocultural Family Interview, which is an open-ended, semi-structured conversation that covers a broad range of topics, during which respondents are encouraged to "tell their story" (ibid. p.277). While the conversation is guided by the researcher, transcribed and scored for analysis afterwards, the aim is to understand family adaptation, and the context of the

family's situation. Furthermore, this scoring is more than just a number, as the meaning for the score is also included. Thus, for example, in seeking to score for child wellbeing, Ecocultural Theory understands this as:

... a universal developmental outcome, explicitly embedded in the cultural community the child develops in, that can be used in evaluating children's development across cultures, but without predetermining the content and context that has meaning in that community (ibid. p.279)

Since the theory itself has been operationalised in social work practice to understand interventions in families with developmentally delayed children, its intent is participatory and democratic on the one hand, with practical outcomes on the other (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). Drawing on the constructivist grounded theory of Charmaz (2006), Ecocultural Theory views research participants' experiential views and implicit meanings, as well as those of researchers, as constructions of reality. Advocating for gathering “rich data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 13), which goes beneath the surface of social and subjective life in analysis, this process results in a contextualised understanding of a given niche, be it a family, a classroom or a childminding service.

2.1.3 The Ecocultural Niche

The idea that each family is adapting to an ecological niche is fundamental to Ecocultural Theory; the term *niche* incorporates a proactive, social constructivist nuance. In evolutionary biology, niche construction is the process whereby organisms, through their activities, interactions, and choices, modify their own and each other's niches (Flynn, Laland, Kendal, & Kendal, 2013;

Laland & O'Brien, 2015). Similarly, social learning is essential to human adaptation: we humans owe our success to our uniquely developed ability to learn from others in cultural niches. This has allowed humans to gradually accumulate information across generations and develop well-adapted tools, beliefs, and practices that are too complex for any single individual to invent during their lifetime (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Trevarthen, 2013).

The ecocultural niche of the family has a similar meaning to that in sociology: the term implies evolution through time and adaptation to the constraints imposed by the subsistence base, the climate, and the political economy of the region (Gallimore et al., 1989; Weisner, 1984). A niche reflects the material environment and ecology as traditionally defined in social science, which includes features like income, public health conditions, housing, transportation, and the distance from kin or services (Bernheimer et al., 1990). The developmental niche was first described in terms of physical and social settings, childcare strategies of a culture, and the beliefs and values of caretakers (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007; Harkness & Super, 2010, 2015; Harkness, Super, et al., 2007; Harkness et al., 2000; Super & Harkness, 1986, 2002). In comparative and cross-cultural studies of human development, the ecocultural niche came to be more broadly defined as describing the larger sociocultural environment surrounding the child and family also (Edwards et al., 1980; Gallimore et al., 1989; Weisner, 1998; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

A family's niche construction is a social process, through the capacity of human beings to organize, understand, and give meaning to their everyday lives. “By incorporating socially constructed cultural features into the definition of family niches, Ecocultural Theory treats families as more than hapless victims of

implacable social and economic forces” (Bernheimer et al., 1990, p. 223). Thus, ECT takes a social constructivist perspective, and it can provide a conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which families differ by explicitly including the family's proactive, social constructivist role (Gallimore et al., 1989; Gallimore, Goldenberg, et al., 1993). For example, in order to understand the underperformance of Latino students in high school in the U.S., the La Vida family study explicitly and actively brought the research participants into the shared data collection project, following over four hundred 14-to 16-year-old Mexican–American adolescents in Los Angeles for two years. The teens and parents completed daily diaries, questionnaires, and a structured survey interview, as part of a qualitative and ethnographic study. They were interviewed in their homes using the Ecocultural Family Interview, a conversational interview with prompts and probes, using 25 photos which the teens had taken for their interviews (Weisner, 2014). In this way, the meaning of their daily routine and the rationale for their activities could be made explicit and comprehensible, as a first step in creating sustainable interventions to support the students.

Although all families have certain similarities, families in all culture groups have different niche profiles. Assessment of the niche domains in Ecocultural Theory is intended to be a meaningful and non-judgmental description, because it includes the family's own values and goals within each ecocultural assessment (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Gallimore et al., 1989a; Ronald Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993). Constituent cultural elements of the ecological/cultural domains and variables as described by Weisner (1984) include the following: work and subsistence, community safety, division of work by gender and age, children’s participation in the routine, children’s and parents’ workloads, organization of childcare, roles of fathers, health and demographic circumstances, parental

sources of information, community heterogeneity, children's friendships, peers and playgroups, roles of and supports for women, diversity and sources of information and cultural influences on children, and diversity of models for family and childcare.

Ecocultural Theory proposes that some domains are more important for human adaptation than others, that there is a hierarchy of influence, which prioritises the impact of niche features, such as beliefs, values, and environmental constraints (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Gallimore et al., 1989a). Thus, to thrive as a family, parents and children will make adaptations in their niche in ways that are meaningful to them in terms of their beliefs and values; congruent with the needs and characteristics of family members; and sustainable for long periods of time, given the constraints and opportunities of the family. Similarly, it is expected that a childminding service (a childminder and family) will have made meaningful, congruent, and sustainable adaptations in order to succeed and thrive in their local community (Tonyan, 2012).

2.1.3.1 The Lens of Everyday Routines

Since an ecocultural perspective theorises links between everyday activity and cognitive dimensions including emotions, motives, cultural models, and values (Gallimore & Lopez, 2002; Janhonen-abruquah et al, 1989; Weisner, 2007), it can usefully serve as a conceptual framework for research into the family, and family based childcare or childminding. The familiarity of daily activities provides a window into meaning systems in Ecocultural Theory, because it proposes that the culture of early care is not an abstract concept, but becomes visible in everyday activities (Cole, 1998; Gillen, 2014; Gillen et al., 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Rogoff et al., 2007). Thus, when

childminders explain their daily care giving routines, their descriptions reflect the meaning systems that undergird those practices, including cultural models, whether consciously held or not (Gallimore, Goldenberg, et al., 1993a; Gallimore & Lopez, 2002; Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993). Using activity as a unit of analysis can identify aspects of cultural organisation, much as a prism can be used to separate the colours of light (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

Ecocultural Theory has been used to understand development and learning in a variety of cultural settings including families (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007; Gillen & Hancock, 2006; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004), school programmes (Grace & Bowes, 2011; Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007), families with developmentally delayed children (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Keogh & Weisner, 1993), as well as early childhood Head Start programmes and the families involved (Yoshikawa, Weisner, & Lowe, 2006). It posits that daily activities are a consequence of adaptation in a particular ecological niche. Weisner (2002) theorizes that

...activities crystallise culture directly in everyday experience, because they include values and goals, resources needed to make the activity happen, people in relationships, the tasks the activity is there to accomplish, emotions and motives of those engaged in the activity, and a script defining the appropriate, normative way to engage in that activity. (p. 275)

Cultural models are situated in the real physical and material conditions of a particular local context, or ecology (Harkness & Super, 2010; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014), and are expressions of deeply held beliefs in taken-for-granted scripts within a community (CCCRP, 2014; Edwards et al., 1980; Harkness & Super, 2015; Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

2.1.3.2 Routine activities and child development

Ecocultural Theory emphasizes that a major adaptive task for each family is the construction and maintenance of a daily routine through which families organize and shape their children's activity and development. The activities of the everyday routine create opportunities for learning sensitive interactions on which child development partly depends (Gallimore et al., 1989a; Rogoff, 2003; Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, & Ganapathy, 2002; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004).

Vygotsky recognised that cognitive development occurs in situations where the child's problem solving is guided by an adult who structures and models the appropriate solution to the problem in the zone of proximal development, which he defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 33). Through this scaffolding - observing, imitating, and collaborating in learning - the child develops increasing individual mental capacity and function.

Children's activity settings are the architecture of everyday life, more an emergent curriculum (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998a; Rinaldi, 2006) than a deliberate curriculum; the interactions embedded in these activities provide opportunities to learn and develop through modelling, joint production, assisted performance and other forms of mediated social learning (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 1982; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). These routine activities become part of a childminder's pedagogy; for example, many childminders create storybook times in order to promote cognitive and linguistic development, consciously scaffolding children's learning, in ways that Bruner and his associates first described in relation to language acquisition in very young children, observed in "the clutter of

life at home" (Bruner, 1983, p. 9). The ecocultural lens of daily activities provides a window into the process of children's learning and development in the social context of routine interactions with the people around them – parents, childminders, siblings or playmates in the childminding setting (Mejía-Arauz, Rogoff, Dexter, & Najafi, 2007; Paradise & Rogoff, 2009; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995).

This understanding of the formative influence of everyday interactions lies behind the Home Learning Environment (HLE) index developed for the Effective Provision Preschool Education (EPPE) longitudinal study in the UK, to track and analyse the significant, long term impact of the home learning environment on children (Melhuish, Sammons, Sylva, & Siraj, 2001; Sylva, Stein, & Pugh, 2000). The EPPE team developed the HLE index to measure the level of activities in the home offering learning opportunities to the child, which has been widely referenced in research on child outcomes in the UK and Ireland (Bafumo, 2006; Dalli et al., 2011; Melhuish, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2008, 2006; Russell et al., 2016; Sammons et al., 2015). The mundane activities at the core of childminder pedagogy have all been found to promote child development and have been associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores in successive studies (Melhuish et al, 2006, 2008, 2010, & Sammons et al, 2015). Findings from longitudinal studies in Ireland and the UK indicate better outcomes for children in home-based settings than centre-based settings in terms of verbal ability, wellbeing, cognitive and socio-emotional development at the age of three (McGinnity, Russell, & Murray, 2015; Melhuish, Gardiner, & Morris, 2017; Russell et al., 2016).

2.1.4 Cultural Models

Cultural models are situated in real physical and material conditions of a particular local context, or ecology (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007; Harkness & Super, 2010, 2015; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Tonyan, 2015; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014), and are shaped by the beliefs seen in religious practice, rituals and ceremonies, art, music and recreation, games and play (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Weisner, 1997, 2007, 2008; Weisner & Hay, 2015; Weisner & Lowe, 2005). Adults in a society use connected, schematized, shared knowledge of this everyday cultural world to adapt and make complex decisions to survive in their local community. In regards to raising children, there are scripts, routines, and rituals that instantiate cultural goals and values in socially organized ways, along with material and symbolic tools used to achieve local ideals and cultural goals; the scripts involved in the childminding setting are closely related to cultural goals that guide parents' childrearing practices and children's experiences (Harkness et al., 2000; Rogoff et al., 2007; Super & Harkness, 2002). In this sense, culture models form developmental pathways for children to learn for adaptation to life.

2.1.4.1 Ecocultural Research into Childminding

Recent ecocultural research has explored childminding niches through the lens of everyday routines with childminders and families in California in order to identify the cultural models of ECEC in operation (Tonyan, 2015, 2017). From the perspective of Ecocultural Theory, childminding can be understood as a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family, children's families and

assistants) negotiate the project of raising children” (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 119).

Using a version of the Ecocultural Family Interview adapted for Family Childcare Providers in California, or for Childminders (EFICh) in the present study (CCCRP, 2014; Tonyan, 2012; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004), Tonyan and her team documented the complex interplay between cultural models of ECEC and the career aspirations of childminders on the one hand, with everyday patterns of activities and understandings of nurturing child development in a home-based setting on the other (Tonyan, 2012, 2015, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). The familiarity of everyday activities, combined with interviews using photos taken by childminders as prompts, opened up a window of meaning which revealed several possible cultural models of ECEC at work in the services in California, in particular Close Relationships and School Readiness.

2.1.4.2 Close relationships as the childminders’ ideal

In the Close Relationships model, the childminder’s priority is to ensure that children feel loved, special, belonging, and enjoy their time with the provider and other children as a goal in and of itself, and not just as a means to other goals (Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). This could be displayed through interactions with children in play and conversation, through an emphasis on really seeing and knowing children as whole beings, and through discussion of the rewards of strong relationships that result when children have been in their care (Tonyan, 2017). Those who saw themselves as a home-from-home, loving environment, tended to have more flexible routines, and talk about home, or comfort and security and the family, using phrase such as ‘part of my family’ or ‘treat children as if they were my own’ (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 126).

2.1.4.3 School Readiness as the childminder's ideal

A second cultural model identified prioritised preparing children for school and seeing changes in what children know and can do. This could include literacy and numeracy as well as social and emotional development (e.g., taking turns, waiting in line), but the focus is on being ready for school. It could also include organizing traditional activities where a teacher instructs (e.g., circle time or “learning time”) or embedding learning throughout the day and into other activities (e.g., believing that children learn through play and so providing lots of opportunities for exploration and child-led play). Those who saw their role as developing school readiness tended to organise daily activities high in structure. They also generally aspired to work in centres rather than homes as a future professional career path, seeing themselves as teachers, and focusing on teaching, learning, education, preparation for future, preparing for success in school, with a focus on the role of adults as a source of what children need to know (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

2.1.5 An ecocultural understanding of quality in childminding

Tonyan's most recent work (Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan, Nuttall, Torres, & Bridgewater, 2017) has presented a working model for quality in childminding defined as “the alignment of children's opportunities for learning and development with locally-relevant ideals or cultural models” (Tonyan, 2017, p. 3). Thus, rather than starting with an abstract list of universal markers of quality, such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1986, 1997; Bredekamp & Copple, 2009), first the goals and cultural models of a community or family need to be interrogated, before assessing whether children's activities and experiences are aligned with those goals in culturally aligned quality.

Others have highlighted the need to better articulate cultural models that can reveal the distinctive characteristics of childminding, and emphasise the strengths of home-based settings: flexibility, intimacy and nurturing (Fauth et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2014; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Much research has shown that that childcare practitioners' beliefs influence their ECEC practices (Forry et al., 2013; Zaslow, Martinez-Beck, Tout, & Halle, 2011); however, while childcare providers may score as 'progressive/child centred' or 'traditional/adult directed' on the Parental Modernity Scale (Schaefer, 1987), they may still be operating with deeper underlying cultural models in their childcare practice (Tonyan et al., 2013). For example, two childminders could be very child-centred in their beliefs but follow different cultural models in practice: a childminder who values a cultural model of school readiness could devote more time to documenting observations for formal parent meetings, while another childminder who sees the child as part of her family may prefer to use post-its and texts, and see maintaining formal documentation as actually interfering with her real job of nurturing the child (Brooker, 2016; Tonyan, 2017).

An ecocultural view of professionalism and aligned quality could help resolve the tension at the heart of childminders' self-perceptions and public perceptions of childminders. As Ailwood (2007) has pointed out, childminders define their role in various ways: Mother, Teacher, Nurse. In the past, an association with mothering has been viewed as a major stumbling block in the path to raising the quality and status of childminding (Urban & Dalli, 2012; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017; Vandebroek, Peeters, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013), with the production of paperwork being considered a rite of passage in establishing professional status (O'Connell, 2011). However, a recent study of the professionalisation of childminding in Belgium, Germany and France since 2000

acknowledges that childminders could not be seen as a homogenous group (Fagnani & Math, 2012) and opinions about the meaning of the job and its professional status vary considerably (Cresson, Delforge, & Lemaire, 2012; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). Where some childminders seek a professional identity within ECEC and acclaim childminding as a learned and skilled profession (Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Fagnani & Math, 2012) others emphasise maternal experiences and moral qualities (Aballéa, 2005; Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009). However, it is possible that an ecocultural approach to validating different cultural models of aligned quality for childminding could lead to new, more nuanced paradigms for professional childminders.

2.1.5.1 An Ecocultural Approach to Systems

Anthropological studies show that a wide range of family and parenting practices found around the world can produce trusting attachments in children including caregiving by older siblings and cousins, as well as other kin, hired care, and group care (Gopnik, 2016; Levine, Caron, & New, 1980; Levine et al., 1994; Otto & Keller, 2014; Weisner, 2014; Weisner & Lowe, 2005). This implies that the precursors of healthy attachment relationships in children are not just specific, individual behaviours on the part of isolated caregivers, but rather “systems of supports that nurture the development of caregivers who are able to successfully protect and socialize their children” (Carlson & Harwood 2014, p. 297). Given the prevalence of relative care and childminding in Ireland, this is clearly relevant to the present study of professional childminding with reference to regulatory and support systems.

2.2 BRONFENBRENNER'S BIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In addition to Ecocultural Theory, this research also draws broadly on the theoretical framework first proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), which in its final iteration, became known as the Bio-Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The specific profile of this Bio-Ecological Model is its interdisciplinary and integrative focus on the age periods of childhood and adolescence, and its explicit interest in applications to policies and programmes pertinent to enhancing youth and family development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As a result, the model has become paradigmatic in research into early childhood education and care (ECEC) over the last twenty years internationally (Hayes, 2001; Melhuish, 2016a; OECD, 2001b, 2006; Sylva, Stein, & Pugh, 2000; Vermeer et al., 2008). It has influenced some international research into childminding (Kontos, 1994, 1995; Mooney & Statham, 2003), while also underpinning the development of national ECEC frameworks, such as *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009, 2015) in Ireland (Duignan, Fallon, Dwyer, Schonfeld, & Walsh, 2007; French, 2007; Hayes, 2007) and *Te Whariki* in New Zealand.

In the present research, the Bio-Ecological Model provides the broader framework against which attitudes to professionalism and regulation in childminding are examined, as well as the contexts which influence these attitudes, such as the national policy on childminding and the central importance of family in the Irish context (Canavan, 2012; Fahey, Keilthy, & Polek, 2012; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Wolfe, O'Donoghue-Hynes, & Hayes, 2013). The Bio-Ecological model provided an appropriate framework for considering the impact of macrosystemic national policy, the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI), on

childminder and parent attitudes towards the professionalisation of childminding, one of the key aims of NCMI.

The ecological principles underpinning Ecocultural Theory are consistent with many of the principles emphasised in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model. However, where the Bio-Ecological Model evolved from developmental child psychology, Ecocultural theory emerged from anthropology, socio-cultural psychology and comparative cross-cultural studies (Moore & Mathews, 2001; Super & Harkness, 2002; Weisner & Hay, 2015; Weisner & Lowe, 2005). Moreover, ecocultural theorists considered that, in the early version of the Bio-Ecological model, the cultural learning environment and the subjective experience of participants in settings were insufficiently emphasized (Weisner, 2008). Similarly, they found the emphasis on interrelatedness and the complexity of social-ecological influences on the family problematic because, while adding a rich array of variables to the impoverished list of earlier developmental models, there was no road map to guide their application in practice (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Weisner, 1997). "If everything is plausibly connected to everything else, how should the different levels or units of analysis be organized? There is no criterion for choosing variables or features to include and exclude at each ecological circle" (Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner, 1990, p. 220).

2.2.1 The ecological contexts of child development

Bronfenbrenner's original proposition that the development of the child be researched in its natural ecology, rather than in de-contextualised, artificial settings, was the foundation of his ecological approach to human development, which aimed to promote the investigation of the interacting contexts which shape

the child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1979). The original model described the multi-levelled contexts of the developmental progress of the individual child, where "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.3). These structures were conceived as four interlocking systems: micro, exo-, meso- and macrosystems and form the foundation of the ecological view of child development.

The microsystem refers to the level of regular interactions that the individual person experiences directly e.g. at home, at the childminder's, or at preschool. This is the level on which traditional developmental psychology focused, Bronfenbrenner (1979) contended, without due regard to broader environmental influences. Within the immediate environment of the microsystem, bi-directional proximal processes operate, resulting in development in the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In the past, these processes were typically examined in the context of the home and family relationships; however, contemporary studies have also examined processes and interactions between teachers and children in childcare settings and preschools (Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Groeneveld, Vermeer, van Ijzendoorn, & Linting, 2012; Melhuish, 2016). In the present study, proximal processes are viewed from an ecocultural perspective through the lens of childminders' daily routines, which describe patterns of daily activities, roles and relationships experienced by the child in sustained interactions in the immediate environment of the home.

The mesosystem comprises "the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person (e.g. the relations between home and school, school and workplace, etc.)" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1646). In short, it is a system of two or more microsystems, such as the

interconnections and associated effects of contact between the childminding setting and home setting of child. The mesosystem provides an insightful lens, through which awareness is heightened of how behaviour in any one setting is a function not only of experiences in that setting, but of the full range of settings experienced by the person (Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny, 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The profound value and importance of these connections and interconnections are emphasised in Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, supporting strong contact and mutual support between microsystems, as, for example, between home and early childhood setting (Hayes et al., 2017).

Consistent with this emphasis on connections, a key theme to emerge in a recent review of the literature on childminding was the consistency of care, and the potential for home-based providers to develop close relationships and connections between the home, preschool, family and community for the benefit of the child (Ang et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies in the UK and Ireland have increasingly focussed on the mesosystem, showing how the relationship between parents' qualifications, socioeconomic background, and the home learning environment correlates with children's development, wellbeing or academic performance at school (Melhuish, Phan, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2008; Sammons, Toth, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj, & Taggart, 2015; Russell, Kenny & McGinnity, 2016). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), this happens through linkages that tie various microsystems together and encourage individuals to apply the learning from one setting to events in another.

The stronger the linkages and the more consistency experienced by children in the mesosystem, the better the outcomes for their development; for example, the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) has highlighted

positive outcomes for children in home-based childcare⁴ in terms of higher cognitive verbal ability and better socio-emotional outcomes with fewer emotional symptoms and better behavioural self-regulation (Melhuish et al., 2017).

Continuity of care with a nurturing caregiver is often cited by parents as the reason for choosing childminding for very young children (Fauth et al., 2013; Morrissey & Banghart, 2007; Tonyan, 2017), as is access to the affordances of a rich home environment both indoors and outdoors (Fjørtoft, 2001; Gibson, 1977; Lindberg, 2014; Street & Freeman, 2013).

The exosystem consists of links between settings the child experiences directly and settings, which the child may never experience, but which may nevertheless affect what happens to him/her; for example, a parent's workplace (CECDE, 2006; European Commission, 2014a; O'Kane, 2016; Ring et al., 2016b). The exosystem assumes a bidirectional process of development, where events in the exosystem affect the developing child's microsystem, this affecting him/her indirectly, and influencing the child's development. Conversely, a child may instigate processes in the microsystem that reverberate in another system (Buehler & O'Brien, 2011; Lapierre et al., 2008). For example, parents' working patterns, such as long hours or shift work, directly influence the choice of childminding care, due its flexibility (Owen & Roby, 2006; Smith, 2015; Tonyan, 2015).

⁴ In the present study, this is an umbrella term, which includes all forms of childcare in the home: childminding, relative care, in-home care with a nanny or au pair.

The macrosystem consists of the wider pattern of socioeconomic and cultural values or beliefs underpinning the social, political and cultural structures of the particular social group to which a person belongs; for example, the value ascribed to the family and home, or cultural norms and expectations regarding mothers in paid employment, (Letablier, 2008; Moen, Hochschild, & Machung, 1991; OECD, 2001a, 2002; Thévenon & Solaz, 2013; Thévenon, 2013). As Bronfenbrenner pointed out,

...within any culture or subculture, settings of a given kind—such as homes, streets, or offices—tend to be very much alike, whereas between cultures they are distinctly different. It is as if within each society or subculture there existed a blueprint for the organization of every type of setting (1979, p. 2).

Thus, the macrosystem came to be defined as the overarching pattern of micro-, meso- and exosystems characteristic of a given culture or subculture, in particular, the belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, life-styles, customs and opportunities that are embedded in each of these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This view parallels to some extent the focus of Ecocultural Theory, which seeks to describe specific cultural models operating within the resources and constraints of a given ecological niche in line with the beliefs and values of the families and individuals involved (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993; Grace & Bowes, 2011; Phenice, Griffore, Hakoyama, & Silvey, 2009; Tonyan, 2015).

2.2.2 The Dynamic Model: Process, Person, Context, and Time.

Although Bio-Ecological theory is probably best known for its identification of the importance of context, (O'Toole, 2016; Rosa & Tudge, 2013), later versions

of the Bio-Ecological Model moved from static contexts to a more dynamic, networked model which emphasised interactions between four key components: Process, Person, Context, and Time (PPCT). This aspect of the model focuses on the processes of development in human beings over time in real environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013), providing impetus for empirical research in real time in all types of childcare settings (Melhuish et al., 2001; Sylva et al., 2000) including childminding homes (Ang et al., 2016; Kontos, 1994; Kontos et al., 1995; Morrissey & Banghart, 2007; Tonyan, 2012).

Time (the Chronosystem) was the last component to be articulated as a separate element of the evolving Bio-Ecological Model. Time, as a defining property of the Bio-Ecological paradigm, appears more than once in the model's multidimensional structure (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). "Micro-time refers to continuity versus discontinuity of relationships within the microsystem, while meso-time refers to the frequency of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796). These both consider Time from the perspective of the developing individual, since proximal processes, as progressively more complex reciprocal interactions, must occur on a regular basis over extended periods of time to be effective (Hayes et al., 2017).

This understanding of micro- and meso-time has bearing on the present research, since increasing numbers of very young children in Ireland are spending extended time in childcare, including group based childcare, private crèches, or childminding settings; the youngest children spend the longest hours in childminding settings, 27 hours on average, national statistics show (CSO, 2009, 2017b), with concomitant risk of the behavioural problems associated with long hours in childcare (Adi-Japha & Klein, 2009; C. Dalli et al., 2011; Melhuish

et al., 2017; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010). Most international studies highlight the beneficial effects of preschool (for ages three to five) on cognitive development, however, “few studies to date have focused on the effects of childcare arrangements in infancy (before the age of three) on later outcomes relating to socio-emotional wellbeing” (Byrne & O’Toole, 2015).

The concept of macro-time in the Bio-Ecological Model also encompasses change or consistency over time in the environment in which that person lives (e.g., changes in family structure, socioeconomic status, employment, place of residence, etc.). It considers the effect of socio-historical conditions on the development of the person over the life-span, as well as the effect which this person can have on future human ecology and culture. This is relevant to research in childcare in Ireland, where views on who should raise children and where that should happen have been heavily influenced by changing Irish government policy over the last 80 years. The marriage bar (1932) hindered a generation of married women from working outside the home, who then focussed on rearing their children at home; its repeal (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1973) and replacement with the Employment Equality Act (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1977) led to the highly educated women of the following generation embracing employment outside the home in increasing numbers. Whereas childcare outside the home was practically non-existent until the 1960s, it had become a necessity by the 1990’s, when the first Child Care Act was passed (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991). Concurrently, there has been significant change in family structure, family formation, and family-related attitudes, behaviours and practices over the past 40 years, with declining fertility rates and family size, significant increases in non-marital births, and increasing diversity in family structure (Canavan, 2012; Fahey et al., 2012; Lunn & Fahey, 2011). The image of the child has been

transformed, once considered marred by original sin, in need of a firm disciplinary approach (Walsh, 2005); now recognised as the possessor of human rights as a child, whose voice ought to be heard (Acts of the Oireachtas, 2012; United Nations, 1989). Attitudes towards early childcare and working mothers have also undergone a marked generational shift (Russell, McGinnity, & O'Connell, 2017).

Drawing together the elements of Process, Person, Context and Time, as the Bio-Ecological Model does, generates an understanding of human development through the lens of its historical context. Looking at each of the elements of Process, Person, Context and Time within a system foregrounds the complexity and interdependence of multiple factors, with changes in one part of the system activating change in other inter-related parts of the system. One key question in this research focuses on exploring how a constellation of these factors interact to shape attitudes to professional childminding: perspectives from two microsystems (childminders and parents); views on a mesosystem, which includes childminder and parent attitudes towards professionalism in childminding; assessment of the macrosystem of policy development broadly, and more specifically related to childminding, within the chronosystem of historical time, and how all of these have shaped our responses to childminding today.

2.3 ATTACHMENT THEORY

Attachment is a vital concept in understanding the beliefs and practices of childminding; the profound importance of warm, nurturing relationships is often recognised as a motivating factor for parents to choose a childminder (Ang et al., 2016; Barnes et al., 2006; Fauth et al., 2013; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012; Otero & Melhuish, 2015; Sylva et al., 2000); as well as one of the rewarding reasons for

which childminders choose the profession (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Bromer, McCabe, & Porter, 2013; Tonyan, 2012, 2017). Key features of emotional attachment, which develops primarily between children and their parents or primary caregivers, include sensitive responsiveness and availability of the caregiver. These attributes are prioritised by parents and promoted by childminders in discussions of the benefits of childminding for children (Ahnert et al., 2006; Bowlby, 2007; Page, 2011).

2.3.1 Attachment Theory and Child Development

Both John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth were key contributors to our understanding of the importance of attachment in the lives of young children (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). In his early post-war research among displaced children, Bowlby focussed on the effects of early separation from the mother (Bowlby, 1951; Bretherton, 1992), thereby revolutionizing thinking about a child's ties to their mother, and its disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement, effectively shifting the focus of childcare from promoting the child's physical health to promoting the child's mental health also (Bowlby, 1951; Levine, 2002; Otto & Keller, 2014; Quinn & Mageo, 2013). Mary Ainsworth's innovative methodology – the Strange Situation Protocol - not only made it possible to test some of Bowlby's ideas empirically, but also expanded the theory in new directions over time (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Grossmann, Grossmann, Huber, & Wartner, 1981; Grossmann, Grossmann, Spangler, Suess, & Unzner, 1985; Van Ijzendoorn, 1995; Howes, Angeles, Galinsky, & Kontos, 1998; Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Belsky, 2006). Ainsworth contributed the concept of the attachment figure as a secure base from which an infant can explore the world; in addition, she formulated the concept of maternal sensitivity

to infant signals and its role in the development of infant-mother attachment patterns (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Grossmann et al., 1985; IJzendoorn, Goldberg, Kroonenberg, & Frenkel, 1992; Van IJzendoorn, 1995).

Attachment theory posits that the bond or attachment formed by an infant with the primary caregiver, defined in the early literature as the mother, forms the basis of future relationships and psychological wellbeing or pathology (Carlson, 1998; Sroufe, 2005a; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005; Trevarthen, 2003). According to Sroufe (2005), the growing child needs to develop a sense of trust and, later, a growing independence; these are facilitated through affection, caring and the reasonably prompt satisfaction of infants' needs. The caregiver must be available to the infant to provide sensitive and responsive care in order to meet the attachment needs of the child (Barnes et al., 2006; Fiene, 2002; Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2007).

2.3.2 Attachment Theory and Research in ECEC

Bowlby and Ainsworth's theory about the growth of early emotional attachments and the importance of caregiver sensitivity has had a profound influence on beliefs about good parenting, attitudes and practices in child care and the direction of childcare research (Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Sroufe, 2005a; Sroufe et al., 2010, 2005; Woodhead, 2006). Concerns based on evidence linking insecure or avoidant infant-mother attachment to extensive non-parental day care in the first year of life (Ahnert et al., 2006; Belsky, 1986; Belsky & Rovine, 1988; Gamble & Zigler, 1986) led to the first large scale longitudinal study of early childcare conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development (NICHD) in the USA in 1991 (Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a, 2000b 2003; 2005).

In 2006, the Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation produced its findings on the place of infant attachment in the developmental course based on a 30 year longitudinal study of the developing person (Sroufe, 2005). Broadly affirming Bowlby's theory (Bowlby, 1973), attachment history was shown in the Minnesota study to be clearly related to the growth of self-reliance, the capacity for emotional regulation, and the emergence of social competence. It also revealed much about the place of early attachment in later adaptation, highlighting the complex links between attachment and outcomes later in life (Sroufe et al., 2010, 2005).

Such research has largely confirmed that sensitive or attuned caregiving is one of the most fundamental aspects of quality childcare (Ahnert et al., 2006; Dalli et al., 2011; Forry et al., 2013; Groeneveld et al., 2012; Groeneveld, Vermeer, van IJzendoorn, & Linting, 2010). In their meta-analysis of research over 25 years into the security of children's relationships with non-parental care providers, Ahnert et al., (2006) found that secure childcare provider attachments were more common in home-based than in centre-based settings, and that "caregiver sensitivity to individual children predicted attachment security only in the small groups that characterise home-based settings" (p.664). They concluded that "affectional attachments not only play central roles in the development of social identity and sociability (Thompson, 1993), but are also vehicles by which ...children's learning processes are mediated" (Ahnert et al., 2006, p. 664). Even in high quality centre-based settings, Lamb & Ahnert (2006) acknowledge that structural quality in terms of childcare facilities and variations in child-adult ratios, level of training and staff turnover affect children's

development largely through their impact on caregiver responsiveness and the quality of interaction and relationships with practitioners.

In regard to early childcare, Leach (1997) found that members of an international organization of infant mental health professionals endorsed surprisingly lengthy periods of care by mothers; all forms of family care were endorsed over all forms of purchased care, with all forms of individual care being preferred to full-day group care for all age groups. Other expert recommendations concur (Belsky, 2006; Leach et al., 2006; Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2011): a composite measure of positive caregiving used by NICHD (2005) indicated that for children in non-maternal care, the most positive caregiving was provided by fathers, grandparents, and caregivers in the child's own home, followed by childminders in family childcare homes, while the least positive caregiving was observed in infant centres (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). More recently, medium to high exposure to group-based care, across the infant, toddler and preschool years, has been found to predict more aggression and disobedience in children, poorer relations with teachers, and, at age 15, more impulsivity and more risk-taking, including sexually, with alcohol and drugs utilisation (Vandell et al., 2010).

These findings and recommendations are worth considering in light of the opportunities for responsive, sensitive dyadic interactions which can be facilitated among very small groups of children in childminding contexts. Other research has also highlighted the importance of the attuned professional caregiver in childcare settings, who is not intended to replace the parent but instead to understand and sustain the child's learning, valuing the relationships that the child makes with adults and with children (Elfer, Goldschmeid, & Selleck, 2002; Elfer & Page, 2015; Goldschmied & Jackson, 2004; Page, 2011, 2018; Page &

Elfer, 2013). Moreover, research has also highlighted specifically that responsiveness and warmth in interactions are associated with better developmental outcomes for children (French, 2007; Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Hayes, 2007; Melhuish, 2015, 2016b; Melhuish, Gardiner, & Morris, 2017; Otero & Melhuish, 2015).

2.3.3 Attachment and Brain Development

One line of research arising from attachment theory has focussed the importance of secure relationships in the development of the young child's brain, in regard to the impact of stress on the child's developing brain in childcare settings (Dettling, Parker, Lane, Sebanc, & Gunnar, 2000; Gunnar & Donzella, 2002; Watamura, Donzella, Alwin, & Gunnar, 2003). Research now shows that children's emotional self-regulation develops optimally in calm, unhurried, low stress settings, whether at home or in a centre (Groeneveld et al., 2012; Groeneveld et al., 2010; Groeneveld, Vermeer, van IJzendoorn, & Linting, 2012; Melhuish et al., 2017; Otero & Melhuish, 2015). While Sroufe (2005) has pointed out that variations in infant-caregiver attachment do not relate well to every outcome, he acknowledges that infant attachment is critical, both "because of its place in initiating pathways of development and because of its connection with so many critical developmental functions—social relatedness, arousal modulation, emotional regulation, and curiosity, to name just a few" (p.365).

Attachment relationships plays a significant role in the development of emotional regulation, which is facilitated by being soothed, held and made to feel safe in the first years (Bakermans-Kranenburg, IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Howes et al., 1998; Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2014). The workings of sensitive and responsive caregiving have been described at the level of hormonal changes

and brain development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Schore, 2001). Infants' biological systems being immature are particularly sensitive: in cases where infant distress and fundamental needs are not being responded to, high levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, have been identified (Van Ijzendoorn, 1995; Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2014). Research in the Netherlands has found that stressed childcare practitioners also impact the wellbeing of young children, while a low stress child care environment is particularly important for children with a difficult temperament (Dalli et al., 2011; Groeneveld et al., 2012).

2.3.4 Attachment Theory and Childminding

Richard Bowlby (2007) speaks of secondary carer attachment, referring to the few special people in a child's life with whom they have developed a close secondary attachment bond, for instance siblings or grandparents (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Bowlby, 2007). He applies the concept to the attachment needs of babies and toddlers in non-parental day care for a lasting secondary bond with one carer who is consistently accessible to them (Bowlby, 2007).

Since research suggests that most children's capacity to benefit from group based ECEC tends to develop between 24-36 months (Dalli et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2002), Richard Bowlby (2007) concluded his review of Sure Start in the UK with a call for a model of attachment-based day care for children under 30 months with childminders, given that young toddlers required personal intimate care and thrived best in a lower stress environment in small groups (Dalli et al., 2011; Groeneveld et al., 2010; Laevers, Buyse, Daems, & Declercq, 2016). Another factor in forming a healthy secondary carer attachment was continuity of care with a carer willing to make an emotional commitment,

reducing the need for transitions during the day (Garrity & McGrath, 2011; Lynch, 2007; Ruprecht, Elicker, & Choi, 2016; Theilheimer, 2006). Since the caregiver can give each child more personal attention, the small group size and mixed age cohort support the child to develop emotional self-regulation, and older and younger children can learn from one another (Administration for Children & Families, 2017; Elicker, Fortner-Wood, & Noppe, 1999; Gray, 2011; Sroufe et al., 2005).

The relationship between the caregiver and the child has been highlighted as being of vital importance in the context of choosing childcare (Barnes et al., 2006; Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Leach et al., 2006; Page, 2011, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013; Taggart, 2011; Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2007). Research has found that children experienced higher caregiver sensitivity with childminders, which was positively associated with children's security and wellbeing (Ahnert et al., 2006; Groeneveld et al., 2010). However, in recent years, discussion of care, affection and love in early years' work has tended to be displaced by discourses of dispassionate professionalism (Brock, 2013; Campbell-Barr, Georgeson, & Nagy Varga, 2015; O'Connell, 2008; Strauss & Cooper, 2012) and even a culture of fear related to being accused of inappropriate contact with a child, limiting physical contact with children in the UK (Campbell-Barr, 2017). Page (2011) has found that, while love might be discussed in regard to childcare, it was not a term that English mothers felt comfortable with; Campbell-Barr et al. (2015) wonder where all the love has gone in a study of trainee early years' educators emotional and attitudinal competence in England and Hungary.

Some research acknowledges the emotional complexity of facilitating consistent and reflective attachment interactions with young children, highlighting the need to develop training, support and supervision for

attachment-based pedagogy for childcare practitioners (Cousins, 2015; Elfer & Page, 2015; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015) to navigate professional love in childcare settings (Page, 2018). This is all the more necessary for childminders, who work with children alone, often in isolation (Bromer, Van Haitsma, Daley, & Modigliani, 2009; Melhuish, 2016b; Nelson, 1990; Williamson, Davis, Priest, & Harrison, 2011). The ecocultural study of childminding in California has highlighted the importance of love and affection in the cultural model of Close Relationships (Tonyan, 2015, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). This is of particular interest to the present study in terms of conceptualising childminders' emotional labour and professionalism (Cousins, 2015; Forry et al., 2013; Harper Browne, 2009; Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009; Paredes, Hernandez, Herrera, & Tonyan, 2018; Susman-Stillman, Pleuss, & Englund, 2013).

2.3.5 Attachment Theory and Ecocultural Theory

Since Bronfenbrenner first queried the use of Strange Situations in developmental research in 1974, in effect challenging the methodology applied in attachment research, ecological researchers have focussed on context as a key to understanding how children develop (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 1977, 1979, 1995; Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny, 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Weisner, 2008). Critiques of attachment theory from ecocultural perspectives (i.e. anthropology, ethnography, cross-cultural psychology) have highlighted that attachment theory's claims and constructs suffer from profound ethnocentrism (Levine, 2002; Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Shweder et al., 2007), based on the Western, middle-class conception of human development with the pre-eminent goal of psychological autonomy (Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Weisner, 2015). This contrasts with cumulative evidence that

cultural contexts differ widely in their models of autonomy and relatedness, socialization goals, and caregiving strategies (Harkness et al., 2007; Harkness & Super, 2010; Otto & Keller, 2014; Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995; Weisner, 2005; Whiting & Whiting, 1975).

The universal applicability of attachment theory is, therefore, problematic. Evidence suggests that infants are able to form strong multiple attachments from birth (Gopnik, 2009, 2016; Gopnik, Metzoff, & Kuhl, 2001; Weisner, 2014; 2015), and that a wider, more dynamic view of children's relationships should be adopted, one that includes, but extends beyond that afforded by attachment theory alone (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Edwards et al., 1998; Shweder et al., 2007). Multiple caretaking in socially distributed care, such as sibling caregiving and allomothering, (substitute mothering by several relatives) is common globally (Gopnik, 2016; Weisner et al., 1977), as a context for the socialisation of trust (Weisner, 2014) for children throughout most of the world (Luster & Bornstein, 1996; Weisner & Lowe, 2005). Moreover, dyadic attachment does not necessarily represent the complex, changing social worlds of relationships well, even in the West, where children and adults strive to construct a close attachment world, often blending multiple individuals who match different functional needs across the developmental life course (Harkness & Super, 2015; Rogoff, 2003; Weisner, 1984, 2005; Weisner et al., 1977; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). A contextual understanding is needed of what is sensitive or attuned between caregivers and children: being attuned may refer not only to the child at hand and that child's moment-to-moment needs, but also to being attuned to the cultural expectations in the child's world (Weisner, 2014). Such a contextualised understanding of attachment will inform the present study of childminders' caregiving practices (Quinn & Mageo, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Tonyan, 2017).

3 REFRAMING CHILDMINDING

Competing images of the child impact research and policy on childhood (Woodhead, 2006); similarly, competing images of the childminder influence research, public policy, perception and treatment of childminding. For instance, many negative perceptions refer to childminder's low levels of education and their low status professionally, even in countries where childminding is regulated and funded by the State (Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Cresson et al., 2012; Jansson, 2008; Karlsson, 1995; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009; Oberhuemer, 2005; Urban et al., 2011). Such preconceived ideas can constitute underlying hidden strata in discussions of childminding (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Graham, Nosek, Haidt, Iyer, & Ditto, 2011; Haidt, 2013; Shweder, 2017; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997).

In recent times, childminders have been both valorised and demonised (Greener, 2009; Jones & Osgood, 2007; Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandebroek, 2012). Childminding has been referred to as a “necessary evil” (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017, p.1), perceived as a marginal form of provision in ECEC systems, and described as an “accordion pleat” in childcare provision, which expands or contracts according to need (Bruner, 1980, p. 21). It often seen as the “Cinderella service” (Osgood, 2004, p. 14), lower than and subordinate to other early years’ services (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Brooker, 2016; Cresson et al., 2012; Jones & Osgood, 2007; Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek, 2009; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). On the other hand, the maternal experiences and moral qualities of the childminder can be also highly valued (Aballéa, 2005; Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Jones & Osgood, 2007), with female expertise used to valorise the position of women caregivers, who are seen

as full of virtues and values, to be credited and learned from rather than despised (Alcoff, 1988; Allen, 2005; Baker & Lynch, 2012; Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009; Nelson, 1990).

In order to gain fresh understanding of childminding in Ireland, these preconceptions need to be interrogated to facilitate the reframing of childminding within the ecological and ecocultural frameworks underpinning this work. Existing, conflicting perceptions of childminding will be considered from three common perspectives: historical, social and cultural; economic and political, and educational, with a particular focus on early childhood education.

3.1 CHILDMINDING IN THE IRISH CONTEXT

To set childminding within the Irish context, a brief history of childminding will be reviewed alongside more recent national policy, while the broader familial and religious cultural background will also be considered along with existing research on childminding in Ireland.

3.1.1 A Brief History of Irish Childminding

Childminding, in various guises, has been self-sustaining in Ireland for many generations as a traditional form of paid work for women, when household labour became more divided into male domains, outside the home, and female domains, within the home in the 19th century, even though industrialisation did not make a significant impact on a largely agrarian society (Clear, 2007; Corrigan, 2000; MacCurtain & O'Dowd, n.d.; MacPherson, 2001; McKenna & Whelan, 2002). "Ireland begins in the Home" was the slogan of the Irish Homestead magazine at the turn of the 19th century (MacPherson, 2001, p. 131), expressing a cultural script which was prevalent throughout the 20th century. The marriage

bar, introduced in 1933, prevented married women working in the civil service or in banks for an entire generation until 1973, although it was lifted earlier for teachers in 1957 (Daly & Clavero, 2003; O'Leary, 1987). The Irish Constitution of 1937 articulated the ideal of the place of women in the home. In an effort to protect that place, Article 41.2 states:

in particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home. (Government of Ireland, 1937)

In the early part of the century, the vast majority of children were looked after by their parents, and most non-parental childcare and education in the early years was provided by family members in the household, live-in domestic servants, or in infant classes at primary school (Walsh, 2005). In 1911, there were over 160,000 domestic servants, with two categories of in-home childcare worker specifically listed as the 'governess' and 'nursery maid', although there appears to be little documented evidence of childminding as it is currently understood, even if more casual arrangements between friends and neighbours probably existed (Murray, McGinnity, & Russell, 2016).

From the 1970's onwards, changes in legislation – the removal of the marriage bar, the introduction of equal pay and paid maternity leave - led to increased demand for childcare as married women's labour market participation increased from 5-6% up to the 1960s (Fahey, 1990) to around 27 per cent by 1983 (Russell et al., 2017). Childminding Ireland was founded in 1983, and the first government report on childcare in Ireland that year showed that 42% of preschool children in childcare were with a non-relative childminder, defined at

that time as “a personal service, involving looking after a small number of children either in the children's home or in the childminder's house” (Govt. of Ireland, 1983, p. 30). The report made the first proposals for the registration, regulation and training of childminders in the private, commercial sector, in the absence of government investment in childcare.

During the 1990s, the demand for the provision and regulation of childcare rose rapidly, with the introduction of the Child Care Act (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991), -which excluded most childminders - against a backdrop of remarkable growth in female employment, peaking during the economic boom at 63% of women in 2007 (McGinnity, Murray, & McNally, 2013). In that year, it was found that 75% of children 0-12 years experienced parental childcare, while 9% of children were with a childminder, and 9% in centre-based provision (CSO, 2009, 2017b).

3.1.2 The Policy Context 2000-2020

Since the advent of the first National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 2000) at the start of the 21st century, substantial and significant changes have occurred within the childcare sector in Ireland (Gallagher, 2012; Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Hayes & Newman, 2005; OECD, 2004a; Wolfe et al., 2013). Such developments were initially driven by labour market demands, with capital investment in childcare facilities under two EU supported, government funded programmes: the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000-2006) and the National Investment Childcare Programme (NCIP, 2006-2013), both of which included a childminding strand: the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI). This led to the creation of national frameworks for early years learning, *Síolta* (CEDCE 2006), and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009), for all types of settings, including childminding, driven

by a concern that the needs and rights of children in childcare settings was not being given due attention.

The National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 2000) envisioned the development of a common registration system for different strands of childcare and early education services in Ireland, including childminding, stating that ‘childminding is the most common (childcare) arrangement among women with paid jobs’ (p.17). At that time, the report recommended that all those providing childcare services for one or more children, in addition to their own, either in the child’s home or in the childminders home, should be required to register. In 2019, this recommendation has yet to be implemented, although the most recent strategy for children and families contains a commitment to extend regulation to all paid, non-relative childminders, moving progressively towards wider support for childminders over the next decade (Govt. of Ireland, 2019).

As a result, the vast majority of childminders remain legally exempt from regulation under the Child Care Act (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991); childminders are allowed to care for three unrelated preschool children, along with their own children, in addition to school age children, to a maximum of six children at any one time in the family home (Dept. of the Environment, 2015). Home-based childcare of all types, paid and unpaid, forms the largest source of non-parental childcare (29%), often used in combination with preschools, crèches and afterschool provision (DCYA, 2018a). An estimated 10% of children in Ireland from infancy to 12 years of age receive childcare from paid childminders, (including au pairs and nannies), with a further 3% of children receiving care from paid relative (Central Statistics Office, 2017b). Based on the Census in 2016, this equates to approximately 88,000 children (Central Statistics Office,

2017a), with widely varying estimates of 19,000-35,000⁵ childminders caring for children aged 0-12 years nationally (DCYA, 2018, 2019). Under the most recent Early Years regulations (DCYA, 2016), childminders caring for four or five preschool children must register with Tusla, the national regulator, as should childminders providing childcare for 7 to 12 school age children under recent regulations for the registration of School Age Services (DCYA, 2018b). However, only 81 childminders were registered with Tusla⁶ in 2019, down from 257 in 2011 (DCYA, 2018a).

In contrast to other European states (Brooker, 2016; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017), there have been no major investigations or negative government reports on childminder care to date. On the contrary, national inquiries have focussed on institutional care (Murphy, Buckley, & Joyce, 2005; Ryan, 2013) or more recently, disturbing investigative documentaries on centre-based ECEC provision on the national broadcaster (Moloney, 2014; Prime Time Investigates, 2019). As a result, there has been little evidence of mistrust of childminders, such as occurred historically in Belgium, France and Germany (Vandebroek, 2009), but also minimal public pressure for the regulation of childminding in the home until recent years.

⁵ Varied estimates result from different average numbers of children per childminder considered: 4 in the Draft Childminding Action Plan (DCYA,2019), 2.5 in the Working Group report (DCYA, 2018), 2.8 is estimated by the Growing Up in Ireland team (McGinnity et al., 2015), and the current study found an average number of 2.6 children per childminder in an online survey conducted in 2015.

⁶ In September 2019.

While the degree of state involvement in childcare in Ireland has grown considerably since 2000, “the role assumed by government is that of an enabler and facilitator rather than a direct provider of services” (Daly & Clavero, 2003, p. 90). The rapid expansion of centre-based services under EU and government funded public-private investment schemes between 2000-2010 reconfigured the landscape of early years’ provision in Ireland, as in the UK (Bradley, Hakim, Price, & Mitchell, 2008; Gallagher, 2012). The annual budget for early childhood education provision was approximately €100 million; however, less than €3 million per annum was spent on the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI) for childminders, who remained virtually unregulated, informal childcare providers, subject to displacement by regulated, subsidised, centre-based provision, despite evidence of parental preference for childminding care for young children (DCYA, 2018a; Fitzpatrick Associates, 2007; Gallagher, 2012; Start Strong, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2013).

The NCMI (2002-2012) aimed to professionalise informal childminders, with a view to including them in the planned new early years’ registration system for all ECEC services (Corrigan, 2000; Daly, 2010; DJELR, 2000). Similar to the model developed in the UK (Bond & Kersey, 2001; Cragg & Dawson, 2003; Greener, 2009; Owen & Roby, 2006), the National Guidelines for Childminders (DCYA, 2008) promoted a more entrepreneurial, professional model of childminding with the intention of raising the quality of childminding services and the associated outcomes for children. NCMI encouraged those who wished to work with children at home to gain ECEC qualifications, to register as childminders with Tusla/HSE or make a Voluntary Notification to the local Childcare Committee, as well as registering with Revenue as sole traders in order to operate small childminding businesses from their own homes. Different

strands of NCMI were presented as the means of improving childminding quality: firstly, by promoting training with a free 10-hour course, the Quality Awareness Programme for Childminders (QAP); secondly, by providing local support through dedicated Childminder Advisors, who managed the Voluntary Notification and Support scheme, offering home visits, and thirdly, developing local childminder networks. In addition, the fourth component of NCMI was financial: a tax relief to encourage childminders to engage in the formal economy, with social insurance benefits; and a childminder development grant aimed at enriching the home learning environment, which also promoted holding insurance for the childminding service (Daly, 2010; DCYA, 2008).

It must be noted however that two of the provisions mentioned in the National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 2000) were never implemented: measures intended to overcome the barriers preventing childminders from moving into the formal economy and potentially becoming registered. The first was the introduction of personal tax relief for parents using childminding care: it was hoped that this would eventually lead parents to pressurize childminders into registration. The second was a disregard for childminding income in relation to eligibility for social welfare and ancillary benefits, such as medical cards. This was intended to support childminders working in disadvantaged areas, for whom a tax relief was irrelevant, to encourage engagement with the Voluntary Notification and Support scheme, without threat to their subsistence levels. The failure to implement this provision meant that the childminders who benefitted most from NCMI were predominantly middle class, effectively excluding childminders in disadvantaged areas.

The process of professionalisation promoted by NCMI extended the promise of rising levels of education leading to improved pay and conditions, and better

career prospects, in line with the paradigm of professionalisation of care workers proposed by Brannen and Moss (2003). Under NCMI, Childminding Ireland also received funding as the national childminding body to assist in the development of professional standards for members. This entrepreneurial model of childminding encouraged childminders to see themselves as business owners, in keeping with the neo-liberal vision of the childcare market (Gallagher, 2012), although the impact of this approach on ECEC quality in Europe has been extensively interrogated and contested since that time (Campbell-Barr, 2013; Lloyd & Penn, 2010, 2012; Penn, 2014; Penn & Lloyd, 2013).

Since 2010, successive funding cuts have dismantled local Childminder Advisory Services, resulting in the exclusion of childminding from most government supports and subsidies (Daly, 2010; DCYA, 2013, 2018a, 2019a; Govt of Ireland, 2015), amidst repeated calls for the proportionate regulation of childminding in various reports (DCYA, 2013; Start Strong, 2012). Since 2016, the creation of the new National Childcare Scheme has introduced income-related subsidisation of childcare for all employed parents, leading to significant pressure for such subsidies to apply to childminding as a commonly used form of childcare for young children (DCYA, 2016b; Govt. of Ireland, 2019). Most recently, a working group on childminding reform has proposed a staged approach to the regulation of childminding (DCYA, 2018a); at the end of 2019, the Draft Childminding Action Plan went through a process of public consultation with stakeholders (DCYA, 2019a) as the Government moved towards mandatory regulation of all paid childminding (DCYA, 2019b; Govt. of Ireland, 2019),

3.1.3 Religion and Family Culture in Ireland

As in other more traditional welfare states, childminding in Ireland has remained predominantly informal childcare; outside regulation, with little support, and no formal competence requirements for the profession (Boogaard, Bollen, & Dijkers, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014; Urban et al., 2011). This apparent neglect can be linked to Government reluctance to intervene in family matters more generally, except in times of family failure (Daly & Clavero, 2003; Hayes, 2016; Hayes & Bradley, 2006), due in part to the constitutionally protected status of the family, and the mother in the home in particular (Govt. of Ireland, 1937, Article 41.2). This separation of family and state is in keeping with the Catholic social doctrine of subsidiarity (Daly & Clavero, 2003; Hittinger, 2009), commonly understood to mean that any central authority should be subsidiary, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level (Hayes & Bradley, 2006). Until the 1990s, this principle restrained Irish Government investment in early childcare, since childcare provision was seen as competition with caring for children in the family home, where the majority of Irish children were raised up to school going age until the 1990s (Wolfe et al., 2013).

Strong family and community bonds should be understood in light of the cultural role of religion in Ireland, specifically Catholicism, the religious background of the majority; while there has been a definite decline in formal devotional practice in recent decades, church attendance remains among the highest in Europe (Breen & Erbe Healy, 2014). Research into religion as culture (Cohen & Hill, 2007) has found that Catholicism tends to be more collectivist than individualist, experienced in a social context, and embedded in a community and tradition (Cohen, Wu, & Miller, 2016). Ireland has retained a strong sense of

community (Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018) ranking consistently high in social connections and community in the OECD Better Life Index (OECD, 2019b). Inglis (2007) proposes that cultural Catholicism in Ireland is focussed on belonging to a tradition and a cultural heritage, which involves participating in Catholic family and community events such as weddings, holy communions, confirmations, christenings and funerals, strengthening family and community connections.

Cultures characterized by interdependent rather than individualistic orientations toward family and community reinforce connections to others, which can be reproduced in the childcare practice of that community, as Bromer & Henly (2004) have observed, citing examples of kith and kin care among the Hispanic and Afro-American communities in the USA. Family retains its importance in people's lives in Ireland (Canavan, 2012), as does the extended, intergenerational family (Ní Laoire, 2011, 2014), despite significant change in family structure, family formation, and family-related attitudes, behaviours and practices over the past 40 years (Fahey et al., 2012; Hannan & Macmillan, 2019; Lunn & Fahey, 2011). In that context, Garrity & Canavan (2017) propose the construction of early years settings as communities of care for relocating young families in the West of Ireland, who lack the natural support networks of extended families and traditional religious and community structures. Noteworthy in this regard is the centrality of themes of identity and belonging in both national early years' frameworks, *Siolta* and *Aistear* (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009, 2015).

In the midst of declining fertility rates and family size, significant increases in non-marital births, and increasing diversity in family structure (Canavan, 2012), the Irish family remains remarkably stable, with the lowest divorce rate in

Europe in 2015, less than one (0.7) divorce per thousand (Eurostat, 2016). Analysis of data from Growing up in Ireland reveal that traditional family structures prevail, with over 81% of Irish children living in biologically intact families, rendering Irish families notably resilient during the economic recession (Hannan & Macmillan, 2019).

Attitudes to working mothers are increasingly supportive among both sexes (Russell et al., 2017), with over 60% of women in paid employment in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2017a). Despite this marked shift in normative gender culture (Russell, McGinnity, Fahey, & Kenny, 2018), market research has found that, given the option, 63% Irish mothers would prefer to raise their own children at home, if that was financially feasible (Amárach Research, 2017). This elucidates the popularity of part-time work among mothers in Ireland: in 2008, 22 per cent of employed women without children under 18 years worked part-time; the rate increased to 34 per cent for women with one child, 44 per cent for women with two children and 50 per cent of women with three or more children (Russell et al., 2018). It appears that Irish families continue to prioritise the care of their own children at home, despite competing economic and social pressures in contemporary society to prioritise participation in the labour market (DCYA, 2016b; European Union Labour Force Survey, 2016). In contemporary Ireland, 70% of young children continue to enjoy care by a parent at home, often in combination with other forms of childcare (CSO, 2017b). Despite rapid changes in Irish society, and its increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity (Garrity, Moran, McGregor, & Devaney, 2017), significant Irish cultural scripts appear to underpin childminding's continued importance as a family-based form of childcare, valued by young families.

3.1.4 Research and Irish Childminding

Research focussed on childminding in Ireland has been sparse. While no national evaluation of the National Childminding Initiative was ever conducted, it was evaluated in County Waterford⁷ for its impact on the quality of childminding in the area (Daly, 2010). The evaluation revealed that each component of NCMI had contributed to a positive impact on the quality of childminding: raising childminders' confidence through training, enhancing home environments for children's play, and informing parents about quality in childminding provision. However, it noted a failure to fully implement all the recommendations of the National Childcare Strategy (DJELR, 2000), in particular, a tax relief for parents (as an incentive to choose notified/registered childminders), and the disregard of childminding income in relation to social welfare benefits (as an incentive for disadvantaged childminders to register/notify). These omissions limited the potential of the NCMI to bring childminders into the formal economy and the regulatory system.

As the structures of NCMI were in the process of being dismantled, two significant pieces of research were conducted into childminders' experiences. McKeon (2013) investigated the views and experiences of childminders in County Leitrim in relation to Síolta, the national quality framework for ECEC (CECDE, 2006). Findings showed that the majority believed Síolta had failed to have an impact upon childminding settings, also suggesting that childminders self-

⁷ One of 26 counties that compose the Republic of Ireland.

perceptions as professionals were confounded by public perceptions of childminding as low status. It was felt that this poor view of childminding coupled with the impact of the recession had increased the number in childminders operating outside the formal economy, a challenge for ECEC policy makers concerned with quality in childminding.

In a further, small, qualitative study, Garrity & McGrath (2011) investigated the experiences of African women in the West of Ireland, where discrimination had led them to open independent childminding services. Perhaps the most salient finding concerned the family support offered by childminders, which “provides opportunities for families and individuals to overcome adversity in spite of a multiplicity of negative factors in their environment” (p.79). Over 50% of participants described concrete acts of support to families, above the care of the children: such as, overnight care; extra hours of care on short notice; flexible, hours for parents working “on call” or on shifts. Along with flexibility of family support, the personal, ongoing, consistent relationship between the childminder and family was considered to be a distinguishing feature of childminding services, leading to a call for greater inclusion of childminding within the public ECEC system, as the most commonly used choice of non-parental care in contemporary Ireland, where children spend the longest hours (CSO, 2017b; Russell et al., 2016).

The national longitudinal study of children's lives, Growing Up in Ireland⁸ (GUI), is one of the few sources of national data on informal childminding⁹, even if it is "randomly generated" (McGinnity et al., 2015, p. 82) rather than purposefully collected. It has revealed some positive impacts of childminding care on children's outcomes, in particular, significant benefits for children's health. McGinnity et al. (2013) found that infants in home-based childcare, unlike infants in centre-based care, suffered no increased health risks, consistent with previous findings in other jurisdictions (Enserink et al., 2014; Forssell, Håkansson, & Månsson, 2001; Kamper-Jørgensen, Wohlfahrt, Simonsen, Grønbaek, & Benn, 2006). Byrne & O'Toole (2015) confirmed the health benefit for both 3 and 9 year olds, finding that "the type of childcare arrangement used in infancy was significantly associated with later health ratings, all else being equal" (p.34).

Notwithstanding the informal nature of childminding care in Ireland, higher verbal ability has been associated with use of childminding, as has better emotional and behavioral self-regulation in GUI reports (McGinnity et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016). Regarding cognitive development, McGinnity et al. (2015) found that childminder care was associated with greater increases in vocabulary

⁸ Growing Up in Ireland is a Government-funded study of children being carried out jointly by the ESRI and Trinity College Dublin. The study started in 2006 and follows the progress of two groups of children: 8,000 9-year-olds (Child Cohort/Cohort '98) and 10,000 9-month-olds (Infant Cohort/Cohort '08).

⁹ Unfortunately, the initial childminder survey in 2008-9 used the terms 'registered/unregistered childminder' when there was no official register for childminders. This means there is no way to determine what these categories meant to respondents at that time, or what that could mean for the quality of provision.

scores between age three and age five than parental care only, similar to findings in the UK (Melhuish et al., 2017); Byrne & O'Toole (2015) also found more positive outcomes for nine year olds with childminders in reading performance. Regarding socio-emotional outcomes, Russell et al. (2016) found that five year olds in childminder care had lower teacher and parent-rated difficulty scores, and higher teacher-rated pro-social scores than children in centre-based care, not unlike findings in the UK , which showed childminder care was associated with fewer emotional symptoms and better behavioural self-regulation than centre-based care (Melhuish et al., 2017). Similarly, based on Strength & Difficulties scores, the socio-emotional well-being of nine year olds was found to be higher compared with those in centre-based out-of-school care (Byrne & O'Toole, 2015).

Finally, two recent government reports have consulted with stakeholders in order to lay the groundwork for the regulation of both school age care (DCYA, 2017a) and childminding (DCYA, 2018a). The first consultation was a series of focus groups with primary school children: a creative, age-appropriate consultation was conducted with 177 children aged 5-7 years and 8-12 years about out-of-school care. Currently, 33% of households report using non-parental childcare for primary school children, of which 8% is childminder care. The major finding was that children wanted to be at home after school, if not their own home, then a relative's, a friend's or a childminder's home (DCYA, 2017b).

The second consultation was an online survey of parents in relation to childminding (n=3,630) to capture parents' views and experiences of childminding. Findings showed a high level satisfaction with childminder care (72% very satisfied). The majority of respondents valued continuity of care, a home-from-home setting, a safe physical environment and positive references

from known people more than childcare qualifications, training, or official inspections (DCYA, 2018a). The findings from both these consultations suggest considerable challenges lie ahead for the design and implementation of a new regulatory system for childminding (DCYA, 2019a) .

While the regulation of childminding in Ireland is currently planned to bring it in line with the ECEC sector as a whole, it remains to be seen what form this recognition and inclusion of childminding will take (DCYA, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018; Govt. of Ireland, 2019; Govt of Ireland, 2015; Start Strong, 2012). In this context, it is hoped that the present research, both ecological and ecocultural, can make a contribution to policy development and implementation by documenting the daily praxis and cultural models of Irish childminders as well as the attitudes of childminders and parents to professionalism and quality.

3.2 CHILDMINDING IN HISTORY

Childminding first became widespread during the Industrial Revolution in England in the 19th century (Bruner, 1980; Mayall & Petrie, 1977), as it did in other parts of Europe (Aballéa, 2005; Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017), when parents living in poverty both went to work in factories, leaving the very youngest children in need of care. By the early 20th century, childminding in Europe was associated with high infant mortality rates, unhygienic conditions and irresponsible practices, uncovered in a series of public investigations (Vandebroek, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010); these reports were used to provide the historical legitimization for the first crèches in Belgium and elsewhere. As public childcare services were gradually expanded, the place of the childminder became increasingly one of subordination (Aballéa, 2005; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017; Vandebroek et al., 2010).

In post-war UK, childminding was regulated in 1948 under the Nurseries and Childminders Regulation Act (Owen, 1988). Concerns about the poor quality of childminding care first attracted the attention of researchers in the 1970s (Bruner, 1980; Mayall & Petrie, 1977), leading to the 1989 Children Act, with basic regulations for all early childhood education and care settings, including childminding. Initially, the number of places with childminders expanded greatly, almost doubling between 1989 and 1997 from 186,500 to 365,000 (Mooney, Knight, Moss, & Owen, 2001; Mooney, Moss, et al., 2001). However, as government increasingly invested in centre-based provision from 2000 onwards, the number of childminder places declined, while the number of places in nurseries expanded, such that childminders now provide only 18% (240,700) of all places (Ofsted, 2019), in a pattern of displacement by group care (Gallagher, 2012).

In Sweden, childminding was only regulated and subsidised as a temporary measure in 1969 due to a lack of full day care facilities, seeking to grow the number of childcare places in order to increase female labour market participation (Gunnarsson, Korpi, & Nordenstam, 1999; Hakim, 2009; OECD, 2000; Schonfeld, Kernan, & Walsh, 2003). In official documents from the time, Jansson (2008) identified a disparaging discourse, characterizing the position of childminders as one of dependence, isolation, lacking in societal esteem, or opportunities for development, in contrast to women in gainful employment outside the home. Exclusion of childminders from the first national preschool curriculum in 1999, and further decline in status (Gunnarsson et al., 1999; Jansson, 2008; OECD, 2006a) has resulted in falling numbers of childminders in Sweden, from 30% of early years provision in 1980s to barely 5% by 2016 (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Ofsted, 2017; Simon, Owen, & Hollingworth, 2015; Urban et al., 2011).

Historical mistrust of childminders, as lone providers, combined with the paradox of a public service based in the privacy of the home has led to fears for the safety and well-being of children, especially when unregulated (Boogaard, Bollen, & Dijkers, 2013; Kontos et al., 1995; Raikes, Raikes, & Wilcox, 2005; Start Strong, 2012). This has led either to the rejection of home-based childcare and replacement with group care, as in Sweden, or its exclusion from any form of public recognition, as happens in more traditional, conservative societies, or to increasing regulation of private childminding, as is the case in many neo-liberal jurisdictions (Arpino, Pronzato, & Tavares, 2010; Boogaard et al., 2013; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). Regulation and inspection of childminding usually parallels the regulation of ECEC, as well as education and caring professions more generally. The disempowering gaze of inspection has been

described as a form of control, and a curtailment of professional autonomy (Cameron & Moss, 2007; Jones & Osgood, 2007; Moss, 2006; Osgood, 2006, 2009, 2010; McGillivray, 2008), which has been the main response of regulatory modernity to the dilemma posed by a private home-based childminder providing a service to the public (Brooker, 2016; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Davis et al., 2012; Kontos et al., 1995; Leng & Lessard, 2013; Lyons, 2012; Raikes, Raikes, & Wilcox, 2005).

The close parallels between motherhood and childminding have often been noted as the childminder's Achilles heel in terms of professionalism (Ailwood, 2007; Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Jansson, 2008; Rapp & Lloyd, 1989). Childminding is often undertaken by women as a means of enabling combining paid work with care for their own children (Fauth et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2014), linking the roles of motherhood and childminder at a practical level, as well as at a conceptual level, as these roles tend to be perceived as similar (Bromer, 2001; Bromer & Henly, 2004, 2009), both taking place within the home (Brooker, 2016; Mooney & Statham, 2003). For some stakeholders in modern society, childminding operates at an uncomfortable nexus between private and public, between family and ECEC (Garey, Hansen, & Ehrenreich, 2011; Jansson, 2008; Moen et al., 1991; Nelson, 1990; Page, 2011).

3.3 POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF CHILDMINDING

Internationally, the number of children participating in non-parental early childhood education and care (ECEC) before school age has been increasing to the point where it is the norm for the majority of children under five years of age in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, 2019; Melhuish, 2016b). Research indicates that home-based caregivers, including formal and

informal childminders, provide the majority of non-parental care for young children up to approximately the age of three or the start of preschool in several European countries, including France, Belgium, and Ireland (CSO, 2017; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009; McGinnity, Murray, & McNally, 2013; Urban et al., 2011; Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2016). Although no internationally comparable statistics are available on how many children are taken care of by childminders, home-based forms of childcare are widespread for children under the age of three across Europe (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice, 2019) as most families with children in this age group face the so-called “childcare gap”, (p. 43) that is, a period of time when a child is not covered either by parental leave or by a guaranteed place in ECEC needs.

State investment in ECEC within the EU has had two key objectives: firstly, to support parental employment, in particular maternal participation in the labour market (Bettendorf, Jongen, & Muller, 2015; Gunnarsson et al., 1999; Hakim, 2009; Huerta et al., 2011; OECD, 2000; Schonfeld et al., 2003), and secondly, to promote children’s welfare, learning and development (Belle, 2016; Bennett, Gordon, & Edelman, 2012; Melhuish & Ereky-Stevens, 2015). The expansion of ECEC services became the explicit aim of EU policy 2000-2010 as part of a larger employment strategy to remove disincentives to female participation in the labour market, by providing childcare by 2010 to “at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age” (Barcelona European Council, 2002, p. 12). In 2019, 93.3% of children aged three and over were attending preschool in the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019), with many States see rising rates of maternal employment (Eurostat, 2017), as the availability of childcare significantly increases the probability of mothers returning to work, particularly

the less well paid and less educated (Del Boca et al., 2009; Figari & Narazani, 2017).

3.3.1 Childminding in neo-liberal and conservative welfare regimes

In neo-liberal states such as the UK and the Netherlands (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, & Myles, 2002; Esping-Andersen et al., 2012), regulated childminders are usually self-employed service providers and business owners in a competitive childcare market (Campbell-Barr, 2013; Greener, 2009; Lloyd & Penn, 2010, 2012; Penn, 2014b; Penn & Lloyd, 2013). In the majority of conservative states (Ireland, Italy, Greece), childminding is predominantly informal, outside regulation; it is a key provision in allowing maternal engagement in the labour market, yet remains virtually invisible in government policy and national statistics (Arpino, Pronzato, & Tavares, 2010; Bryson, Brewer, Sibieta, & Butt, 2012; Davis, Freeman, et al., 2012; Del Boca et al., 2009; Figari & Narazani, 2017).

The UK has promoted an entrepreneurial model for childminding in the 21st century (Bond & Kersey, 2001; Greener, 2009) alongside higher qualification requirements in order to become eligible to provide government funded childcare places. However, while qualification levels have risen considerably (Nutbrown, 2012; Simon et al., 2015), relatively poor earnings have contributed to the decline in childminding in England, despite the introduction of childminding agencies in 2014 in an effort to recruit and retain more childminders to meet continued growing demand for childcare (Department for Education, 2014; Callanan, 2014; Truss, 2012). Low earnings and onerous paperwork have been cited by registered childminders as the main reason for seeking other work. This has contributed to a high turnover rate, with registered childminders spending on average 6 years in

the profession (Mooney, Moss, et al., 2001; Ofsted, 2017; Simon et al., 2015), and growing numbers of informal childminders (Bryson et al., 2012; Rutter & Evans, 2012). Similar high attrition rates in Belgium and Germany have been attributed to poor working conditions including low pay, little recognition, social isolation and high levels of job insecurity (Bauters & Vandembroeck, 2017; Glorie, 2009; Vandembroeck & Bauters, 2017).

Entrepreneurial childminding businesses are subject to the vagaries of childcare markets and can be impacted negatively by the unintended consequences of government policy, regulation and subsidy (Campbell-Barr, 2013; Lloyd & Penn, 2010, 2012; Penn, 2014b; Penn & Lloyd, 2013). In the Netherlands, for example, the childcare market spiralled out of control under deregulation, which was intended to increase the supply of childcare services in order to stimulate growth in maternal employment rates. Relative carers became registered childminders only in order to access state subsidies, and the cost of childcare subsidies to the State trebled between 2005-2009. Since new services did not emerge as intended, the impact on employment rates was considerably less than expected, resulting in further policy reform in 2010, which required all childminders to care for unrelated children in addition to relatives; as a result, the number of registered childminders returning previous levels (Bettendorf et al., 2015; Bijl, Boelhouwer, Pommer, & Schyns, 2010; Boogaard et al., 2013; Daycare Trust, 2012).

3.3.2 Childminding in socialist welfare states

By contrast, in France, the focus of policy attention in the 1990s was increasing maternal employment through the revalorisation of childcare benefit programmes to allow families access individual childcare services in the private

sector, such as childminders or nannies, rather than rely on the direct government provision of services in crèches. Consequently, since 1994, the single most widespread formal childcare arrangement for children aged under six years in France has been a licensed childminder (Daly & Clavero, 2003; Fagnani & Math, 2012; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009; Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2016). In 2004, the drive to increase the number of childcare places for children under three years of age (Barcelona European Council, 2002) resulted in the creation of a new, independent, tax exempt employment status for childminders (Cresson et al., 2012; OECD, 2004b). Currently, 90% of childminders in France are independent providers, which means they can choose when and with whom they wish to work. However, by holding individual employment contracts with different families, they are technically seen as employed and covered for social welfare benefits (holiday, illness, pension etc) under employment law (Aballéa, 2005; Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Fagnani & Math, 2012; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009). Childminders are officially guaranteed the minimum wage (SMIC), which effectively sets a minimum price per childminding place for parents; this rises in line with the SMIC, but does not prevent the childminder from charging more, depending on the services provided (Daune-Richard & Letablier, 2011; Plantenga & Remery, 2009). Parents are reimbursed on submission of monthly receipts for licenced childminding in line with salary related subsidy rates. These terms and conditions were negotiated by trade unions, established in 1977, when childminding was first officially recognised (Cresson et al., 2012). In reality, independent childminders' wages fluctuate depending on whether all their places are filled in the childcare market (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2018). The supply of childcare has increased rapidly, with the childminding workforce nearly doubling from over

166,700 *assistantes maternelles* in 1995 (Algava & Ruault, 2003) to 327,775 in 2016 providing over a million childcare places (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2016). There was a concurrent rise in female employment rates, not least because many less educated women found a secure job and gained a certain status in society as a licenced childminder, with certified childminding training and a staffed support network (Cresson et al., 2012; Fagnani & Math, 2012).

In Denmark, salaried childminders are sufficiently well paid that their salary could constitute a primary income, with increments and benefits which all municipal childminders are paid, whether or not all five childcare places in their home are in use (Department for Education, 2013b). This is, in large part, due to the highly unionised nature of the early years workforce, including childminders (Halling-Illum & Breuer, 2009). In 2012, a childminder in Denmark earned £21,500 per annum; the average in France was £13,200 per annum, and the average earnings of an English childminder was £11,400 gross, before expenses (Department for Education, 2013b; Crown CREC & Ipsos MORI, 2013). These developments have created a stable childminding sector in Denmark, with childminders providing places for approximately 25% children under three years old: it appears to be the most common form of provision in more rural districts¹⁰.

¹⁰ <http://www.statistikbanken.dk/statbank5a/default.asp?w=1366>

3.4 CHILDMINDING AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC)

With rising numbers of young children participating in ECEC in the last decade, policy focus in the EU has shifted to promoting children's welfare, learning and development. Large, longitudinal studies on the effects of early childcare have led to significant consensus about the impact of both the quantity and quality of childcare (Early Child Care Research Network, 2003; McGinnity et al., 2013; Melhuish et al., 2006, 2001; Russell et al., 2016; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 1997). High quantities of childcare in infancy (i.e. long hours (30+) particularly in centres) has been associated with negative socio-emotional outcomes over time (Eryigit-Madzwamuse & Barnes, 2013; Vandell et al., 2010). However, high quality ECEC has been shown to have beneficial effects on both cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, particularly for children from the age of three years and over (Adi-Japha & Klein, 2009; McGinnity et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2016; Sylva et al., 2011), leading to increasing recognition of the benefits of participation in ECEC for the child, family and society (Melhuish & Ereky-Stevens, 2015; Otero & Melhuish, 2015; Urban, Vandembroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2012; Urban et al., 2011).

Since higher quality ECEC has been correlated with better outcomes for children long term (Dalli et al., 2011; Duignan, Fallon, Dwyer, Schonfeld, & Walsh, 2007; Garcia, Heckman, Leaf, & Prados, 2016; Hayes, 2006; Heckman, 2006; Heckman et al., 2010; Menchini & Irc, 2011; OECD, 2012, 2016b) and the quality of ECEC has been correlated with staff qualifications (Fagnani & Math, 2012; Melhuish, 2016b; Nutbrown, 2012; OECD, 2012), this has in turn been linked to increasing professionalisation of the early years workforce, even though the professional status and working conditions for practitioners have remained largely unchanged (Lazzari, Picchio, & Balduzzi, 2015; Lyons, 2012; Share,

Kerrins, & Greene, 2011; Urban, Robson, & Scacchi, 2017; Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek, Urban, & Peeters, 2016). In this context, the European Qualifications Framework was established in 2008, (European Commission, 2012), in an attempt to provide flexible and inclusive pathways to formal professional recognition and status, attracting large numbers of ECEC practitioners in Ireland and other European nations, including childminders (Boogaard et al., 2013; DCYA, 2018a; Oberhuemer, 2011; Urban et al., 2011; Wolfe et al., 2013).

Research has shown that improved ECEC quality (both structural and process quality) is linked to rising standards of qualifications and levels of professionalism (Bigras et al., 2010; Dalli et al., 2011; Duignan & Walsh, 2004; European Commission, 2014b; Melhuish, 2015, 2016b; Oberhuemer, 2005; OECD, 2012, 2015; Urban et al., 2012; Vandebroek et al., 2016), although this modernist view is contested in other post-modern paradigms (Campbell-Barr, 2018; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Fenech, 2011; Peter Moss & Dahlberg, 2008). Early years practitioners are gradually emerging as self-regulating profession, (Adams, 2008; Brooker, 2010; Lumsden, 2010; Manning-Morton, 2006; Moloney, 2015; Osgood, 2009; Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011; Vandebroek et al., 2016) with specialized qualifications and specific codes of conduct, agreed values, recognised responsibilities and acceptable or required behaviour in the field (Adams, 2014; Beck & Young, 2005; Boddy, Cameron, & Moss, 2006; Dalli, 2008; Olgianti, 2010; Parsons, 1939; Urban, 2008; Urban, Robson, & Scacchi, 2017). As an emerging profession, much debate surrounds the issue of who should be included and recognised as professionals within ECEC systems, with complex entanglements and debates regarding professional belonging (Skattebol, Adamson, & Woodrow, 2016).

Professionalism in ECEC is sometimes characterized by emotional distance from the child, limit-setting on personal involvement and helping, use of formal resources and instruction, and the capacity to translate child development theory and research into practice in order to offer high quality care and education (K. Adams, 2008; Bromer et al., 2013; Dyer, 2018; Oberhuemer, 2015; Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011). Other research describes professionalism less on the basis of traditional professional benchmarks such as a high entry level of education, and more on the basis of personal autonomy, working within self-defined values and beliefs, rather than taking on 'business' values or externally imposed standards (Campbell-Barr, 2018; Manning-Morton, 2006; McGillivray, 2008; Osgood, 2010; Page, 2011, 2018; Taggart, 2011). Drawing on theories of performativity, Osgood (2007) highlights the tensions between official, technocratic surveillance of those working in ECEC and the more personal, moral and emotional construct of professionalism that comes from within (Campbell-Barr, 2017, 2018; Campbell-Barr et al., 2015; Jones & Osgood, 2007; Osgood, 2006, 2009, 2010).

However, unlike the classic liberal profession, with its agreed, self-defined habitus (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011), the early years workforce in many neo-liberal western nations has had its practice defined by external regulation and quality standards in order to attain predetermined outcomes with very young children, sometimes explicitly underpinned by human capital theory and the Heckman equation in a bid for public investment in ECEC (Belle, 2016; Biroli, Boca, Heckman, Heckman, & Koh, 2017; Datta & Simonsen, 2010; García et al., 2016; Heckman, 2006; Heckman et al., 2010). Moss (2016) has characterized this discourse as 'the story of quality and high returns' (p.3) a highly instrumental narrative that tells of the large profits to be made from social

investment in early childhood education if only the correct technology (i.e. 'quality') is applied in the correct manner (Moss, 2016; Moss, 2006b; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Peter Moss, Dahlberg, & Pence, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006).

In such a context, the practitioner's voice is often marginalised (Brock, 2013; Campbell-Barr, 2018; Garrity & McGrath, 2011; Urban et al., 2011). The pressure to perform in such a professional habitus – completing plans, checklists and observations – can lead to the paradox where, in the name of quality and professionalism, the individual child's needs come last amidst competing demands (Brooker, 2016; Jansson, 2008; O'Connell, 2008, 2011; Simon et al., 2015). This points to the conflicted role of care, affection, love and relationships in ECEC more broadly, and it challenges the very concept of dispassionate professionalism (Cousins, 2015; Moyles, 2001; Nutbrown, 2012; Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

In its analysis of professional competence in early years practitioners, the CoRe report (Urban et al., 2011) conceives of professionalism in childcare on a spectrum from exclusive to inclusive, based on the models and practices presented in the case studies from different jurisdictions in the European Union (Lumsden, 2010; Musatti, Picchio, & Mayer, 2016; Ortlipp et al., 2011; Peeters, Urban, & Vandebroek, 2016). At the exclusive end of understanding practitioner professionalism lies an expert model in which transformative practices are mainly directed from above in a hierarchical structure. The decision-making processes tend to be controlled by practitioners whose expertise is institutionally recognised, usually because of a higher qualification (i.e. academics) (Urban, 2008). Such an approach tends to lead to centralised state requirements or standards that practitioners on the ground must meet in order to

prove that they are providing a professional service (Lumsden, 2010; OECD, 2011, 2015).

By contrast, on the inclusive side of understanding professionalism lies a “participatory model, in which transformative practices are mainly negotiated in a team within an equal structure, which includes parents, children, the wider community and, more generally, society” (Urban et al., 2011). This inclusive conceptualization of professionalism increases the sense of agency of all those involved, who see themselves as bringing change in their own settings— coordinators, ECEC staff, parents and children (Musatti et al., 2016; Peeters, 2012; Van Laere et al., 2012). Ultimately, ECEC professionalism in the CoRe report is conceptualized as “multi-dimensional and systemic: it encompasses the dimensions of knowledge, practices and values. It unfolds at every layer of the early childhood education and care system – which, in a best case scenario, can develop into a competent system” (Urban et al., 2011). As an example, the CoRe report cites the early years’ services in Reggio Emilia, where professionalism is conceived as the acquisition of a reflective stance by practitioners rather than the acquisition of accredited qualifications (Milotay, 2016; Musatti et al., 2016; Rinaldi, 2006; Urban et al., 2012; Vandebroek et al., 2016).

The trajectory of Early Years workforce development in the UK and Ireland has tended to proceed along exclusive lines, aspiring towards a graduate led workforce with steadily rising levels of minimum qualifications over the last two decades (Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou, & Ereky-Stevens, 2014; Nutbrown, 2012; Oberhuemer, 2011; Start Strong, 2015; Urban et al., 2017). Curricular policies, regulation and inspection criteria are determined nationally, with little local discussion of goals, planning and development (Kalitowski, 2016; Start Strong, 2014). This managerial approach to fragmented provision in liberal

welfare societies rewards a compliance culture rather than professional autonomy, with individual childcare businesses, from nurseries to childminders, experiencing ever tighter regulation and inspection (Campbell-Barr, 2013; Esping-Andersen et al., 2002, 2012; Lloyd & Penn, 2010; Penn, 2014a).

3.4.1 Childminding and Professionalism

In discussing childminding as a profession, it is important to define what is meant by terms such as professionalism and professionalisation, which are often used interchangeably (Moloney, 2015). For clarity, this study defines professionalism in terms of behaviours and attitudes, while considering professionalisation in terms of the process described by Brannen and Moss (2003) in which rising levels of education and improved conditions grow alongside better career prospects and collaborative relationships, culminating in distinctive professional approaches to work.

Often excluded from ECEC professionalism debates are childminders (Brooker, 2016; Urban et al., 2011), childcare assistants (Peeters, Vandebroek, 2011; Van Laere et al., 2012; Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2016), and services working with disadvantaged families (Garrity & McGrath, 2011; Skattebol et al., 2016). The education-care divide between qualified teachers and less well educated assistants can result in conflicting understandings of professionalism in these different contexts (Brooker, 2010; Van Laere et al., 2012). Poorly qualified, low paid childminders can be even further excluded, being on the wrong side of the education-care divide, and even further from the proverbial school gate (Baker & Lynch, 2012; Brooker, 2016; Jones & Osgood, 2007; OECD, 2006c; Urban & Rubiano, 2014; Urban et al., 2011a). As the CoRe report summarises: “In many countries, they [childminders] work in very difficult conditions, with limited

educational support and low income. As a consequence, professional mobility (both horizontal and vertical) is virtually impossible for them. In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce...” (Urban et al. 2011, 14).

This had led some advocates for the professionalisation of ECEC to denigrate childminders as poorly paid “substitute mothers” (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017, p. 8), who reinforce the image of childminding as an individualized, casual, neighborly form of care, consolidating common beliefs in the redundancy of the professionalisation for childminders (Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Fagnani & Math, 2012). For some, this is tantamount to exploitation of childminders, who only gained recognition as a cost-effective way of meeting with demand for childcare for children under the age of three years, in particular in times of economic crisis (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017). From this perspective, professionalism (improving standards of practice) and professionalisation (improving qualifications and status) can be considered as the only way forward for a sustainable future for childminders (Peeters, Vandebroek, 2011; Van Laere et al., 2012; Van Laere & Vandebroek, 2016; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017; Vandebroek et al., 2013).

On the other hand, many childminders consider their experience as mothers vital to their practice as any qualifications they hold (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; Nelson, 1990; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Research shows that parents seek the close relationship and individualized care for their child with a childminder, above documentation or regulatory compliance (Ang et al., 2016; Fauth et al., 2013; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012; Janssen et al., 2016). The comfort of a real-life home environment is valued in contrast to the inflexibility of institutionalized childcare in purpose-built centres (Cresson et al., 2012; Davis, Freeman, et al., 2012; McKeon, 2013). Studies with childminders show that they

consider providing ‘a home away from home’ to be very important, emphasizing the close, affective relationship with frequent mention of the physical and emotional affection between child and childminder (Cousins, 2015; Page, 2011, 2018; Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Convinced of the value of their relationship-based practice, the demands of performative professionalism can be rejected as hindering the real work of childminding (Brooker, 2016; O’Connell, 2011; Tonyan, 2017). Significantly, this approach aligns closely with the reasons parents give for choosing childminding over centre-based care: the close relationship between child and caregiver, the freedom of the home environment, and the mixed age group of the children, all of which mirror the characteristics of family contexts (Fauth et al., 2011, 2013; Harper Browne, 2009).

In an analysis of the process of professionalisation among poorly paid care workers, Brannen and Moss (2003) have proposed that rising levels of education and improved conditions should grow alongside better career prospects and collaborative relationships, culminating in distinctive professional approaches to work. (See Figure 3-1). This suggests an organic development of professionalism from within (Jones & Osgood, 2007; Osgood, 2006), whereby rising qualifications are rewarded by improved salaries and conditions, and an increasingly cohesive, collective identity.

However, childminders are far from an homogenous group (Fagnani & Math, 2012), and opinions about the meaning of this work and its professional status can vary considerably (Cresson et al., 2012; Garrity &



Figure 3-1 The Process of Professionalisation based on Brannen & Moss (2003).

McGrath, 2011). In recent decades, when the accordion pleat of childminding provision needed to be extended, the UK government consciously constructed childminding as home-based early years professionals: "...this involves the rejection of what are seen as hegemonic, harmful and conservative discourses of mothering, home and family....in favour of the 'necessary language' (Dahlberg et al., 1999:2) of 'quality': 'skills', 'training', 'business' and 'professionalism'" (O'Connell, 2008, p. 13). It is hardly surprising that research reveals a divide between childminders who see childminding as their career, and childminders who see the role of a childminder as similar to that of parent (Alberola & Doucet Dahlgren, 2009; Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; McKeon, 2013; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017).

In many domains, the promise of professionalisation (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Cameron & Moss, 2007; Hargreaves, 2000), has been superseded by the demands of external regulation for productivity in terms of increased documentation.

Research shows that childminders tend to resist such externally imposed standards, when childminding's essential homely, individual, private nature is threatened (Bryson et al., 2012; Callanan, 2014; Cook, Davis, Williamson, Harrison, & Sims, 2013; Davis, Freeman, et al., 2012; Ofsted, 2017; Rutter & Evans, 2012; Simon et al., 2015).

3.4.2 Childminding and quality

In terms of more sensitive and responsive caregiving, the quality of childcare provided by childminders in regulated contexts has been found to be better than in unregulated contexts (Kontos et al., 1995; Leach et al., 2006; Otero & Melhuish, 2015; Raikes et al., 2013), which correlates with better outcomes for children in terms of well-being, language and socio-emotional development

(Declercq et al., 2016; Laevers et al., 2016; Melhuish et al., 2017). However, the causative pathways are unclear. Early investigations of regulable structural features of childminding highlighted general education level, group size and adult-child ratio (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2002; Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008), while more recent studies have emphasized the impact of continuous professional development, supportive supervision and mentoring for childminders (Bromer et al., 2009; Hughes-Belding, Hegland, Stein, Sideris, & Bryant, 2012; Layland & Smith, 2015; Smith, 2015). Even though regulation has been found to be positively associated with the quality of childminding in general (Bromer et al., 2013; Burchinal, Howes, & Kontos, 2002; Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman, & LaGrange, 2006; Morrissey & Banghart, 2007; Otero & Melhuish, 2015), it is essential to note that the type of regulatory regime varies considerably, the definitions of quality are contested, as are the instruments of quality measurement for childminders (Harper Browne, 2009; Rusby, Crowley, Jones, & Smolkowski, 2017; Rusby, Jones, Crowley, & Smolkowski, 2013; Tonyan, Nuttall, et al., 2017; Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017).

It has been argued that the childminder's intentionality is the essential component of quality (Bromer et al., 2009; Burchinal et al., 2002; Kontos et al., 1995; Otero & Melhuish, 2015). Intentional childminders actively pursue childcare qualifications and growing expertise in the field of early years; there is a desire for continuous professional development, and suggestions of a common childminding approach to ECEC as critically reflective professionals, with awareness of the strengths of childminding practice (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Brooker, 2016; Nutbrown, 2012; Ofsted, 2017; Osgood, 2010; Otero & Melhuish, 2015). Doherty et al. (2006) have highlighted that childminder intentionality is expressed in engagement with regulation, and in pursuit of training and

education, which results in sensitive, nurturing pedagogy with children. In other words, quality in childminding is not about the regulations *per se*, rather it concerns the person of the childminder, and the dispositions, attitudes and attributes s/he brings to the pedagogy of care for children (Andrew, 2015; Campbell-Barr, 2017; Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Taggart, 2011). In ecocultural terms, this intentionality is described in childminders' levels of agency, connection and advocacy (CCCRP, 2014). These childminders are more likely to be involved in networking and professional associations, and advocate for the recognition of childminding on a par with other forms of ECEC (McKeogh, 2010; McKeon, 2013; Osgood, 2010). Noteworthy in this regard was the finding in the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) that three factors were associated with process quality in childminder settings: the adult-to-child ratio, frequency of training and quality assurance support, and the years of experience as a childminder (Callanan, 2014; Otero & Melhuish, 2015).

However, the low status of the work, poor pay conditions and negative perceptions where the boundaries between roles of mother and childminder become indistinct, can generate significant challenges when constructing an understanding childminding as a professional career (Jansson, 2008; McKeon, 2013; Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2018; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Furthermore, in a private childcare market, there are also tensions between providing care for children at home, with its emphasis on commitment and affective engagement with children (Page, 2011, 2018), and operating as a small business for financial reward (Campbell-Barr, 2013; Greener, 2009; Penn, 2014b). The public and private domains of work and home are blurred for childminders, who do not have a physical separation of their private lives from

their paid employment, unlike other care practitioners, such as nurses (Ailwood, 2007; Bromer, 2001; Bromer & Henly, 2004; O'Connell, 2008).

Although policy and rhetoric have put childminders on a par with other Early Years Professionals in the last two decades in the UK, for example, there still remain both real and perceived barriers for a majority of childminders in seeing themselves as equal professionals (McKeogh, 2010; McKeon, 2013; OECD, 2016b). Research with childminders in the UK indicates that they struggle with the sense of imposed performative professionalism, which detracts from the essence of childminding, as they perceive it (Brooker, 2016; Jones & Osgood, 2007; O'Connell, 2008, 2010, 2011; Osgood, 2007). For example, an ethnographic study among childminders in East London documented how the regulated approach to childminding was perceived by childminders on the ground, as prioritising paperwork to an excessive degree: "...just 'cos you can write reports... 'Are you telling me that it makes a better childminder? No. It doesn't. Cos you can do all the reports but not give them the attention" (O'Connell, 2011, p. 788).

This rejection of performative professionalism highlights the need to reconceptualise childminding in its own terms, where giving the children attention is considered essential to the role and prioritised over paperwork. Brooker (2016) has identified an issue which many registered childminders felt was happening in practice: compliance with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department of Education, 2012), threatened to undermine not only their practice but their valued relationships with parents. Increasingly, structural markers of quality, such as qualifications or rich environments, are being presented as proxies for the process markers of quality, such as responsive caregiving and continuity of care (Burchinal, Kainz, & Cai, 2011; Ruprecht et al.,

2016). However, Owen & Roby (2006) found that childminders believed quality in childminding was constructed differently from quality in group-based provision and posited that a more professional approach to childminding should not undermine the traditional flexibility, hominess and loving nature of their work. Holding higher levels of childcare qualifications has not impacted the decline of registered childminding in England, down from 103,000 childminders in 1996 to 39,000 in 2019 (Ofsted, 2019), nor has it stemmed the attrition in childminder numbers in Flanders (Vandenbroek & Van der Mespel, 2017). This suggests that the issues surrounding contradictory understandings and visions of childminding remain to be resolved in many jurisdictions.

3.5 CHILDMINDING AS A DISTINCTIVE FORM OF CHILDCARE

Childminding has unique, distinctive, inter-related features which set it apart from other early years settings as current research shows: the close relationship based pedagogy (Freeman, 2011b; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012), continuity of care (Ang et al., 2016; Bowlby, 2007), close partnerships with parents (Brooker, 2016; Janssen et al., 2016), the relaxed home setting (Fauth et al., 2013), the wide age range in a group (Corr et al., 2014; Lanigan, 2011), the maternal background of most childminders (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; O'Connell, 2008), and the close connections with the community (Ang et al., 2016; Davis, Freeman, et al., 2012; Grace & Bowes, 2011).

3.5.1 Childminding as family childcare

The majority of childminders enter childcare not as young students envisioning a career in childcare, but as more mature mothers, with previous qualifications and work-life experience, who want to stay home with their own

children and earn a supplementary income (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; Glorie, 2009; Kontos, 1994; Kontos et al., 1995). Some consider this link to motherhood as problematic, hindering professionalism (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Bromer, 2001; Bromer & Henly, 2004; Cresson et al., 2012; Jansson, 2008; Mooney & Statham, 2003; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017), however, even well qualified childminders seem to consider their maternal experience to be more valuable than professional qualification (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; O'Connell, 2008, 2011).

Moreover, childminding services do not fit neatly into the age-stratified boxes of early years (ECEC) and school age childcare (SAC). It could be said that they provide neither ECEC nor SAC, as they typically work with a small group of children of mixed ages, from babies to teens in mixed age childcare resembling a family group. This has implications for a pedagogy of childminding care, which have rarely been explored, although children at childminders speak of the experience of playing with babies or older children (Administration for Children & Families, 2017; Corr et al., 2014; DCYA Working Group, 2018; Garrick, Bath, Dunn, Maconochie, & Willis, 2010; Lanigan, 2011).

Childminders work at home in a relatively unhurried, low stress setting, where the needs of the individual child can be more easily met in child centred practice: there is less requirement for an adult led schedule (Dalli et al., 2011; Groeneveld et al., 2012; Groeneveld et al., 2010), allowing for a less structured, more flexible approach to routine (Tonyan, 2015; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). In some cases, there are also opportunities for daily outings in the back garden (weather and clothing permitting) to local parks, playgrounds and libraries (Street & Freeman, 2013), which greatly enrich the affordances for children at a childminders (Fjørtoft, 2001; Gibson, 1977; Hayes et

al., 2017; Lindberg, 2014; Waller et al., 2017). These outings contribute to forging relationships at local preschools and schools in the local community, which can foster a strong sense of identity and belonging in the young child (Ang et al., 2016; NCCA, 2009, 2015), as children's own accounts of their playtimes with childminders in the UK have shown (Garrick, Bath, Dunn, Maconochie, & Willis, 2010). Combined with long term consistency and continuity of care over years, this sense of security can help build resilience in infants and toddlers and ease transitions to preschool and primary school, research has shown (Ang et al., 2016; Bowlby, 2007; Coplan, Findlay, & Schneider, 2010; Dalli et al., 2011; Grace & Bowes, 2011; O'Kane, 2016).

In addition, like other early years providers, childminders provide childcare in *loco parentis*, when the parent is unavailable to take care of the child. As the sole provider of care for the child, childminders tend to develop very close partnerships with his/her parents, to the point where some conceptualise childminding more as support for working families than as early childhood education and care (Bromer & Henly, 2004, 2009; Forry et al., 2013; Garrity & McGrath, 2011). Findings in existing studies indicate that parents are more aware of partnership with childminders than with centre-based services, and this contributes to their choice of childminding care for children (Brooker, 2016; DCYA, 2018a; Fauth et al., 2013; Janssen et al., 2016; Tonyan, 2017). This could be in part due to the small numbers of children with a childminder, and the more equal, participatory, working relationship childminders negotiate as parents working with other parents, rather trying to relate to parents as expert professionals (Gonzalez-Mena, 2009; NCCIC, 2000; Tonyan, 2012).

Moreover, parents rely on childminders' flexibility in working unusual hours, and often depend on them for support with a challenging child, or in times

of crisis over many years, as a form of informal support network for the family beyond their primary role as caregivers (Ang et al., 2016; Bromer & Henly, 2004; Garrity & McGrath, 2011). Ang et al. (2016) highlight the sustained partnership, the personal, ongoing consistent relationship and “symbiotic relationship with parents, school and community” (p.263) suggestive of an ecocultural niche of relationships between childminder and families.

3.5.2 Childminding pedagogy and praxis

Research suggests that childminding offers a unique pedagogical approach to children’s developmental outcomes that is distinct from other type of childcare setting, a relationship driven, informal, emergent curriculum in the home (Ang et al., 2016; Freeman, 2011b; Melhuish et al., 2017; Otero & Melhuish, 2015). The concept of a nurturing pedagogy (Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Hayes, 2007, 2019) is very close to the relationship driven pedagogy practiced by childminders: “...understanding of early childhood development requires that we prioritise relationships and interactions...”(Hayes & Kernan, 2008, p. 150). These relational and nurturing principles of pedagogy are prioritised in the childminder’s home where all the daily and family routines are anchored and must be considered the defining characteristic of childminding care. While it is widely acknowledged that interactions drive development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Dowsett et al., 2008; Gevers Deynoot-Schaub & Riksen-Walraven, 2008; Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Melhuish, 2016b; Page & Elfer, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978), childminders’ interactions build close secondary attachment relationships with young children, through individualised attention, consistency and continuity of care over many years

(Belsky & Fearon, 2002; Bowlby, 2007; Elicker et al., 1999; Fauth et al., 2011; Freeman, 2011; Howes & Spieker, 2008; Ruprecht et al., 2016; Tonyan, 2017).

However, this secondary attachment relationship can be ambiguous and difficult to negotiate: unlike care workers who provide care in an institution, which is separate from their private home environment, such as nurses or teachers, who are expected to exercise some form of professionalism, the childminder must determine how to act like a mother (as is commonly expected) towards children who are not her own in her own home (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011, 2013; Hochschild, 1979; Nelson, 1990; Page, 2011, 2018). Because childminders typically work alone at home, not in a centre-based setting, and they charge money for labour that women usually supply without financial compensation, they must learn to manage this emotional labour (Lynch, 2007; Nelson, 1990; Page, 2011, 2018). Most career childminders eventually learn the skill of “detached attachment”, holding back somewhat, so as not to become “too attached” (Nelson, 1990, p. 598), or “over-involved” (Page, 2018, p. 135), even though some may lose out financially, going above and beyond to support the child and family in times of crisis, without charging as they should. It is not surprising that burnout is mentioned by those who leave childminding (Andrew, 2015; Bromer & Henly, 2009; Cook et al., 2013; Davis, Priest, et al., 2012; Garrity & McGrath, 2011; Harper Browne, 2009; Williamson et al., 2011).

A significant body of research stresses how the quality of relationships with providers has the most significant impact on children’s development: practitioner education and adult/child ratios are important only insofar as they impact on the quality of relationships (Ahnert et al., 2006; Early Child Care Research Network, 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a, 2000b; OECD, 2006a; Tomasello & Farrar, 1986; Vandell, 1996; Hayes & Kernan,

2008). A meta-analysis of research over 25 years in the USA has shown that “secure childcare provider attachments were more common in home-based than in centre-based settings, and that care providers’ sensitivity to individual children predicted attachment security only in the small groups that characterise home-based settings” (Ahnert et al., 2006, p. 675). Research has found more positive caregiving is seen when group sizes and child-adult ratios are smaller (Ahnert et al., 2006; Declercq et al., 2016; Laevers et al., 2016; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a, 2000b, 2002). In a study of children’s experiences in early years settings in the UK, it was noted that the children in the childminding settings seemed to have the closest attachment to practitioners, often supported by the continuity of care: children had been with the same childminder since they were babies, and their parents had friendly and informal relationships with the childminder (Garrick et al., 2010).

Noteworthy in this regard is the renewed discussion of care, affection and professional love, its praxis and challenges among early years professionals, including childminders (Page, 2011, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013; Taggart, 2011). Page (2018) characterises the principles of professional love as “emotional intimacy” and “gradual, authentic, reciprocal” relationship, building mutual understanding, which forms the basis of unwritten “permission” (Page, 2011, p. 312) from parent to caregiver to love the child, without threatening the primacy of the parental relationship. Campbell-Barr (2017) has identified “a romantic construction of children and childhood embedded within cultural constructs of ECEC” (p. 47), which is at odds with the technocratic, managerial construct of policy, noting the need to reintegrate the silenced knowledge-base of empathy and sensitivity in early years practitioners (Campbell-Barr, 2018). From an ethic of care perspective (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2013; Taggart, 2011), Garrity &

Canavan (2017) describe the development of a relationship of trust between caregiver and mother based on an awareness of vulnerability in ECEC settings in the West of Ireland.

4 METHODOLOGY

This mixed method research was conducted over five years in response to the need to develop an evidence base of research into childminding. Initially, research at Masters's level focussed broadly on accessing childminders' and parents' attitudes to professionalism in the context of childminding in Ireland. A cross-sectional study developed using a mixed method approach with both quantitative and qualitative components. Methods included an online survey questionnaire of parents and childminders and a more in-depth exploration of 40 childminders' perspectives, using a World Café methodology. The key question to be addressed was: What constitutes a professional childminder?

To generate as comprehensive a picture as possible, a survey of childminders and parents was conducted anonymously online with Survey Monkey in 2015 (See in Appendix 1) to capture data from 'difficult to reach' stakeholders. In addition to targeted emails sent via the Childcare Committees to known childminders, survey links were also placed on relevant childminding and parenting Facebook group pages. It was hoped to garner up to 1,000 responses and attain the gold standard of validity for marketing surveys, which the researcher thought would be most influential with policy makers. In the event, there were only 450 respondents, with a completion rate of 73%.

Following the online survey, qualitative data were collected from a sub-sample of these participants, using a World Café Forum as research tool (Brown, Homer, Isaacs, 2007; Brown & Isaacs, 2007; The World Café Community Foundation, 2015). Originally, it was intended to conduct a number of focus groups with survey respondents, but this proved very difficult to organise. An approach made to Childminding Ireland led to an invitation to their Annual

General Meeting in 2016. The World Café forum facilitated this larger number of childminder participants and also allowed for a less researcher directed conversational dynamic to develop.

4.1 RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Bryman (2012, 2016), Creswell (2003, 2009) and Denscombe (2008, 2009, 2014) all stress the fundamental importance of choosing a research design that is fit for purpose, providing a ‘framework for the generation of evidence’ suited to the research questions under investigation (Bryman, 2012). Fetters et al. (2013) point out the importance of the philosophical paradigm underpinning the research as well as the epistemology or theory of knowledge involved.

Quantitative approaches emphasise an objective epistemology and tend to examine causes and outcomes in a scientific modernism, which has dominated social science studies since its inception (Creswell, 2009a; Denscombe, 2008). These positivist studies seek to provide measurable, quantifiable evidence ‘out there’, although post-positivist approaches acknowledge that evidence established in research is imperfect and fallible (Bryman, 2012). Nonetheless, such objective evidence still carries considerable weight in policy development.

On the other hand, since the 1970s, qualitative approaches have developed, which tend to emphasise the subjectivity of knowledge, often focussing on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants (Bryman, 2012); the intent being to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others ascribe to the world (Denscombe, 2014). Advocacy research goes even further, attempting to give voice to marginalised groups with a view to bringing change to their situation (Creswell, 2003; 2009).

Finally, the pragmatic approach focusses on what works to solve real life problems, tending to combine both the quantitative and qualitative in a mixed methodology, an approach increasingly applied in recent decades (Denscombe, 2008; Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013; Weisner, 2014). According to Denscombe, (2014), the mixed methods approach is “problem-driven” (p. 179), rather than theory-driven, in the sense that it treats answers to the research problem as the overriding concern. While this mixed method approach crosses the boundaries of conventional paradigms of research by deliberately combining methods drawn from different traditions with different underlying assumptions, its use is well justified in social research due to the role of triangulation and complementarity. Denscombe (2014) highlights the benefits of triangulation, where the research methods and data are dissimilar or contrasting, as creating a fuller picture and more complete findings, leading to the production of complementary data, with further data developing out of previous findings.

This is the rationale behind the present research approach and methodology: by combining a range of methods, it is possible to access complementary perspectives on home-based childcare, those of the childcare providers -childminders, and those of service users – parents. The quantitative approach, adopting an online survey methodology, set out to capture national attitudes towards professionalism and quality in childminding in 2015 in the Irish context. A key limitation of survey questionnaires is that they cannot provide the detail and depth of information which qualitative approaches can achieve. To address this limitation, it was decided to adopt an interactive café forum methodology as a supplementary approach (Brown, & Isaacs, 2010; Brown, Isaacs, 2007; Steier, Brown, & Silva, 2015). Thus, in phase 1, the qualitative café forum methodology created a more complete picture,

corroborating the survey findings, and lending them greater validity (Bryman, 2012). Conducting the café forum after the online survey allowed for fine tuning of the “questions that matter” to be included (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015, p. 2), while the addition of forum feedback added depth and detail to that national perspective, allowing insight into what the attitudes revealed therein may imply in practice.

In keeping with the mixed method approach, this initial study used two research instruments in the first phase:

1. An anonymous self-completion online questionnaire distributed via Survey Monkey; (See Appendix 1)
2. A World Café discussion format (Brown et al., 2007; Steier et al., 2015)

4.2 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the attitudes of childminders and parents to the regulations, inspection and support systems for childminders, which had been put in place from 2002 onwards. The central research question was: What constitutes a professional childminder? More concretely, the research interrogated:

1. Childminders’ and parents’ understanding of professionalism and high-quality home-based childcare;
2. The impact of the National Childminding Initiative (2002-2012) on the professionalisation of childminders;
3. The future development of childminding in Ireland.

4.2.1 Online survey questionnaires

An online survey questionnaire was adopted to allow for as large a response rate as possible from what is essentially a ‘hidden population’ of unregulated childminders, whose estimated numbers vary from 19,000 to 35,000. In order to capture as comprehensive a sample as possible, including accessing ‘hard to reach’ participants, survey links were placed on relevant childminding and parenting Facebook group pages in addition to targeted emails sent via the Childcare Committees to known childminders who had attended training or made voluntary notifications. A significant feature of the formal childminding sector in Ireland is the relatively small number of childminders registered with Tusla, the national Child and Family Agency, responsible for the regulation and inspection of ECEC. Specifically, in 2019, only 81 childminders were registered under Early Years’ regulations (DCYA, 2016a), down from 257 in 2011 (DCYA, 2018a).

Home-based childcare of all types, paid and unpaid, forms the largest source of non-parental childcare (29%), often used in combination with preschools, crèches and afterschool provision. An estimated 10% of children in Ireland from infancy to 12 years of age receive childcare from paid childminders, (including au pairs and nannies), with a further 3% of children receiving care from paid relative (CSO, 2017b). Estimates of the number of childminders vary from 19,000-35,000 childminders caring for children aged 0-12 years nationally (DCYA, 2018a, 2019a); the wide variation results from different average ratios of children per childminder considered: 1:4 in the Draft Childminding Action Plan (DCYA,2019); 1:2.5 in the Working Group report on Childminding Reform(DCYA, 2018). 1:2.8 was estimated by the Growing Up in Ireland team (McGinnity et al., 2015); the present study found 1:2.6 in the study sample.

Higgins (1998) lists categories of 'hidden' population, two of which apply to childminders in Ireland today: private populations, and populations not known to formal institutions or agencies. Most childminders in Ireland are not known to formal institutions, and for a considerable period, childminders were a private population due to threat of law enforcement (Heckathorn, 2011), specifically in relation to taxation for the self-employed, although the Childcare Tax Relief has diminished that threat since its introduction in 2006. Sampling a hidden population is fraught with challenges (Brickman-Bhutta, 2011; Higgins, 1998; Magnani, Sabin, Saidel, & Heckathorn, 2005; Rossi & Program, 2008). Generally, some form of snowball sampling is used, with initial respondents generating the next wave of respondents via personal recommendation. According to the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Task Force report on non-probability sampling (Baker et al., 2013), this type of network sampling, particularly Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS), is increasingly used for sampling rare and hard to interview groups, where probability sampling methods are often not feasible. This approach allows for specialized sampling with substantial assumptions to allow for estimates that are approximately unbiased.

However, the use of online social networks to facilitate sampling in academic survey research has not been widely developed, even though social networking sites and online questionnaires make it possible to do survey research faster, cheaper, and with less assistance than ever before. In 2011 in the USA, Brickman-Bhutta found that such methods "are especially well-suited for snowball sampling of elusive subpopulations" (Brickman-Bhutta, 2011, p. 1) when she used Facebook groups to reach thousands of Catholic women in one month. Since then, the use of email, the internet and social networking sites has grown considerably, particularly in Ireland. Research conducted by Amárach for

EUMom in 2013, showed that 62% of mothers with children under 5 years of age owned a smartphone, (compared to a national average of 43%) and 38% of those surveyed were online all day. By 2015, 55% (1.3 million) of Irish women were using Facebook (O’Leary, 2015). In addition, the online survey company used in this study, Survey Monkey, is widely accepted among internet users with 3 million survey responses worldwide every day (Bentley, Daskalova, & White, 2017). Since it is also used for academic research in social work (Massat, McKay, & Moses, 2009), it was decided that an online survey via Survey Monkey would be the most suitable method of reaching home-based childminders.

4.2.1.1 Sample composition, access and recruitment

Since privacy is a key factor to accessing members of a ‘hidden’ population, anonymous, self-completion survey links on Survey Monkey firstly targeted, childminders known to the Childcare Committees by email for these respondents to complete personally, with an invitation to send on to other childminders and parents in their circle to create a form snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012; Heckathorn, 2011). In the absence of a sampling frame, this allowed access to childminders who were in contact with regulatory and support organisations but would also reach out beyond them to those outside of those agencies, it was hoped. The email contained an embedded link to the survey, thus overcoming difficulties dealing with attachments and appearance (Bryman, 2012). In addition, the privacy of the individuals was protected because no personal information was acquired other than that which the respondent volunteered.

The response rate to this type of email survey is now well documented (Dillman, 1991; McPeake, Bateson, & O’Neill, 2014; Monroe & Adams, 2012).

A range of simple strategies can boost response rates: initial attraction through personalisation, engagement by having an easily accessible, embedded link to the survey, transparency regarding survey length, and higher completion rates through targeting the correct, and thereby interested, population. According to Survey Monkey (2009), a 60% response rate would be considered very good for an email survey of this type, with 40% deemed average. A meta-analysis of thirty-nine study results over the previous decade found that that mail surveys had higher response rates than Web-based surveys in general (Shih & Fan, 2008). However, by contrast, the recent study *Childminding Practice in England*, found that the highest response rate came from the email survey, above both phone and postal surveys (Fauth et al., 2011).

Secondly, since social networking sites and online questionnaire are especially well-suited for snowball sampling of elusive sub-populations (Brickman-Bhutta, 2011), the survey was also widely disseminated via social media on parenting and childminding Facebook groups and pages. Research conducted for EuMom in 2013 showed 90% of Irish mothers use social media, Facebook being most popular, and that mothers were online more than any other adults, with double the levels of social media usage (Amárach, 2013). Moreover, it seems the virtual response rate via Facebook is higher than the traditional snowball technique, due participants' increased level of confidence in the researcher, since s/he shows his/her personal information (Facebook profile) and also participates in their groups of interest, i.e. the Facebook group (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). By casting a wide net, posting the survey on local Childcare Committee websites as well as Facebook pages, it was hoped to generate a relatively diverse sample of exempt childminders, even though this internet survey strategy relies on a convenience sample of internet users, who see the

survey invitation online and choose to participate. These surveys are subject to the same limitations facing other surveys using nonprobability-based samples: the relationship between the sample and the population is unknown, so there is no theoretical basis for computing or reporting a margin of sampling error and thus for estimating how representative the sample is of the population as a whole (Baker et al., 2013; Bryman, 2012).

By these means, the survey was successful in accessing 450 respondents, both parents and childminders; of these, 325 provided complete or partially complete surveys that could be used for analysis: nearly 55% of respondents were accessed via Facebook, just under 46% responded to targeted emails, while there were no responses to website links. Respondents from twenty-three of Ireland's twenty-six counties took the online survey: 63% childminders and 37% parents, with a completion rate of 72%.

Respondents to the online survey were predominantly female: there was only one male childminder and two male parent respondents. They came from 23 out of the 26 counties: the majority of childminder respondents lived in rural areas, (58%), while parent respondents were predominantly from urban settings (67%), with most coming from Dublin. Most childminders were aged between 30 and 49 (77%), as were the majority of parents (92%).

This online strategy also was relatively effective in reaching "hidden" childminders: over 78% were exempt childminders, and nearly 35% of the sample had had no contact whatsoever with any government body. Nonetheless, nearly 20% of the sample were or had been registered childminders (vs. 0.1% nationally), and nearly 60% were or had been members of Childminding Ireland. In addition, nearly 12% held ECEC qualifications at degree level or above, and a further 10% were graduates in other disciplines; i.e. 22% held bachelor's degrees, which is

close to the national average 21% of 25-64 year-olds in 2015 (OECD, 2016a, p. 42). Therefore, one limitation of the present study is that it may be reflecting primarily the views of those childminders who are better qualified and consequently, more confident about coming forward to participate.

4.2.1.2 Questionnaire design

To access the different viewpoints on childminding, two questionnaires on professionalisation and quality in childminding were developed: a survey for childminders, (current, retired and intending), and a survey for parents currently using childminding services (See Appendix 1 for the complete questionnaire). The main sections of the childminder questionnaire included: Contextual and background details about respondent's childminding service; Definition and provision of quality; Commitment to childminding and job satisfaction; Membership of childminding networks and sources of support; Knowledge and attitudes towards regulations, qualification and supports; Definition of professionalism in childminding; Background and demographic information. The main sections in the parent survey were: Reasons for choosing a childminder; Views on quality in home-based childcare; Knowledge of childcare regulations, qualifications and supports for childminders; Knowledge and opinion of terms and conditions of professional childminders.

These two surveys were presented as one to allow for ease of presentation on social media. There were 105 questions in total; however, skip logic was applied so that parents or childminders were only directed to the questions relevant to them. Several questions also had skip logic applied, so that survey takers did not have to go through questions that were irrelevant to them, i.e. if they were not currently childminding, the survey focussed on their reasons or

future intentions. A wide range of question types were used including rating scales, ranking and open-ended questions allowing for textual responses.

4.2.1.3 Questionnaire Pilot

Pilot studies are particularly crucial in relation to research based on a self-completion questionnaire, since there is no interviewer present to clear up any confusion (Bryman, 2012). A pilot test offers feedback on whether the survey's wording and clarity was apparent to all survey respondents and whether the questions mean the same thing to all respondents. It was important to note the items which are difficult for the respondents, or cause confusion, as well as ensuring that the answers collected were both sufficiently diverse and in line with the intended purpose of the survey. Most importantly, the pilot allowed representative respondents to highlight any significant issues the researcher may have overlooked (Iarossi, 2006).

Once the basic survey questions were formulated, a small pilot study was conducted to ensure that questions were clear and to the point, and that the time taken to complete the questionnaire was not excessive, i.e. not more than 20 minutes on average. As a result, some questions were simplified for childminders. In particular, one long question on why people would choose a particular childminder was subsequently divided into three separate questions on personal, practical and professional attributes (Q. 35, 36, 37) to allow for a clearer focus on different aspects of professionalism, concluding with a comparative question (Q.39) ranking the relative importance of these characteristics in choosing a childminder. Similarly, questions on childminding regulations and supports for parents were made more accessible to a non-

professional audience by simply asking 'Have you ever heard of... ' to ascertain level of awareness rather than an in-depth knowledge and opinion (Q.90).

4.2.1.4 Data Analysis

Predictive analysis software within Survey Monkey was used to analyse the emerging patterns and trends in order to obtain data from the online survey that was relevant, timely, and fit for the exploratory purpose of this research (Fetters et al., 2013). While the limitations of the non-probability sampling survey can only allow for limited inferences, the compensatory adjustments of using respondent driven sampling and online targeting of participants meant that the information gathered was treated as if it were from a random sample for the purpose of analysis.

As this was a survey of attitudes, basic descriptive statistical analysis was used to assess the frequency of certain responses, with a variety of graphic visualisations allowing for different views and insights into trends in the data. Within Survey Monkey, it was possible to view a summary view of all data in response to each question, as well as browse through individual responses to all questions. It also allowed the use of filters to focus on specific data views and segments to examine for correlations between ECEC qualifications and working conditions, for example, or years of experience and level of qualifications achieved. A number of core questions were asked of both childminders and parents regarding quality in childminding, it was also possible to make straightforward comparisons. In addition, insights and trends in textual responses could be found by tagging responses and creating word clouds to highlight emerging themes. However, since this was descriptive statistical

analysis, mainly frequencies, there is scope for a more nationally representative study to be conducted to gain a more detailed, nuanced understanding.

4.2.1.5 Limitations of the questionnaire

The questionnaire design had several disadvantages. Firstly, it was somewhat excessively lengthy too long and complex with a total of 105 questions: the core questionnaire for childminders contained 42 questions, with some alternative questions for retired or intending childminders, while the core questionnaire for parents contained 31 questions. The length and complexity of the survey may partly explain why some participants tended to skip questions. However, a second design flaw was that participants had the option of skipping questions, instead of being obliged to answer all questions within survey logic. This resulted in some inconsistencies in terms of the numbers of participants responding to the different questionnaire items and should be noted as a limitation when comparing responses across these items. Given the inconsistencies in terms of the number of participant responses to each item, it was deemed appropriate to limit the statistical analysis to descriptive frequencies and trends, rather than more complex inferential statistics.

4.2.2 The World Café Forum

To supplement the questionnaires, a qualitative approach using a World Café forum (Steier et al., 2015) was also undertaken at the annual general meeting of Childminding Ireland in order to provide triangulation and gain a deeper understanding of childminders' perspective on professional home-based childcare. This more qualitative approach lends itself to insight into the experiences and understandings of the research participants (Denscombe, 2014). It was originally intended to conduct a more standard focus group, but when it

became clear that more than 40 participants could be involved, a different approach was chosen. Since a part of this study focuses on a social system in the process of change (home-based childminding), the World Café process seemed a particularly apt tool, well suited to the task.

4.2.2.1 Appreciative Inquiry

The World Café process has grown out of the Appreciative Inquiry approach to organisational change (Cooperrider, 2002, 2013, Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) which critiqued the problem-solving approach which dominated action research, as ineffective or even counterproductive in creating social innovation. This socio-rationalist approach to action research posited that: “Appreciative inquiry refers to a research perspective that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social-organizational arrangements and processes” (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987, p.153).

It was intended to be generative, unlocking the potential of any social system, and eventually came to be described in the 4D method. 1) Discovery: grounded observation to identify the best of what is; 2) Dream: vision and logic to identify ideals of what might be; 3) Design: collaborative dialogue and choice to achieve consent about what should be, (using what Cooperrider called ‘Provocative Propositions’); and 4) Delivery: collective experimentation to discover what can be. In the Childminding World Café Forum, childminders were invited to dream about and design what childminding might look like in Ireland in the future.

4.2.2.2 *The World Café process*

Embodying Appreciative Inquiry's collaborative approach to innovation, the World Café process arose to facilitate conversations that matter in a hospitable environment conducive to real exchanges (Isaacs, 2010). The World Café is "a simple yet powerful conversational process that helps groups of all sizes to engage in constructive dialogue, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning" (Steier, Brown, and Silva 2015, p.211). A World Café seeks to create networks of conversation in an inviting, café-like environment, which affords comfort and engagement (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015). A World Café enables groups to participate together in evolving rounds of dialogue, with varying combinations of others while, at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, whole. The approach is participatory and democratic, and values local knowledge on the ground. Participants are invited to take ownership of the questions and collaborate to bring innovative answers to questions that deeply matter to their life, work, or community (Brown & Isaacs, 2010).

The basic design principles of a World Café (Steier et al., 2015) were followed in the particular design of the Childminding World Café Forum held on April 16th 2016 with Childminding Ireland as described below.

1. Set the context

The context of this World Café method was a day for Childminding Ireland's members to reflect on the theme, 'The Future of Childminding.' The purpose was to gather childminders' views on the type of regulations, training and supports they believed would contribute to childminding at its best in the future. At the outset, in the Discovery phase, the findings from the online survey were presented, focusing on parents' and childminders' perceptions of high

quality childminding and its future in Ireland. The key context setting question became: How can childminding be at its best in the future?

2. Create a hospitable Space

The World Café methodology emphasizes the power and importance of creating a hospitable space—one that feels safe and inviting. When people feel comfortable to be themselves, they achieve their most creative thinking, speaking, and listening. In particular, the invitation and physical set-up contributes to creating a welcoming atmosphere.

Childminders were apprised of the Café's purpose to contribute to the first piece of academic research focussed on childminding via their invitation to the Annual General Meeting. Due to the pressure of time, it was not possible to set up a full café, with little tables and flowers, but it was decided instead to put large A2 sheets on the carpet, with coloured markers for noting ideas or doodling, at the centre of groups of 5 chairs. When they returned from lunch, they were invited to pick a sweet, the colour of which determined their initial group. These simple strategies created a light-hearted atmosphere, quite in contrast to the more serious morning sessions; childminders visibly relaxed and this facilitated more insightful and interesting conversations to evolve at a natural pace.

3. Explore Questions that Matter

Knowledge emerges in response to compelling questions. The questions were very relevant to the real-life concerns of Irish childminders, as discovered in the online survey. Powerful questions that travel well, help attract collective energy, insight, and action as they move through several conversational rounds. In the end, due to time constraints, we only used three out of four possible questions, all developing the idea of childminding at its best:

- What type of regulations should be in place for childminding at its best into the future?
- What type of training should childminders get to support childminding at its best in future?
- What kind of supports would you like to have nationally/locally to sustain childminding at its best?

Childminders moved between groups after each question, to discuss the next question with a different combination of people, allowing for cross pollination and fertilisation of ideas, which were harvested in the feedback to the whole group at the end.

4. Encourage everyone's contribution

Each group started by nominating a 'host', who would stay put while others came and went during the discussion. As hosts, they had to encourage everyone in their group to contribute their ideas and perspectives, while also allowing anyone who wanted to participate by simply listening to do so. In the event, conversations were buzzing as most people really wanted to make a contribution, writing down their ideas and highlighting those they agreed were most important for each question.

5. Connect diverse perspectives

The opportunity to move between tables and meet new people, actively contributing to thinking, and linking the essence of discoveries to ever-widening circles of thought, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Café. As participants carried key ideas or themes to new groups, they exchanged perspectives, which greatly enhanced the possibility for surprising new insights – even in the relatively tight time frame of 90 minutes.

6. Listen together for patterns and insights

The quality of listening is perhaps the most important factor determining the success of a Café. Listening to one another and making sure to get the best ideas onto paper, provided those ideas expressed with value, and encouraged participants to contribute further and go deeper than usual. Because the groups were constantly rotating, it did not appear that any one individual dominated, as most participants became involved in this meaningful conversation.

7. Share collective discoveries

The last phase of the Café, often called the “harvest”, involves making the whole pattern visible to everyone in a large group conversation. Following a short period of reflection, the host of each group shared their top three ideas, as agreed in the group. At the end, all the feedback sheets were gathered up to record the conversation as input to the research process.

4.2.2.3 Data Analysis – World Café Forum

The group feedback sheets from the World Café forum (24 from eight groups in response to three questions) were transcribed, noting in particular the three key ideas identified by each group in the harvest phase of the forum. Colour coding of key phrases allowed tagging throughout the feedback sheets, forming the basis of an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was used to identify the priorities and values expressed by participants. These were in turn categorised in relation to the key question of this research: the components that constitute their common perceptions of professional, high quality childminding in Ireland.

4.2.2.4 *Limitations of the World Café Forum*

Thematic analysis was used for both the feedback sheets from the rotating small groups and the harvest phase of the World Café forum in the larger group. However, in retrospect, it would have been useful to record the conversations at each table to gain more awareness of the range of opinions in the room. Notwithstanding this limitation, recording the discussions would have been time-consuming and would perhaps have made it more challenging to identify the key issues which were highlighted by participants themselves in the feedback sheets.

4.3 ETHICAL ISSUES

Ethical consideration for this study was given to protecting the rights of research participants. All participants were given full and accurate information in regard to the background, nature, purpose, outputs of the research so as to allow them to make an informed decision to participate or withdraw at any stage (See Appendix 1 for online consent form). In relation to the World Café forum, each participant gave signed consent to their own participation (See Appendix 2 for consent form). All participants were given a commitment of anonymity and confidentiality regarding any information disclosed. This research is fully compliant with all legal requirements regarding the collection, storage, handling, processing and analysis of data. The research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines as set out by the Dublin Institute of Technology (2013)¹¹.

¹¹ Since 2019, the Technological University of Dublin.

5 ECOCULTURAL METHODOLOGY

Paradoxical findings from the survey and the World Café forum regarding professionalism shifted the focus of research significantly on to the daily practices of childminders at home in an effort to describe the essence of childminding. While professionalisation and quality were the dominant discourse in relation to childminding in recent decades (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Bromer et al., 2013, 2009; Mooney & Statham, 2003; O’Connell, 2008; Owen, 2000), little or no research has documented childminder praxis, or observed childminding from the childminder’s own perspective, or sought to understand childminding’s differences (Weisner et al, 1997, Tonyan, 2013). Findings from the first phase of the research generated a more detailed focus on the precise niche in which childminding in Ireland occurs, explored through an eco-cultural lens. This gap in the research was of particular relevance in the Irish context, given the current policy discussions on the regulation of childminding. This second phase of research was facilitated by the award of PhD Enterprise Scholarship by the Irish Research Council in partnership with Childminding Ireland.

In a pragmatic approach focussed on addressing real life problems, (Denscombe, 2009; Feters et al., 2013; Weisner, 2014), the mixed method ecocultural research aimed to document the beliefs and praxis of childminders in this study as a precursor to the future development of a support system for childminding. The ecocultural research strategy combined methods drawn from different traditions, (Ethnography, Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology) with different underlying assumptions, for the purpose of triangulation and complementarity.

The approach was first encountered in the description of childminding career paths by Tonyan & Nuttall in 2014, which, unusually, focussed on childminding praxis and pedagogy. For this study, the features which differentiate the Ecocultural Theory and other ecological approaches were of particular relevance. Firstly, its focus on family explicitly includes the family-constructed "meaning" of their circumstances through the lens of family goals and values, as well as their proactive responses to those circumstances and meanings (Weisner, 2007; Gallimore et al., 1989a; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). It seemed vital to understand the issues of meaning and values in capturing the essence of childminding. Second, in Ecocultural Theory, daily routines form the critical unit of analysis, the lens which makes underlying values and beliefs visible (Tonyan, 2012, 2017). It also forms a relatively simple basis for a semi-structured interview as most people enjoy describing their daily routine. Thirdly, since its methods are based on cross-cultural research, ecocultural theorists believe that this approach is distinguished by its capacity for application to families in any culture. Hence its usefulness to the present research as applying the ecocultural approach to childminding settings in Ireland allowed current childminding praxis to be documented, and revealed the underlying cultural values and ideals of child development shaping the daily routine.

Using the framework of Ecocultural Theory (Gallimore, Weisner, et al., 1993; Phenice et al., 2009; Tonyan, 2012; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004; Weisner, 1984), the Ecocultural Family Interview for Family Childcare Providers protocol (CCCRP, 2014; Tonyan, 2015; Tonyan et al., 2013) was adapted for the Irish context, for Hiberno-English usage, referencing Irish educational bodies and qualifications, Irish government agencies and national funding streams in the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICH)

(See Appendix 3). This adaptation was done in collaboration with Elena Paredes of the Californian Child Care Research partnership over 12 hour-long Skype sessions in early 2018. Using the EFICh protocol, the present study replicates, on a small, limited scale, the research undertaken by Tonyan and her team of associates at California State University at Northridge, 2013-2016, using a multifaceted research instrument, which, in addition to a semi-structured interview (See Appendix 3), uses photographs, field notes, holistic rating scales (See Appendixes 8-11), and a background case study survey (See Appendix 4).

Two key questions were addressed by this ecocultural research:

1. What cultural models of practice and pedagogy are prevalent among childminders in Ireland?
2. What type of regulatory system would best support professional childminders in Ireland?

5.1 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

In the second phase, the research used an ecocultural semi-structured interview, the Ecocultural Family Interview adapted for childminders (EFICh) tailored to the Irish context (Tonyan, 2012; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). The original Ecocultural Family Interview was so-named for two reasons: first, a family's daily routines are primarily based on the family's ecology, that is, their resources and constraints; second, daily routines are based on the family's culture, that is, their beliefs and values, which inform and shape these daily routines and interactions. It is the dynamic between these two factors -ecology and culture- that allows each family to create and sustain an everyday routine (Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004).

The EFICh research instrument has three main components. The first component is the interview itself (See Appendix 3 for show cards); the second part is focused around photographs the providers take of their daily activities; and the third part consists of field notes on the environment and observations of interactions. The EFICh protocol also includes a case study survey (See Appendix 4), which, in addition to demographic information on family income and childminders' education, includes questions used in past research on levels of job satisfaction and views on early childhood and parenting (Zaslow et al., 2011) for the purposes of comparison with other ECEC professionals (CCCRP, 2014).

Participants for this phase of research were recruited at Childminding Ireland roadshows which presented the Pathway Report on Childminding Reform to childminders all over Ireland (DCYA, 2018a). Following a brief presentation, childminders were invited to read the information pack and leave their contact details if they were interested in participating.

The research involved two visits to the childminder's home. On the first visit to the service (of about 1 hour), the research was explained, and written consent to participation was given. Then following a brief holistic observation of the setting, a case study questionnaire was left for the childminder to complete, along with a request to take up to 10 photographs of everyday activities, with a phone camera, without showing the children's faces. Field notes were completed as soon as possible after this visit.

On the second visit, the questionnaire was collected and reviewed, prior to starting the conversational EFICh interview described below. These interviews were conducted outside service hours as far as possible so that the childminder could relax into the interview. After this visit, holistic ratings were completed as

soon as possible, alongside transcription of the interviews prior to coding and analysis. The protocols are described in full below.

5.1.1 The Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders

The original Ecocultural Family Interview is based on a division of families' ecocultural niche into ten dimensions, which reveal the adaptations that families make in constructing their everyday routines. Each dimension comprises a selection of the resources and constraints, goals and values, abilities and needs of families, which were defined theoretically (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989; Weisner, 1984) and operationally (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie, & Nihira, 1993). These dimensions were adapted originally for the study of childminding in California, (see Table 5.1) because childminding involves multiple families and operates as a small business.

Table 5-1 Domains of the Ecocultural Niche of the Childminding Family (Ireland)

- | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Family Subsistence, the Work Cycle and the Economic and Financial Base2. Public Health and Demographic Characteristics of Family and Community3. Home and Neighbourhood Safety4. The Division of Labour by Sex, Age, including Domestic Task and Chore Workload5. Childminding Tasks: How are they organized6. Roles of the Father and Others in Childminding7. Composition of Childminding Group: Age and Sex8. Marital relationship and support for Childminding9. Networks, Supports, and Organizational Involvement for Childminders10. Sources of Child Cultural Influence in the Community11. Sources of Parental and Childminder Information Regarding Children and Family12. Degree of Community Heterogeneity Influencing Family and Childminder <p style="text-align: right;">Based on Weisner, 1984.</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The team of the California Child Care Research Partnership (CCCRP) specified further this list of ecocultural dimensions for the research into childminding (See Table 5.2) with reference to childminders' supports and

engagement with the Quality Rating and Improvement system in California. These were also used in the present project in Ireland.

Table 5-2 Ecocultural Dimensions of Childminding (Ireland)

<p>Services: <u>The use of services by the childminder.</u> This dimension comprises the number and kinds of services used for the child(ren) including school and preschool, any special services, and the childminder's connection with these services.</p>
<p>Home: <u>The structure of the home environment.</u> This dimension comprises structural features of the home, adaptations for the childminding service, and the childminder's own family, and the safety and convenience of the neighbourhood. It includes the materials and resources available for childminding, and the capacity to organize and store the materials needed for childcare.</p>
<p>Domestic Workload: <u>The amount of domestic work and the division of labour.</u> This dimension comprises the complexity of the domestic workload as well as the level of assistance available inside and outside the family. Specifically, it looks at tasks that need to be done for the childminder's own family as well as for the childminding service: who gets that work done, how the decisions are made.</p>
<p>Connectedness <u>Consistency with Own Family and the Children's Families ("Extended" Childcare Family).</u> This dimension examines the providers' feelings of connection within her own family and with the families of the children in the childminding service.</p>
<p>Support and Information <u>Support.</u> This dimension comprises the childminder's social support network and sources of information on regulations or to how to operate a childminding service. This can also include social support networks including both professional and non-child care related support, religious participation and support, and nonprofessional sources of information.</p> <p><u>The use of information</u> from professionals. This dimension comprises the amount of information received from professionals and the amount of time spent in seeking it.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">based on The Ecocultural Family Interview for Family Child Care Homes (CCCRP, 2014).</p>

The ideas and methods that guided the development of the original EFI as a research instrument were drawn from a combination of many research

traditions. Anthropologists study the meaning of family adaptive projects in a cultural context, using ethnographic methods to describe a cultural community using the community's own words and ideas. The clinical tradition in psychology emphasizes empathy, rapport, and listening and responding to the concerns of others, essential in conducting an effective interview, while in psychological and social research, the structured, direct question is a common interview format (CCCRP, 2014). Much research uses carefully designed methods to score or rate families, children, and institutions for the purpose of comparison (Gernhardt, Keller, & Rübeling, 2016; qualitycompendium.org, 2019; Zaslow et al., 2011).

Drawing on these methods, the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICH) is a semi-structured interview, a conversation with childminders about how they organize their everyday routine; that is, how they plan, create, change, and sustain childminding activities in the context of their own family life. It focusses on the daily routine, as it is daily routines that matter most in children's lives and that serve as the best indicator of how well the childminding service is functioning. Childminders are involved in constructing their own family's daily routine and constructing a daily routine for the children in their service, which also forms part of the daily routines for the families they serve.

Through the interview, childminders are encouraged to describe their economic circumstances including health insurance, jobs, and job security, their neighbourhood, education, social support, personal history, availability of services, and all the other resources and constraints that make up their family's and service's ecology. Childminders also describe their goals for their minded children and for themselves, naturally revealing their personal values and moral convictions regarding how best to live, raise children, and achieve their goals. It

is important to emphasize that the interview is designed to resemble a conversation rather than a question-answer interview: the format involves a mixture of conversation, probing questions by the interviewer, and pre-planned structured questions (See Appendix 3a for a sample interview).

5.1.2 Additional Components of the Protocol

The EFICh protocol is a mixed method approach, using a multifaceted research instrument, which, in addition to the semi-structured interview, uses photographs, field notes, an interview summary, and holistic ratings in addition to a background case study survey (See Appendices 3 to 11).

5.1.2.1 Photographs

The photographs are an important feature of the EFICh protocol, as they provide a window into what daily life looks like in a childminding service. Study participants shared up to 10 photographs to show what they believed to be special about their setting. The photographs proved to be useful prompts during the interview in helping childminders express their values and beliefs about their work, because many found it easier to describe what they saw in their photographs than to narrate their general daily routine. The photographs also facilitated greater ease in expressing their feelings and innermost thoughts more freely. While many photos included children, their faces were not shown and all identifying features were removed in the photographs to protect their anonymity.

5.1.2.2 Field Notes

After the initial visit, a field note was completed by the researcher describing impressions of the childminding home, based on observations of the physical and material environment as well as the interactions between the childminder and the children during the visit. Similarly, when the interview was

completed, a short summary was written to describe the circumstances of the interview, evaluate the loquacity of the childminder, and give an overall impression of the childminder's levels of agency, connection or isolation. Both of these used templates based on the Californian research project (Tonyan, 2017). (See Appendix 6 & 7).

5.1.2.3 Background Case Study Survey

The EFICh interview was supplemented by a case study survey, which was not included in the original version of the Ecocultural Family Interview. The survey is intended to give background information about the childminder, the service, and the family's situation (See Appendix 4). Reviewing the survey allowed the researcher to prepare for the interview, focussing on certain topics, or allowed for clarification on any missing questions or confusing responses on the second visit to the childminder. It was adjusted to reflect the Irish context: for example, a family childcare provider became a childminder/childminding setting, and all the qualifications were specific to the Irish context: QQI level 5 and 6, and primary degrees at level 7 or 8 in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

5.1.2.4 Ethical Issues

Ethical consideration for the ecocultural study was given once again to protecting the rights of research participants. There were no significant ethical issues, since the core research involved interviews with adult childminders, and no observations of individual children were conducted. Photographs were shared with parental consent, and any identifying features were removed to ensure anonymity. All participants were given full and accurate information in regard to the background, nature, purpose, outputs of the research so as to allow them to make an informed decision to participate, or withdraw at any stage, and each

participant gave signed consent to their own participation (See Appendix 5 for the information and consent form). All participants were given a commitment of anonymity and confidentiality regarding any information disclosed. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Technological University Dublin (formerly DIT) in 2017 accordance with its policies and procedures, and it is fully compliant with all legal and ethical requirements regarding the collection, storage, processing, analysis and publication of data.

5.1.2.5 Researcher Reflexivity

Firstly, since ‘no human being can step outside of their humanity and view the world from no position at all’ (Burr, 2003, p. 152), as a researcher participant in this study, I must acknowledge that my personal history, values and perspectives inform my research, and certain core beliefs underpin my choices regarding theoretical frameworks and methodology. This is of particular relevance given the interpretivist nature of ECT, which highlights reality as a social construct, composed of the perspectives of all those involved, including the researcher.

Firstly, having stayed at home to care for my own children for over a decade, I have experienced the joys and sorrows of that particular lifestyle choice. Whenever I did do some lecturing outside the home, which was never more than two mornings per week, I would always choose to use a childminder, which is therefore my preferred form of childcare.

In addition, from 2004, I spent almost a decade working with childminders as a Childminder Advisory Officer, implementing the support service for childminding mandated by the National Childminding Initiative. As the sole worker supporting childminding, the status of childminder as the least regarded

worker in the ECEC workforce became increasingly obvious, as childminders were progressively excluded from mainstream provision during that decade, even though they remained sought after providers of childcare by parents on the ground. The reality that childminders can be both ‘valorised and demonised’ (Jones & Osgood, 2007, p. 289) motivated me to pursue research in this under-investigated field in the pragmatic hope of advocating for more effective national ECEC policy on childminding.

My research started with a quantitative survey research in the hope of providing a large enough evidence base to inform policy development, but as I moved to an Appreciative Inquiry based approach in the Café Forum with childminders, I gradually became aware of the extent to which my approach was couched in the language and mind-set of the predominant discourse on ECEC quality and professionalisation (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Urban, 2008). Since “social constructionism demands ... that particular attention is paid to the values and power relations implicit in the concepts, design, methods and language of research” (Woodhead, 1999a, p. 16), this led me place greater emphasis on listening to the voices of childminders in Ireland today, with the understanding that respondents draw on their social and cultural resources to present their childminding identities in all their diversity.

To some extent, my philosophical stance has developed while living in particular cultures in Ireland, Germany, France, the Netherlands and North America. As well as moving between countries and mastering languages as a migrant, I have lived through the transition from a traditional Catholic background, to an emergent Christian church, which has made me sensitive to the diversity of cultural perspectives within Ireland. As a returning migrant, my son with special educational needs sensitised me further to excluded voices in

mainstream educational culture at the time. With my background in English and French literature, and qualifications in post primary and special education, I am deeply interested in social and cultural views of the world, which partly drew me towards more comparative cultural understandings of childminders and their work with children in this study (Campbell-Barr, 2018; Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978)

Seeking an appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for such a qualitative approach brought me to an awareness of Ecocultural Theory. The development of Ecocultural Theory and its application for use with families in need of support with children's additional needs struck a personal chord, and its roots in ethnography appealed to my desire to document an unknown Irish subculture: the hidden world of childminding. Thus, I have drawn on pragmatism to develop this thesis, using a variety of theories and methods to gain a multi-faceted description of the current state of childminding in Ireland.

5.1.3 Implementation Phase

A pilot study was conducted to test the EFICh in Ireland, which had been adapted for Hiberno-English usage, with references updated for the Irish education system, and Irish government programmes and agencies for ECEC. This was done in weekly sessions over a period of five months under the supervision of Elena Paredes of the Californian Child Care Project (CCCRP, 2014)

5.1.3.1 Pilot Study

Two pilot interviews were conducted in order to ensure that the adaptation of the elements of the protocol to the Irish context were successfully eliciting the type of information needed to rate the target items. The interview showcards

(CCCRP, 2014) were adjusted to reflect Irish usage, as the sample showcard in Table 5.3 shows (See Appendix 3 for the complete set).

Table 5-3 Childminding in Ireland: Showcard on Subsistence

Subsistence
<i>Economic Situation</i>
Security, Stability, Flexibility, Impacts, Fair (how just)
Time Availability
Health Insurance/Pension/PRSI
- Access, Type of Coverage
Childcare Tax Relief/Childminder Development Grant
Affordable Childcare Scheme
<i>Feelings about Economic Situation</i>
Change in Economic Situation
Wishes for Change in Economic Situation

Other adjustments included use of the term childminder or childminding service, instead of family childcare provider or family childcare home; the range of qualifications listed in the case study questionnaire were relevant to the Irish context, and the list of ethnicities attending was that used in last national Census in 2016. (See the complete case study survey included in Appendix 4.)

Table 5-4 Irish List of Ethnic Backgrounds in Case Study Survey

<input type="checkbox"/> Irish
<input type="checkbox"/> Irish Traveller
<input type="checkbox"/> Any other White Background
<input type="checkbox"/> African
<input type="checkbox"/> Any other Black background
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese
<input type="checkbox"/> Any other Asian background
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Including mixed background)
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Please specify: _____

These were laid on the table to be referred to during the interview, and once the topic was covered, that card was turned over. An Ecocultural Family Interview is a conversational method rather than a formal structured interview with set questions; the interviewer must tailor questions according to their own conversational style. The exact wording of the question is not as important as that the question provokes answers that can be used to rate the items in the interview. The pilot allowed the researcher to practise this interview method.

An important amendment following the pilot study was the omission of a follow up form, used in the four year Californian study (Tonyan, Nuttall, et al., 2017) to help locate a childminder who might move in the course of the study: each childminder gave at least two interviews in the Californian research, to allow for analysis of trends. However, the present study included just one interview per childminder, with a view to gaining a snapshot of Irish childminding in 2018.

5.1.3.2 Sample recruitment and composition

In the ecocultural phase of research, which was conducted in 2018, there were 17 childminder participants, from 11 counties, from urban and rural areas. Most of the participants came forward to participate in this research following an appeal at public meetings organised by Childminding Ireland to present the Pathway Report on Childminding Reform (DCYA, 2018a) to childminders across the country. All the participants were female, most were Irish, with 4 non-nationals. Seventy percent (n=12) were over 40 years old and held QQI level 5/6 as their highest reported formal educational attainment in ECEC. Nearly 30% (n=5) held qualifications at degree level in other disciplines, in line with the national average of 27% for 25-64 year olds in 2018 (OECD, 2019a, p. 49). A

more detailed profile of all participants in this phase of the research is presented in Chapter 7.

5.1.3.3 Recording and Transcription

Every interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder (WS-853). The interviews varied in length from 49 minutes to 1 hour 25 minutes, as some interviewees were more forthcoming and loquacious than others. Each interview was then uploaded to Otter Voice Notes (otter.ai), an automated, cloud-based transcription site, where the interview was roughly transcribed, before being fully and correctly transcribed by the researcher. These interviews were slightly edited, to omit repetition, unclear phrases, and pieces of conversation unconnected to the research interview. (See Appendix 3b for a sample interview.)

5.1.3.4 Indexing and Holistic Ratings

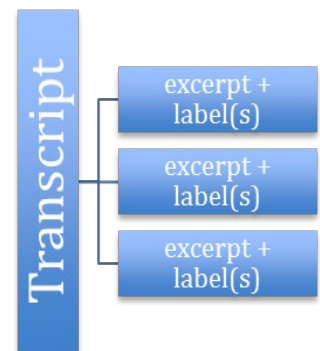
In order to complete an ecocultural analysis, transcripts were coded based on two different units or levels of analysis: indexing labels/codes were assigned at the level utterances or excerpts, while holistic ratings gave an overall rating or classification to a childminder or a whole transcript. The holistic rating scales were completed with defined levels (See Appendix 8-11) and included qualitative vignettes from the interview or field notes (See Appendix 6-7), exemplifying the reason for each rating. Transcription of the interviews, and the completion of all the EFICh templates (Appendix 3-11) was also practiced and evaluated with support from Ms. Parades to ensure conformity with the protocol developed by Professor Tonyan and her team at CCCRP.

5.1.3.4.1 Indexing

Indexing involved dividing a complete transcript into segments, called excerpts, which were about a particular topic or topics, and then applying a descriptive label or labels to code that excerpt. Indexing helped the researcher to find data on that topic across all transcripts, in the way the index in the back of a book helps direct the reader to all references to a given topic. In this project, an indexing tree lists all topics applied as labels from the transcripts. By observing which labels co-occur, you can easily locate the part of a transcript which refers to that topic.

Figure 5-1 An Index Tree

Using Dedoose® software, an analytic tool for qualitative and mixed method research (Salmona, Lieber, & Kaczynski, 2019) used by the original Californian study, each transcript in the current research was uploaded, and then excerpts of relevant quotes were indexed using, as far as possible, the descriptive labels created by the original team, drawn from terms used by the childminders interviewed in California. Most of these labels remained virtually unchanged from the Californian project, as they were equally applicable in the Irish context.



The main codes or parent codes are listed in Figure 5.2. Initial questions in the interview usually concerned the childminder’s story of how she started her service, and the cast of characters, i.e. those involved in supporting the service (See Appendix 3a for accompanying diagram). Apart from the Daily Routine, other main areas of concern were the age range of children in the service, its economic viability, connections to support services, the home and domestic



workload and relationships with family, children and client families. Any great quotes, articulating key ideas, were coded also.

As can be seen in Figure 5.3, the Index Tree is opened up to reveal the sub-codes or child codes in blue. The largest number of child codes lies within the parent code Daily Routine, as might be expected given the prominence of narrating the daily routine within the interview.

Figure 5-2 Parent Codes

Nine child codes were identified in the present study, capturing details of daily arrivals and departures, nap time, nutrition, and daily physical activity indoors and outdoors. Under Other daily routine activity, items such as school runs were included, for example.

The second largest group of child codes identified was under Support and Information: these captured feedback on the services currently available to childminders, and also the type of services which childminders felt were needed. Another major group of child codes had to do with the Childcare Family, allowing for more detailed analysis of the description of relationships between childminder and children, with the childminder's own family, and with the minded children's families.

Taken together, these coding labels allow for analysis of daily patterns across

different childminding settings. In a few cases, where necessary, labels were adjusted to reflect the Irish context. One major addition was the insertion of a



Figure 5-3 Child Codes

new child code, Outdoors and Outings, under Home /Materials, as a result of the significant attention given to these in the interviews. In addition, questions about support services mentioned the Childcare Committees, Tusla and Childminding Ireland, as can be seen in Figure 5.4 where the grandchild codes are in pink, and the great grandchild codes are in orange. Often these grandchild codes delve into further detail to discover the underlying motivations, challenges, and desires for change. These probe the sustainability of the niche in the longer term, moving beyond the more obvious practicalities of the Daily Routine. (See Appendixes 3c and 3d for a coded excerpts of the sample interview, and a sample of a resulting report generated by Dedoose.)



Figure 5-4 Grandchild codes

5.1.3.4.2 Holistic Rating

Holistic rating refers to assigning a rating or classification to a provider or a whole transcript. In this form of coding, the goal is to summarise patterns, which means detailed data tend to be obscured. Childminders were rated along dimensions that range from Low to

High, or 1-7, to capture variation. These ratings had to have a rationale or justification based on vignettes of actual observations during the initial visit, or utterances by the childminder, included in the interview summary, for example. For every rating, there was a summary classification and a verbal rationale. The series of holistic ratings covered:

- Sustainability of Daily Routines, assessing features of the overall daily routine;
- Complexity measuring features of the setting as a work environment;
- Cultural Models reflect ideals of care that providers describe as related to their work. As in the Californian project, childminders in the current research were rated initially in relation to two cultural models -school readiness and close relationships - on how much they value, enact, and see (or evaluate) the impact of these cultural models on the children's outcomes in some way;
- Engaging in quality improvement reflects how actively childminders take steps to learn about how to operate a childminding service, and how that relates to children's experiences in their care;
- Leadership and advocacy focus on how much providers are involved in a larger field of childminding;

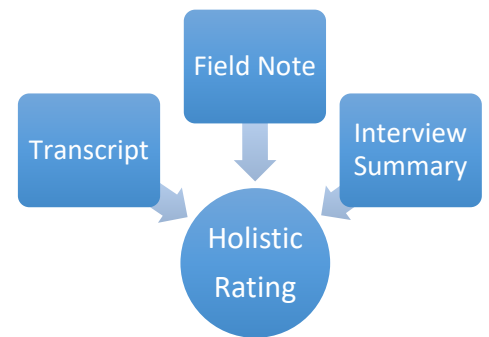


Figure 5-5 Data Sources for Holistic Ratings

- Services Use and Needs capture variability in how much providers know about and use the services available to them.

The interview protocol did not follow this topical order, nor were single responses to single questions enough to rate the childminding service on a single dimension. Rather, the rating for each item reflected information captured at different times throughout the interview, some gathered from direct probes, while the remainder were accessed through multiple indirect probes, and some from observations of the childminder, the home, and the interactions in the setting. Ratings also drew on information captured within the questionnaire.

The rating procedure was as follows: for each dimension, the interviewer must first decide whether the family demonstrates low, moderate, or high levels of the variable. For example, to rate the overall sustainability of a childminder's daily routine, the researcher must decide if the daily routine has low, moderate, or high sustainability. Low sustainability describes a daily routine that is not predictable, that does not fit with the provider's resources and/or ideals for how care should be provided, and for which the provider evaluates the challenges as greater than the rewards. Moderate sustainability describes a daily routine that has some isolated or time-limited threats to sustainability, but overall the provider evaluates the rewards as greater than the challenges. High sustainability describes a daily routine that is predictable and stable, fits with the provider's resources, fits with the provider's sense of personal meaning and ideals of childcare and balances the competing interests of multiple stakeholders, such as children of different ages, the childminder's own self-care, the children's families, and others, where relevant e.g., assistants, or the childminder's own family members. (See Appendixes 8-11 for templates.)

5.1.4 Limitations of the Ecocultural Research Protocol in this study

Unlike the team-based project in California, this investigation is the work of a sole researcher. This means, for example, that holistic ratings were given by the researcher on the basis of the researcher's own observations and field notes, without any team discussion to arrive at an agreed rating. Therefore, the possibility of interpretation bias must be acknowledged, although every effort has been made to avoid such bias through substantial training with Ms. Paredes in the use of the rigorous protocol, to ensure that such potential bias was minimised.

Furthermore, approximately 50 childminders gave at least two interviews over the course of the three year study in the California research to allow for analysis of trends and the impact of quality improvement interventions. Dr. Tonyan advised (personal communication) that 12 study participants would likely be sufficient before data saturation was reached. In the event, the present study was conducted with 17 participants. However, only one interview was conducted per childminder, and so this study represents a snapshot of Irish childminding in 2018.

6 ATTITUDES TO PROFESSIONAL CHILDMINDING

This chapter presents the findings from the first phase of research, which used an online survey conducted in 2015 to assess attitudes towards professionalism and professionalisation in childminding, followed by a World Café forum (See Appendix 1). The survey provided a snapshot of attitudes to some markers of professionalism promoted under the National Childminding Initiative: the qualifications of childminders, their terms and conditions of work; the place of childminding in our ECEC system currently; the definition of high quality childminding by practitioners and users; and, finally, the future of childminding in Ireland. Findings from a thematic analysis of data collected through the World Café forum are also presented in this chapter. For clarity, this study defines professionalism in terms of behaviours and attitudes, and references professionalisation in terms of the process described by Brannen and Moss (2003) in which rising levels of education and improved conditions grow alongside better career prospects and collaborative relationships, culminating in distinctive professional approaches to work.

Respondents to the online survey (n=325) were predominantly female: there was only one male childminder and two male parent respondents; they came from 23 out of the 26 counties. Of the childminder respondents (n=181), the majority, n=105 (58%) lived in rural areas, while parent respondents (n=144) were predominantly from urban settings, n=96 (67%). Most childminders were aged between 30 and 49, n=139 (77%), as were the majority of parents, n=132 (92%). The majority of childminders were either married, n=132 (72%) or cohabiting n=20 (11%), although five (3%) were single, and one was divorced. Similarly,

parents were mainly married n=99 (69%) or cohabiting n=33 (23%) with only seven (5%) single and four (3%) separated, and none divorced.

Parent respondents who answered the question (n=122) had an average of 1.6 children (n=198), ranging from 0-12 years, 63% (n=133) of whom were under the age of three. The majority of childminders n=133 (82%) had children of their own n=294, with an average of 2.21 per childminder: of these, 32 (24%) had children aged 5 and under, 44 (33%) had children in primary school, 29 (22%) had children in secondary school, while the remainder, 23(17%), had adult children.

On average, childminder respondents currently working, n=149 (82%), were minding 1.35 children part-time (i.e. less than 20 hours per week), and 1.28 children full time (i.e. for more than 20 hours per week). This means the average number of minded children per childminder was 2.6, usually of mixed ages for varied hours, i.e. some full-time children, mainly under the age of three years, and some part-time school age children up the age of 12 years.

6.1.1 Qualifications, conditions and career

In the survey, there were a number of questions aimed at measuring childminders' preparation for and commitment to childminding as a professional career. These asked specifically about any educational courses in childcare, levels of pay and job satisfaction, as well as personal plans for the future whether in childminding or not.

A key finding emerging from the study was the high number of childminders who held accredited awards from Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) at level 5 or higher, the national qualification's for early years' worker, even though this was no mandatory for exempt childminders. Of 181 childminder

respondents, 128 (71%) had childcare qualifications ranging from the free, unaccredited Quality Awareness Programme for Childminders (QAP) across the spectrum of QQI levels 3-9, detailed in the figure below.

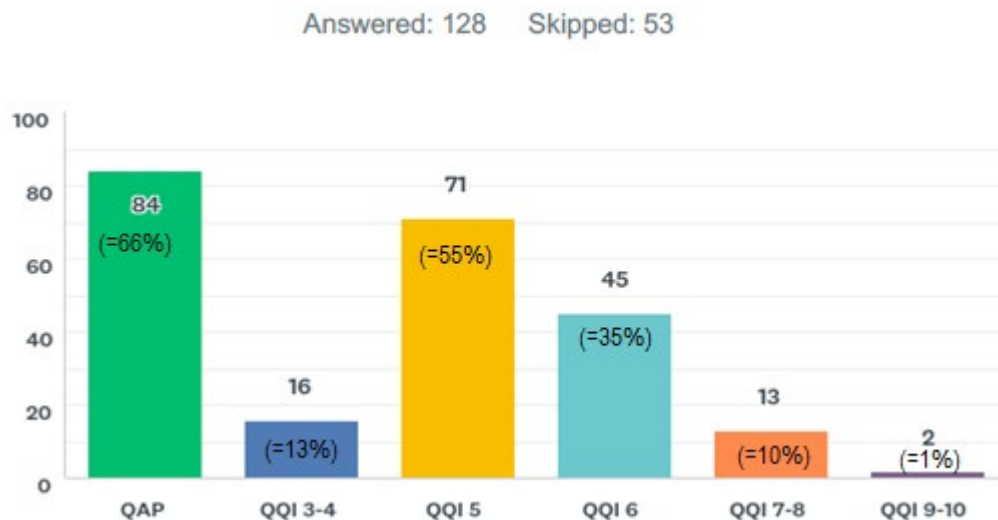


Figure 6-1 Childminder Qualifications

In total, including those who skipped the question, 46% (n=84) of all the childminders in the survey had completed the Quality Awareness Programme. Of those childminding for 5 years or more, 83% (n=70) had completed this programme, while of those minding for less than a year, only 39% (n=33) had completed the QAP, possibly because it is no longer as readily available. In addition, comments showed that some respondents had also completed various individual modules such as Child Development at level 5, or Montessori Teaching Method at level 6, and that they were in the process of gaining a complete award. Other comments revealed qualifications from other jurisdictions, such as kindergarten teacher or nursery nurse, or pre-QQI qualifications, such as a Montessori Nursery Diploma for 0-6 years, or City & Guilds nursery nurse. In addition, 22 (12%) participants also held qualifications in non-childcare related disciplines.

Findings from the online survey clearly indicated that childminder attitudes to the importance of education and qualifications for childminders were very positive, as can be seen in the table below which details childminders' attitudes to the importance of education in ECEC for childminders.

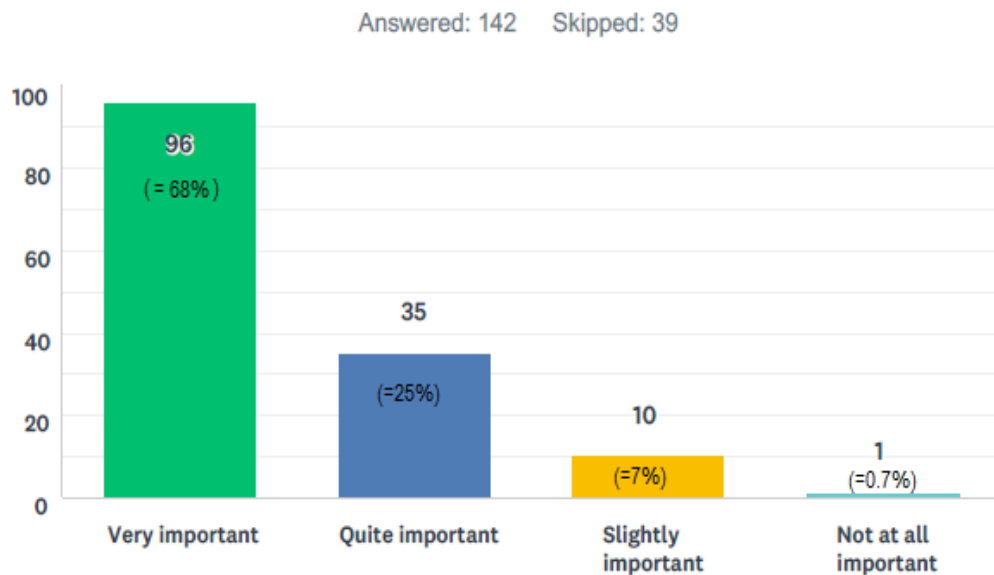


Figure 6-2 Childminders' attitudes to ECEC education and qualifications for childminders

However, certain comments revealed ambivalence about the usefulness of current childcare qualifications to the work of childminding – caring for very young children alone in a home, and not in a centre. Participants in the World Café forum also highlighted the cost of accessing educational qualifications, both in terms of time and personal effort, as can be seen in the following quote:

However, as a poorly paid business with no job security and usually a solo job, it is incredibly difficult to find the time and money to avail of training or education if it is available. Also little of the courses available are tailored

to the particular needs of childminders and the type of service they provide. Usually we apply what we can learn to our needs (C9¹²).

A conflicted view on the role of education in relation to childminding was expressed by some respondents, for whom maternal experience outweighed the importance of qualifications in terms of knowing children; however, only one respondent defined the role as substitute mothering.

I would say you need to be a kind, loving and caring person above qualifications. You only needed to watch that Prime Time programme on professional childcare providers to see that. In crèches they all have qualifications but many of them aren't mothers and haven't experienced real home childcare (C7).

Nonetheless, childminders in this study had rising educational levels, despite the lack of official incentive or recognition for the exempt majority, in line with Brannen and Moss' (Brannen & Moss, 2003) process of professionalisation paradigm.

6.1.1.1 Qualifications and childminders' conditions of work

Since professionalisation has been considered to lead to improved conditions, (Brannen & Moss, 2003; Hargreaves, 2000), childminders could expect that gaining qualifications will improve their earnings and conditions of work, such as holidays and sick leave. However, these expectations were not

¹² In reporting textual comments from the online survey C= childminder comment and PC= parent comment. The number refers to the place the comment took in a list comments in relation to that particular question; the numbers do not refer to individual respondents.

borne out in the present study findings: level of ECEC qualifications had no impact on average earnings. Of those who answered the questions on fees (n=138), nearly half (n=68) were only earning between €3-4.99 per hour per child, while of the 105 childminders with accredited childcare qualifications, QQI levels 5-10, slightly more than half (n=56) were in the same category, with only slight variation in Standard Deviation between the two groups: 1.10 (unqualified) and 1.06 (qualified). (See Appendix 1a for basic statistical analysis within Survey Monkey). Overall, the average rate among respondents was €4.90 per hour per child, a figure which has remained virtually unchanged since 2004, as annual surveys of childminding fees among the membership of Childminding Ireland can confirm (Feeley, 2012).

Similarly, there was no discernible relationship between higher levels of qualifications and better holidays or holiday pay. Of all respondents to this question (n=141), the majority get no paid leave, n=81 (57%), and this is the same for childminders with qualifications n=45 (58%). Only 56 (40%) respondents were paid for bank holidays, 22 (16%) were paid at Christmas, and 17(12%) received summer holiday pay. Moreover, no respondents made reference to any type of paid sick leave.

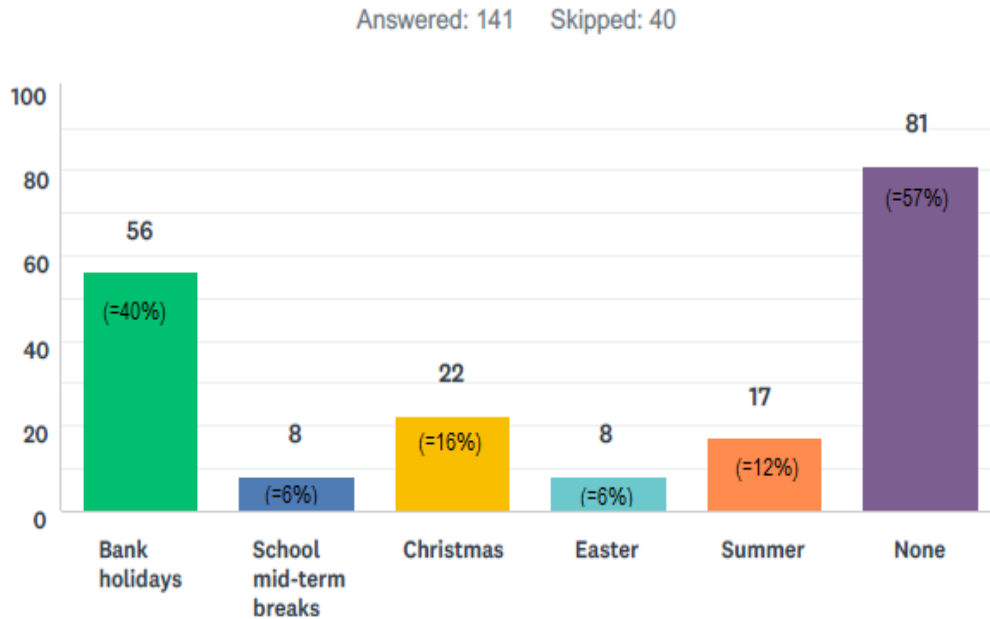


Figure 6-3 Types of paid leave for childminders

Among those childminders who received some paid holiday, there was considerable variation in the number of days' leave, and levels of pay. More specifically, 60% (n=85) received full pay, 14% (n=20) received half pay and for a further 26% (n=37) of childminders, holiday pay varied by arrangement with their families. The qualitative comments revealed how wide the variety of arrangements were, with much of these depending completely on the negotiation between individual families and childminders, or as one comment succinctly stated: "Depends on contract" (C3).

The range of responses highlights the extent to which childminders' working conditions varied, with some receiving days of paid leave, for example, only when the parent took a day off while her service was open, but no days of leave in her own right. Another childminder left holiday pay entirely up to the good will of the parents – so one parent in the service pays for holiday leave while another does not. However, no childminder made any reference to entitlement to sick leave. In general, findings in the present study indicated that if the

childminder is not available to work, they do not get paid, since the parent must pay for someone else to mind the child.

6.1.1.2 Parents' views on childminders' qualifications and conditions of work

Given the lack of correlation between childminder qualifications and rates of pay, it could be expected that parents are unaware of the level of qualification their childminder may possess. Out of 144 parents who took part in the survey, only 25 (17%) responded to the question about childminder qualification levels; of these, 12 (8%) indicated that their childminder had a Fetac level 5 qualification.

However, 27 (19%) parents did comment in response to the question on the importance of training for childminders. A small number of respondents deemed only certain training essential; for example, training in first aid and child protection. Interestingly, those who favoured education for childminders saw it as essential these days, as a modern development in childminding as a career. One parent highlighted the importance of childcare qualifications as an exclusive marker of professionalism, in the context of monitoring and inspection as expressed in the following quote: "... otherwise anyone could do childminding. Young children and babies are vulnerable as they cannot communicate if something is wrong, therefore the people who look after them need to be vetted and monitored to ensure they are acting professionally" (PC1¹³).

¹³ In reporting textual comments from the online survey C= childminder comment and PC= parent comment. The number refers to the place the comment took in a list of comments in relation to that particular question; the numbers do not refer to individual respondents.

However, personal qualities such as aptitude, temperament and motivation were prioritized by parent participants ahead of qualifications, as the following quotation shows:

I would be very positive towards a minder having qualifications, and between two equivalent people, otherwise equal, it would influence me. Suitable temperament, loving care, child-led development, creativity and seeing world through child's perspective are also extremely important to us and we are fortunate that our minder has these qualities. (PC18)

Some respondents indicated their belief that motherhood alone was qualification enough and formal qualifications unnecessary in the context of childminding. Of 37 (11%) respondents who added a comment to this question, eight parents and two childminders indicated that the experience of motherhood was sufficient qualification.

Parent responses about fees and holidays broadly mirror those of the childminders. Of 60 parent respondents, 28 (46%) were being charged €5-€6.99 per hour per child – which parallels the 49% of childminders receiving this amount. However, on average, individual parents paid for fewer hours of childcare than childminders worked: 26.5 hours per week was the mean attendance for a child at a childminder's, where 32 hours per week was the mean working hours for childminders. This reflects the flexibility of arrangements which childminders offer parents, being able to accommodate part-time or full-time care as needed.

Regarding leave and holiday pay, the parents' accounts parallel those of the childminders. While 46% (n=28) of parents paid for no holidays at all, the remaining parents paid for varying days and weeks of holidays depending on

individual agreements with the childminders. As was the case with childminders outlined above, sick pay was not referred to by participants.

In summary, parent respondents appeared to appreciate the individual tailored working agreements that have been put in place, which gave them flexible care at a lower price than crèches on average, while at the same time seeing training and education as increasingly essential to providing childminding.

6.1.1.3 Childminding as a career

In addition to attitudes towards qualifications and working conditions, the online survey aimed to identify the key motivations and career intentions of childminders. Firstly, respondents ranked their top three reasons for becoming a childminder: for 49% of respondents (n=68), the most highly ranked reason was being able to *stay home with my own children*; a further 41% (n=57) ranked *love working with children* most highly, and in third place, 40% (n=55) ranked the need to *earn money from home*. The remaining reasons (*wanting to be your own boss, being asked to mind a child, not being able to find other work*) scored very low in the rankings, although interestingly, 59% (n=82) clearly rejected the proposition that they could not find any other work.

Secondly, childminders were asked to rank from 1 to 3 what they considered to be the best thing about childminding out of a list of six choices. The majority of childminders, 60% (n=83) ranked staying at home with their children first, with 44% (n=61) ranking working with children as the next best thing about the job, reinforcing the findings in the previous question. Note that the following graphic shows weighted rankings of childminders' top three choices, for which numbers and percentages are not meaningful. See Appendix 1b for the details.

Answered: 139 Skipped: 42

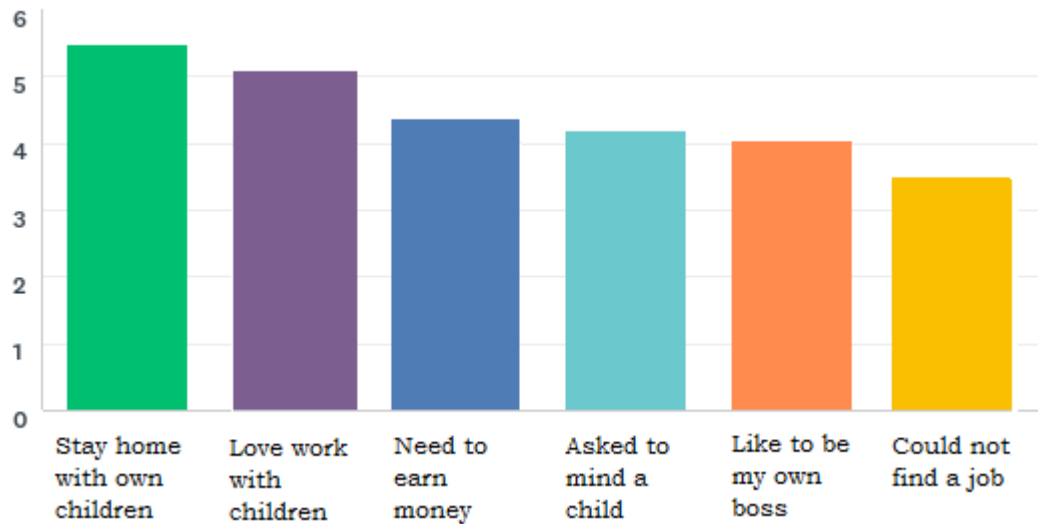


Figure 6-4 Reasons for starting a childminding service by weighted ranking

Childminders' views were explored on the key challenges they encountered within their profession. The most significant challenge identified was *poor pay* with 39% of participants (n=53) highlighting this challenge and a further 32% *job insecurity*, (n= 44) i.e. uncertainty as to whether they will have clients in the next month or two. A further 28% of respondents (n=38) found *working alone* to be the most challenging aspect of the work. Again as in the previous question, childminders were asked rank from 1 to 3, the greatest challenges of childminding from a list of seven choices. Note that the following graphic shows weighted rankings of these top three choices, for which numbers and percentages are not meaningful. See Appendix 1c for details.

Answered: 136 Skipped: 45

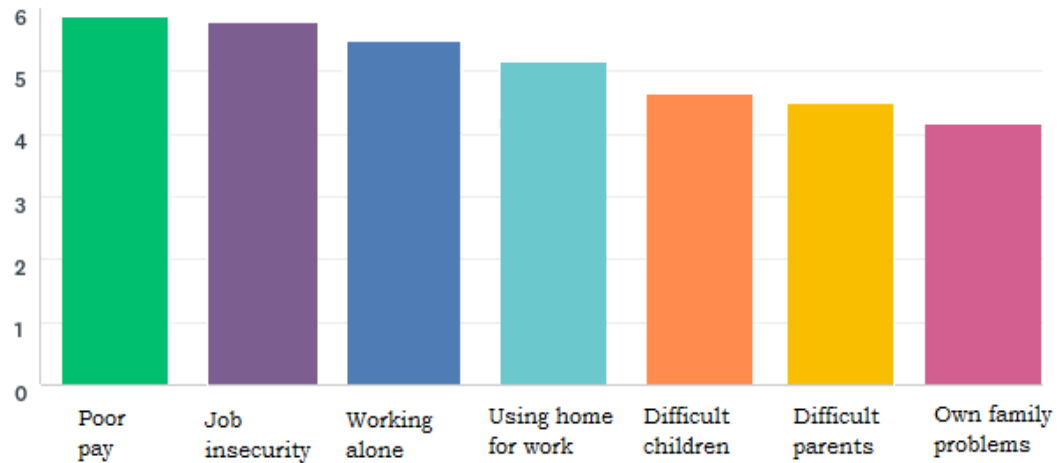


Figure 6-5 The challenges of working as a childminder by weighted ranking

Regarding their commitment to childminding in the future, over half of respondents (n=73) indicated they had no plans to stop childminding, while just over 30% of respondents (n=42) indicated that they intended to stop childminding within the next three years.

Five possible reasons were identified for withdrawing from childminding as a profession in 119 responses to an open-ended query on the topic. The most commonly mentioned were family reasons, (such as children going to primary school, or a conflict of interest between family and minded children), and financial reasons (such as not earning enough, or not needing to work anymore). However, another significant theme concerned stopping due to failures in childminding, (such as child accidents, or relational stress with parents, or lack of clients, and falling pay rates), and giving up due to lack of physical capacity caused by ill health or old age. Another more minor theme was moving on to a better job or career, which included a number of students, who were funding their college costs by childminding.

6.1.2 The system of supports for childminders

Participants were asked for their views on the system of regulation and supports in 2015, many still in place from the National Childminding Initiative in some areas: Statutory Notification¹⁴, Voluntary Notification, Childminder Development Grants, the Childcare Services' Tax Relief, Garda Vetting, as well as the National Guidelines for Childminders, Aistear and Síolta. Childminders were asked how these schemes impacted their services, while parents' awareness of their childminders' engagement with official supports was probed.

6.1.2.1 Statutory notification and inspection

In 2015, prior to the introduction of registration with Tusla, most childminder respondents thought that Statutory Notification and inspections were beneficial: 72% (n=97) thought that inspections were either very or somewhat helpful. However, 29% of childminder respondents (n=39) were less favourable, and added comments tended to be more negative than positive.

¹⁴ In 2016, Statutory Notification to the Health Service Executive was replaced by Registration with Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency under new Early Years' Regulations (DCYA, 2016a). In 2019, there were only 81 childminders registered with Tusla.

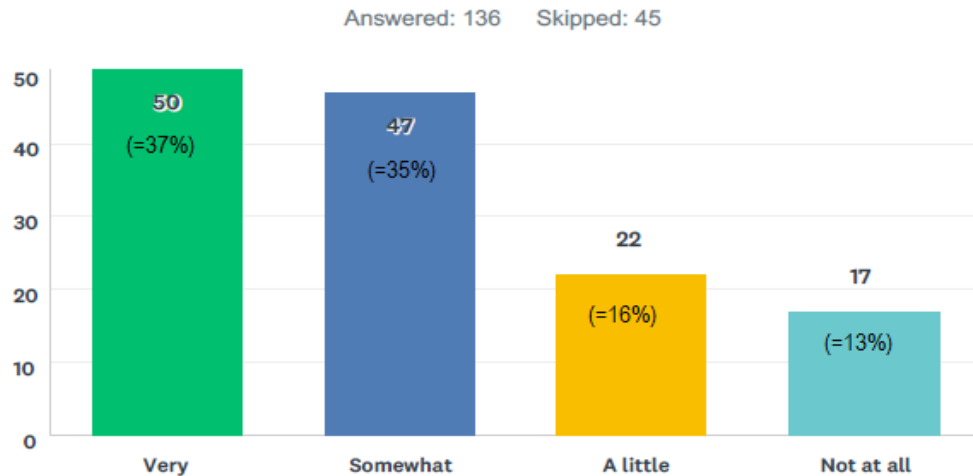


Figure 6-6 Childminder opinions on how beneficial Statutory Notification was to childminders.

Although 94% of childminder respondents (n=134) had heard of Statutory Notification, only 26% of respondents (n=36) had ever made one, while 21% (n=29) had received an inspection. Of the 54 parents who answered this question, 10 (18%) were aware that their childminder had made a statutory notification, only 4 of them (7%) knew if the service had been inspected, and 17 (31%) were unsure on both questions.

Comments about statutory notification and inspection included substantial criticism and concern about such an approach to regulation for childminding. Key themes identified included the inappropriate nature of centre-based regulations for childminding within a family home, pressures to meet centre-based standards, and the flawed focus on paperwork and property rather than relational processes within these settings. The most common view of inspection was that inspectors found it difficult to adapt to inspecting a family home, as the following comment illustrates well: “Regulations and inspection tools seem to be tailored towards centre-based care and a lot don't fit in with the setup of a childminder working at home” (C3).

The pressure to meet the standards expected of larger crèches or childcare services could make inspection a stressful experience for a lone childminder at home, as the following quotation shows:

Nerve-wracking and highly stressful, your home is under scrutiny, and generally allowances for the fact it is your home and not a purpose built, or adapted building is not taken into account. We have to meet the same standards as larger crèches and childcare services...this is nuts...we have to have all the policies and procedures etc. (paper work is practically flowing out the door!!) that larger crèches and services do... (C21).

Another point of concern highlighted in the present study findings was the lack of focus on interactions with children, the process quality of childminding, as this childminder highlights:

All the inspections were a form filling exercise, more a case of ticking the boxes to make sure I'd all sorts of paperwork, equipment, bandages in first aid box but very little if anything of how I interact with the children I mind (C2).

Those who found inspection a little or somewhat helpful also highlighted the need for proportionate treatment. According to these participants there should be fewer regulations, and inspections should focus on the distinctive elements that make childminding so attractive to parents of young children:

I think it is important to be registered but not to have as many rules and regulations as in a day care centre as we choose to work from home so they should respect it is a different service and as long as we provide a safe, fun learning environment that should be enough to pass (C11).

Furthermore, fear of overregulation was a very significant concern for many of the childminder respondents, who felt that excessive emphasis on

regulation had the potential to impact negatively on some of the most highly valued features of childminding, as illustrated in the following quote:

My worry would be with inspections of people's homes this industry could become very tightly regulated like the crèches and many people choose childminding for its more relaxed homely environment versus the strict crèches environment (C25).

Finally, it seems that childminders who felt inspections were very helpful were mainly conscious of how reassuring parents find inspection by an external body: "We all need rules and regulations. I feel it is reassuring for parents to know we are open to inspections" (C4).

There was the perception that professional status was conferred by inspection as the following remark exemplifies: "I feel I am a professional because I have been inspected."(C9). Others expressed a contrary view, considering parents as the primary inspectors of the childminding service, where their daily visits constitute a routine inspection, especially where this was encouraged via an 'open door' policy on the part of the childminder, to encourage parents to drop in at any time.

Childminders offer high quality care and over-regulation can cause difficulties in giving the home-from-home care desired by parents. Ideally the parent should feel as comfortable leaving their child with a minder as they would leaving the child in the care of a close relative. All parents had access to the shared areas of the house used by the children, so they were free to inspect any anytime, without notice (C23).

Only one comment expressed the view of childminding regulation as important for the sake of the children, those on whose behalf inspections ought to be done:

Caring for children is a vital and worthwhile profession. It is so important that the people caring for children are overseen by a regulatory body to ensure that the children in their care have all their needs met and are safe (C20).

Parents were also asked to comment on the importance of regulations for childminding. Just over half of parents (n=26) thought that regulations were important or very important, somewhat less than 71% of childminders (n=97). However, parents also expressed concern about the pressure of regulation, as evidenced in the following quote:

Regulations aren't too important for me as they can be claustrophobic while trying to run a homely, creative environment. Our childminder is well qualified, and we trust her "common-sense". A happy stimulating environment is what's important (PC1).

However, other parents expressed their concern about the financial implications of regulation, which could drive the price of childminding up in comparison to crèches: "...the awful truth is, childminders are cheaper than crèche so I did everything I could to find a childminder over a crèche for my second child" (PC2).

However, all these reservations notwithstanding, the majority of parent respondents in this survey acknowledged the importance of a regulatory system in order to protect children at their most vulnerable, particularly when the childminder was unknown either personally, or within the immediate social circle. When combined with a strong endorsement of inspection by childminders, this indicates a broad-based acceptance of the idea of regulation for childminding.

6.1.2.2 Voluntary notification for childminders

While childminders were as aware of Voluntary Notification as Statutory Notification, 96% (n=135,) a considerably greater percentage had engaged in the Voluntary Notification support scheme: 70% had made a Voluntary Notification (n=99) and 62% had received an advisory visit from their local Childminder Advisory Officer (n=86). Parents were correspondingly more aware of Voluntary Notification: 31% knew their childminder had made a voluntary notification (n=17), although they were less aware of the advisory visits, with only 17% of parents certain on that point (n=9).

On the question of how beneficial Voluntary Notification was for childminders, most rated it very beneficial (58%), a considerably higher percentage than those who found inspection very beneficial (37%); only 20% viewed it less favourably, as can be seen in the figure below.

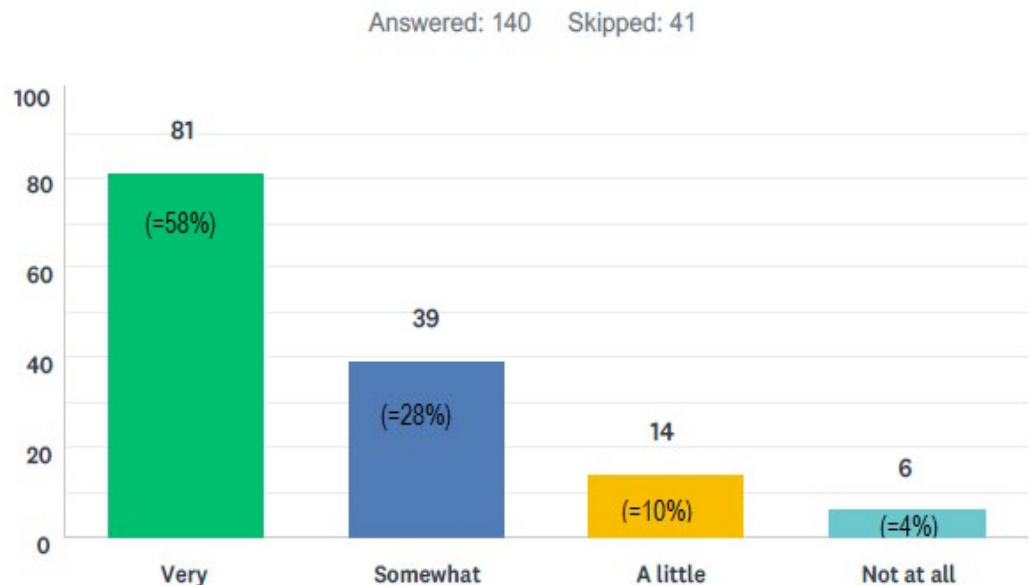


Figure 6-7 Childminder views on the helpfulness of Voluntary Notification

Themes which emerged included the sensitivity of the advisory officer and appreciation for the system of supports, lamenting the loss of childminding

advisory services in local Childcare Committees. In contrast to the commentary on Statutory Notification, comments about Voluntary Notification were mainly positive:

The childminders' advisor would come out and talk with you, they knew about the difficulties facing childminders, they also knew how to help us adapt our homes to try to meet the relevant childcare rules and regulations... Childminders are very isolated, and this personal contact was very reassuring (C18).

Other comments also pointed to an appreciation for the training, and information around any new developments that might affect them. Several participants lamented the loss of the Childminding Advisory Services precisely because it had been so beneficial with advice on insurance, tax and grants. The following comment offers a good summary of the points made by several respondents:

I think the loss of our Childminders Advisory Service was a huge blow to childminders. We need support and help with training, grants, etc. We need to be seen as a professional body, but we are different to other Preschool services and need a different type of inspection that understands this. Also, I badly miss the meetings our Childminders Advisor organised and the training she arranged... Since contacting the Advisory service after I set up, I have voluntarily notified, become tax-compliant, got insurance and first-aid training, etc. I doubt I would be paying tax/PRSI if I hadn't had the support of my Childminders Advisor. Also, I've had no access to training since we lost her (C19).

While some participants felt parents did appreciate the Voluntary Notification system as a means to ensure good standards of care for children,

others felt that such a system was not relevant to parents and their relationship with the childminder, as the comment below highlights:

I was registered, insured and Garda Vetted (my husband was also Garda vetted). Parents never enquired about this or asked to see supporting documentation. The gut-response between parent and minder is generally how the relationship is formed and how both parties agree to work together (C20).

In general, when providing further qualitative comments within the online survey, parents did not differentiate between Voluntary and Statutory Notification: their remarks addressed the idea of a regulatory system in general. Very few parents mentioned Voluntary Notification or the role of Childminding Advisory Officer and County Childcare Committees directly, but of the small number that did there was evidence of the awareness of the implications for working childminders on the ground as illustrated in the following quote: “Ireland ignores childminders. Our local CCC had a childminding officer but they are gone now lack of funding!” (PC2).

6.1.2.3 Markers of professionalism: Garda vetting and memberships

Since the majority of childminders cannot make a Statutory Notification, many childminders use other means to mark their status as professionals: by gaining Garda Vetting voluntarily, and becoming members of professional organisations, such as Childminding Ireland or Early Childhood Ireland.

6.1.2.3.1 Garda Vetting

As the only means of official recognition for exempt childminders, it is significant that both childminders and parents were most aware of Garda Vetting,

even though the vast majority of childminders are not legally obliged to undergo Garda Vetting. On the contrary, apart from Statutory Notified childminders, who are obliged to gain Garda Vetting by regulation, all others were excluded from recent legislation on Garda Vetting, i.e. National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012-2016. However, all childminders are allowed to apply to get Garda Vetting through Barnardos Vetting Service. Thus, while only 26% of childminder respondents had made a Statutory Notification (n=36), 92% had received Garda Vetting (n=132), and 90% of those who commented deemed it very important or important (n=85) .

Unsurprisingly, the textual comments echoed this overwhelming endorsement of the value of Garda Vetting in providing parents with assurance of a childminder's good character and suitability to care for young children. However, a small number of participants disagreed with this view suggesting it offered "a false sense of security" (C91), pointing out that "Garda vetting is only valid on the day it is issued" (C24). For these respondents what counts most is when childminders are well known to members of the local community who can truly vouch for them, which is the intended function of a written reference.

6.1.2.3.2 Membership of childcare organisations

Membership of a professional organisation can also serve as marker of professionalism, reassuring parents of the childminder's suitability. Of 118 respondents to this question, over 91% were members of Childminding Ireland (n=107), the national organisation for childminders. In addition, over 17% were members of other childcare organisations (n=19), and some were members of more than one. The majority found their memberships very or quite useful, as can be seen in the figure below.

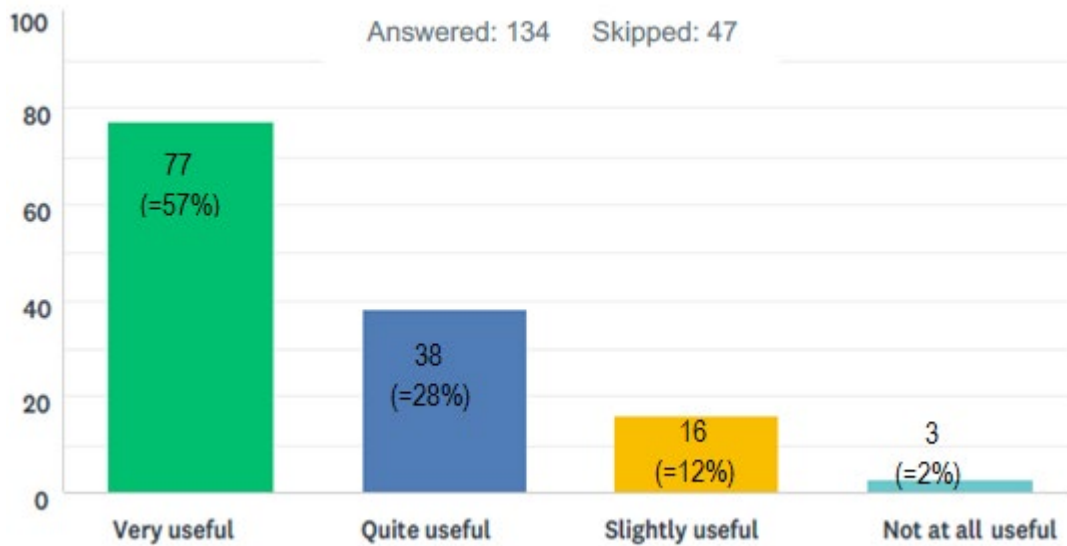


Figure 6-8 Childminder views on membership of a professional organisation

Once again, the textual comments reveal a richer picture of reasons for membership of Childminding Ireland in particular. More specifically, these included social support in isolation, the benefit of professional insurance and participation in advocacy at national level. Many childminders find ongoing information and support from Childminding Ireland vital to working in a very isolating occupation, particularly in the absence of support from local Childcare Committees. “So important to have a sense of belonging to an organisation comprised of people working in the same job” (C4). Another reason often mentioned was the benefit of group insurance cover which membership of Childminding Ireland brings, which some childminders feel is essential for professional practice: “I would not have engaged in childminding without insurance for the children I cared for” (C14). Finally, another important reason for membership was the capacity to have some political influence as one, united voice: “Having a place to have your voice heard and to make valid points that may hopefully heard by policy makers” (C15).

6.1.2.4 Economic supports: Childminder Development Grant & Childcare Tax Relief

Two forms of economic support are intended to help childminders get started or upgrade their equipment (the Childminder Development Grant) and encourage them to participate in the formal economy (the Childcare Tax Relief). The Childminder Development grant was initially for €630 and then €1,000; applications can be made biannually; conditions include appropriate insurance for the childminding service and continuing to childmind for at least two years. The Childcare Tax Relief allows a childminder to earn up to €15,000 per annum without being liable for tax, once they mind no more than three children at any one time.

6.1.2.4.1 The Childminder Development Grant

Childminders were very well aware of the Childminder Development Grant: over 86% of respondents were aware of it (n=124); and 54% had received a grant at some point (n=77). As can be seen in figure 6.9 below, virtually all found the €1,000 grant helpful in improving the quality of the environment in their service (Gibson, 1977; Lindberg, 2014). The textual commentary specified that many were able to purchase books, toys, outdoor play equipment and high-quality resources that they could not have afforded otherwise. These “have added to the experience of my minded children” (C11), and since the resources were of good quality “many years on, are still being used daily (C18). Participants also highlighted that since equipment could be renewed, with repeated uptake of the grant possible biannually, this meant an enriched learning environment could be maintained for the children, even where earnings were low.

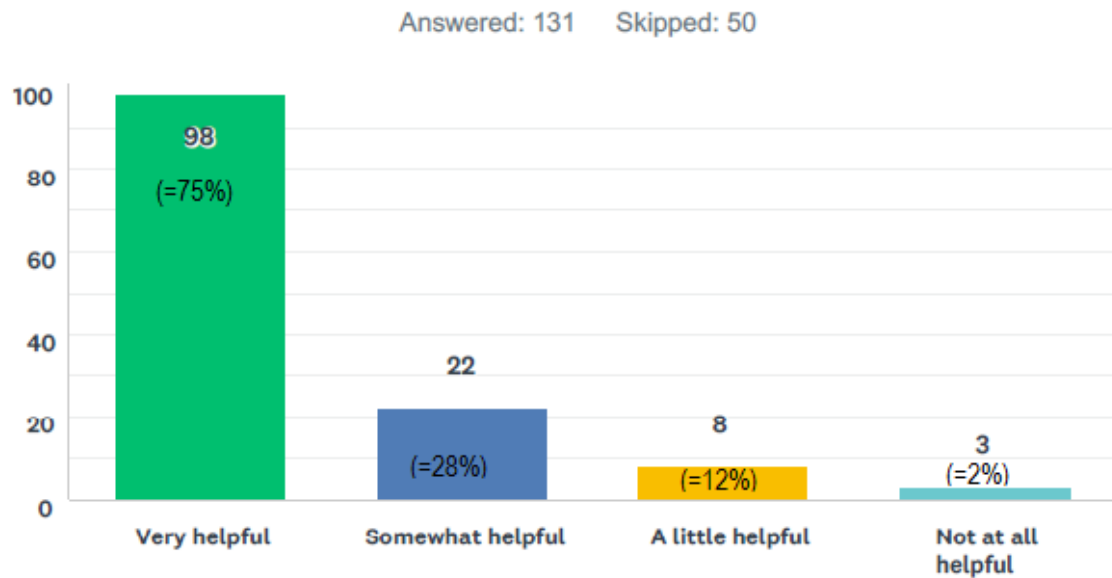


Figure 6-9 Childminder views on the Childminder Development Grant

The only criticisms which emerged in the present study concerned the laborious administrative process associated with the Childminder Development Grant, and in one case, the refusal of an application for school age childminding resources at that time¹⁵ “...childminding for older children is not recognised as existing. It seems that childminding is seen to only exist by officialdom for under 6's” (C18).

¹⁵ With the introduction of the School Age Regulations 2019, this is no longer the case.

6.1.2.4.2 The Childcare Tax Relief

However, while views on the Childminder Development Grant were positive for the most part, attitudes towards the value of the Childcare Tax Relief¹⁶ were more mixed. While nearly 80% of respondents had heard of the Tax Relief (n=113), and over 82% thought it was *very* or *somewhat beneficial* (n=101), only 45% of respondents had availed of it (n=63).

From the textual commentary, the reasons behind this dichotomy of attitude and action became clearer. Only a small number of participants were happy with the Tax Relief because it allows them to pay PRSI towards maternity leave or a state pension and it means that they can actually earn a decent wage since it disregards income from other sources, such as part-time work: “The tax-relief allows me to be tax-compliant without reducing my earnings to the point that it would be impossible to continue minding. It is expensive to pay for the €500 PRSI but at least it covers maternity and pensions (C26).

However, many comments highlighted the limitations of the tax relief. Firstly, a childminder cannot earn more than €15,000 per annum tax free, which means some childminders deliberately limit their earnings to avail of it. Otherwise, if the childminder’s income should exceed the threshold, the entire amount will be taxed as per usual for a self- employed person, excluding only the normal credits. Many participants felt the threshold was simply too low: the

¹⁶ In 2019, only 610 childminders availed of the Childcare Tax Relief (DCYA, 2019a)

gross income limit can prevent childminders from earning a viable income: “Great to get tax relief but the fact that the whole amount above €15,000 is taxed is crazy. Surely there should be a system whereby you only get taxed on the amount above €15,000 and not the whole lot” (C10).

Another limitation is that no more than three children may be minded at any one time regardless of the childminder’s income. “I think the limit should just be on the annual income and not on the number of children” (C9). In some rural or disadvantaged areas, it is possible to earn less than €15,000 per year as a childminder, while caring for five children in compliance with the Regulations, or even six children, as local planning laws allow. However, these childminders are still not eligible to claim the Tax Relief.

Finally, there are issues with social welfare. While childminders on social welfare payments are allowed to earn a certain amount per week, they cannot avail of the Tax relief at all, and instead are taxed on every extra amount they earn. This could act as a further disincentive to work, as the following comment reveals: “Even though on average I would make €25 extra each week on jobseekers’ allowance, I still have to pay tax while earning €5 an hour. This tax relief means very little to my household” (C17). The Tax Relief was never harmonised with social welfare regulations as originally intended, thus it does not benefit childminders on the very lowest incomes (DJELR, 2000).

6.1.3 Early Years Regulations, Guidelines and Frameworks

At the time the survey was conducted, the Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations (2006), were in use in the childcare sector and were applicable to a small number of childminders nationally, as are the more recent Early Years Regulations, (DCYA, 2016a). The National Guidelines for Childminders (Revised

2008) were available through the Childcare Committees and Childminding Ireland. Childminding practice was included in both the national early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009), and the national quality framework for early childhood services, Siolta (CECDE, 2006). The survey showed the influence of these documents on childminders' work in practice.

6.1.3.1 The Childcare Regulations (2006)

When asked about their knowledge of the Regulations, most childminders felt they knew them *very or reasonably well* – 88% (n=126), while just over 59% of parents were aware of them (n=32). The largest group of childminders (48%) only considered these regulations *somewhat helpful* in practice (n=66), although a further 34% (n=48) found them *very helpful*. Given the negative responses to inspection under these regulations, this response is not surprising, as it was also borne out in the textual comments added by some respondents: “Regulations can be terrifying and I can see why the vast majority of childminders work on the black market, why meet regulations when the government doesn't compel you to!?” (C15).

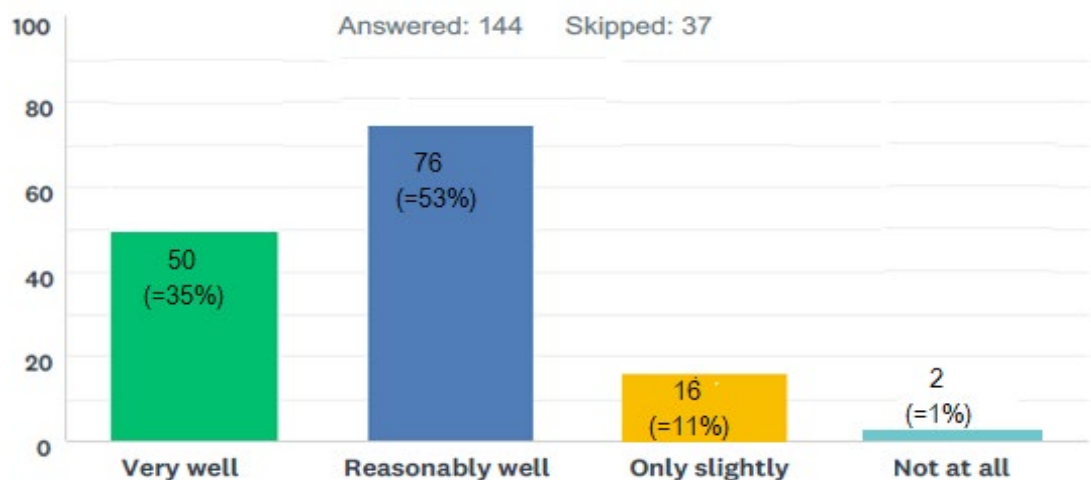


Figure 6-10 Childminder knowledge of the Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations (2006)

6.1.3.2 *The National Guidelines for Childminders*

Knowledge of the National Guidelines for Childminders was approximately equivalent to knowledge of the Regulations at just over 89% for childminders (n=129); 65% parents were aware of the Guidelines (n=35). However, childminders' appreciation of their practical value was higher than for the Regulations, with the majority considering them *very helpful* (48%) n=66 or *somewhat helpful* 40% (n=56).

Again, this evaluation could be expected given the positive response to the advisory visits and other supports made available in tandem with the Guidelines through the Childminder Advisory Services in each area. Moreover, because the Guidelines were specifically developed for childminders, they seem to be better aligned to the particular features of homebased practice, unlike the Regulations.

6.1.3.3 *Aistear and Síolta*

Findings in the present study indicate that childminders were significantly less familiar with the curricular and quality frameworks, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006); less than 60% of childminders (n=86) claimed to know Aistear *very or reasonably well*, while those claiming such knowledge of Síolta were even fewer, 57% (n=82). Slightly over 51% of parents had heard of Síolta (n=28), and they were surprisingly aware of Aistear: over 72% of parents (n=39) had heard of it, by far the highest recognition level for any of the official childcare documents.

Approximately 66% of childminder respondents found both Frameworks *very or somewhat helpful* (n=91). However, comments relating to these frameworks reflected primarily negative attitudes, as for example, criticising the language of Aistear for example as: "very longwinded.... it wouldn't be so simply

understood by all parents and people not in the industry” (C16). Another comment highlighted that there had been no funding allocated to educating childminders about these Frameworks. There was a certain perception that the Frameworks were imposed without negotiation or consideration of their appropriateness, as the following comment illustrates:

At the end of the day it’s down to the childminder to decide what each child needs at any given time and this cannot be governed by thinking about ‘am I doing it the Siolta way?’ or recording everything. It’s just too hard to keep up... (C3).

Parent comments about the Frameworks were positive overall, and most saw the value in having the childminder, preschool, and primary school following the same core guidance when working with children in their early years. However, some parents questioned how relevant these external frameworks were to childminders: parents commented that childminders would do nurturing, and enriching activities derived from home-based values naturally, as the following comment well illustrates:

These regulations and curriculum are important as they set out a clear pathway and principles to work by, but a lot of these principles and standards were in place before the documents were in place. If the childminder is enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and competent most of this will be in place naturally (PC13).

6.1.3.4 The Impact of the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI)

The survey revealed clear evidence of the impact of the National Childminding Initiative on the professionalisation of childminders over the previous decade. As Figure 6.11 shows, childminders in the present study

embraced different elements promoted by the programme, in addition to the pursuit of ECEC qualifications previously outlined.

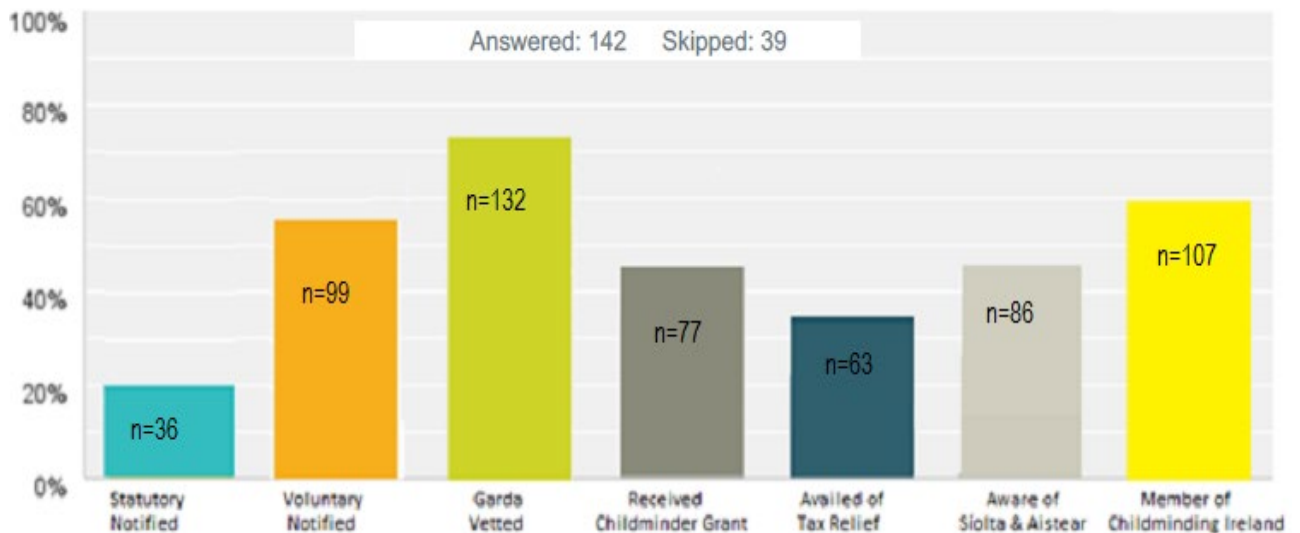


Figure 6-11 Childminders' Markers of Professionalism as promoted by NCMI

Many childminders valued their role as independent service providers in a self-directed career in childcare, availing of existing supports and enjoying high levels of personal agency, similar to findings in international research (Tonyan, 2012, 2017; Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017). Nearly 20% (36) of childminder respondents were or had been statutory notified to the Health Service Executive, and 55% (99) had been voluntarily notified to local Childminding Advisory Services in a form of self-regulation. Nearly 60% (107) were members of the national professional body for childminding, Childminding Ireland, which supports childminders' self-professionalising process, by promoting practices such as holding insurance, as a requirement for membership. Further, over 73% (132) held Garda vetting, even though it is not mandatory for exempt childminders. In addition, while there is no obligation on exempt childminders to adopt or reference curriculum frameworks within the ECEC sector, over 45% childminders in the study were aware of the national childcare frameworks: Siolta

(=82) (CECDE 2006) and Aistear (=86) (NCCA 2009), with over 50% (91) of childminder respondents indicating that they found these frameworks helpful or very helpful for their practice.

6.1.4 Perceptions of Quality in Childminding

Given the multitude of opinions about what constitutes high quality childcare, this research sought to operationalise the concept practically, by identifying what parents and childminders would prioritise when looking for a childminding service. This was achieved by asking first about the *personal characteristics* parents would look for in a childminder, then the *practical reasons* for choosing a particular childminding service, and thirdly, what they would consider *professional reasons* for using a particular service. Finally, respondents were asked to rank criteria from within these areas relative to each other in a summary question designed to access key information in defining high quality childminding.

6.1.4.1 *Personal, practical and professional reasons for choosing a childminder*

Respondents, both childminders and parents, were asked to rank some of the principal qualities they would look for in a childminder. The first question in the series was a ranking question asking about the most desirable personal qualities. There was a striking correlation in childminder and parent responses; therefore, the combined rankings are given in the figure below. Both childminder (n=138) and parent (n=24) respondents to this question gave first ranking to the relationships between childminder and child/ren as being most important. Childminders felt that the *character* of the childminder was most important and

ranked in the top three by the majority n=124 (90%)¹⁷, and this was also true for parents, n=19 (80%). Agreement was also seen the second item in the rankings: *interest in the child* : childminders n=112 (81%) and parents n=17 (71%). The only slight difference was in the third ranking item; childminders would look for someone with *childcare experience* n=103 (75%), while parents felt *good references* were more important n= 20 (83%). Having an *understanding and flexible attitude to family needs* was considered least important by both parents and childminders.



Figure 6-12 Averaged ranking of childminder personal qualities: parents and childminders

Regarding the practical reasons for choosing a childminder, both childminders (n=157) and parents (n=24) clearly gave the top ranking to the

¹⁷ In this section n= the total number of votes received by the item. Rankings were calculated within Survey Monkey using the Relative Importance Index to summarize the importance of each indicator, where weighting is assigned on a Likert scale by each respondent in a range from 1 to 5, where 1 has the highest weighting.

caregiving environment: clean home, toys, books, & childcare equipment, space & access to outdoors at n=154 (98%) and n= 23 (96%) respectively. Childminders ranked proximity to home or work as the second most important factor, n=128 (82%), and the parent ranking concurred n=18 (75%). There was divergence in terms of the third most important factor, with parents considering *home-cooked, healthy meals* as important as *being able to drive* n=20 (83%) while childminders ranked *reasonable rates and values for money* in third place, n=122 (78%).

When asked about professional attributes, childminders (n=158) and clearly ranked *Garda vetting* most highly, n=137 (87%). *Childcare training and qualifications* achieved equal ranking with *Garda Vetting* by childminders; however, ultimately qualifications were in second place with fewer overall votes, n=127 (80%). Similarly, parents ranked *childcare training and qualifications* most highly n=19 (80%); unfortunately, *Garda Vetting* was accidentally omitted from that question in the parent survey. *Insurance for home and car* was ranked in second place by both childminders n=113 (80%) and parents n=20 (87.5%). Interestingly, parents ranked *Registration with Tusla/HSE* in third place n=19 (80%), where childminders ranked it as the least important marker of professionalism, n=79(50%) behind *contract and policy documents* ranked third, n=93 (59%) and *membership of professional organisations*, ranked fourth n=106 (67%).

6.1.4.2 A definition of high-quality childminding

Overall there was a high degree of agreement between childminders (n=132) and parents (n=45) on the rankings of the different aspects of childminder competence. When asked to place the summary categories in relative importance to one another (*home environment, relationships, individualised care and education, real life learning, professionalism*), a very clear

consensus emerged about what both childminders and parents consider makes a high-quality childminding service.

Both childminders n= 70 (53%) and parents n=25 (63%) gave first ranking to *relationships* between childminder and children as most important.

Individualised care and attention was ranked in second place by both 40

childminders (30%) and 9 parents (24%). Both childminders (n=44) and parents (n=12) also agreed on the third ranking for *the home environment* at 33% each.

Both childminders and parents ranked *real life learning* in fourth place in order of

priority, while interestingly, *professionalism (i.e. contracts, policies, qualifications and insurance, etc.)* was considered least important by both parents and

childminders – 48% of parents placed it last (n=20) as did 42% of childminders (n=55).



Figure 6-13 Respondents' averaged rankings of the characteristics of quality childminding

6.1.5 The Future of Childminding

As part of the online survey, childminders (n=130) and parents (n=45) were asked about how the future of childminding might look in two different ways.

Firstly, they responded to nine 'provocative propositions' (Cooperrider, 2013; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2006) about

possible futures for childminding on a four point scale from *completely agree* to *agree* to *disagree* to *strongly disagree*. Neutrality was not an option. Secondly, there was an option to add any other ideas in a large paragraph box, and many respondents added an original contribution to the possible future of childminding. Please note that in this section, comparisons between childminders' and parents' views are shown by composite graphics for illustrative purposes only, and they should not be read as graphs. (See Appendix 1d and 1e for full details). Accurate numbers of respondents are included in the textual commentary.

6.1.5.1 *The availability of high-quality childminding*

Two of the propositions dealt with the *viability* of childminding in the future: will childminding survive or thrive? Both parents n=32 (71%) and childminders n=85 (66%) strongly believed that quality childminding should be available as a choice to parents in the future, choosing to *agree completely* with that proposition. From the comments, it appeared that a minority of childminders feared that 'black market' childcare would continue to undercut and compromise the quality of professional childminding despite regulation.

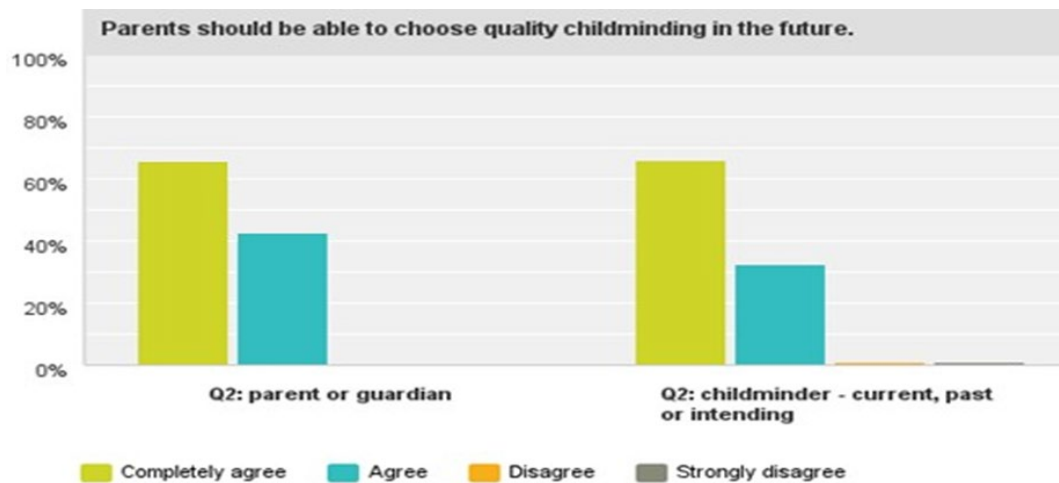


Figure 6-14 Parent & childminder views on the availability of childminding in the future

However, the contrary proposition, that childminding might die out, provoked by far the strongest level of disagreement. Nearly 54% of childminders (n=69) disagreed with the proposition that childminding might die out in the coming years without government support, as did over 59% of parents (n=26). However, approximately 40% of parents (n=18) agreed that this was possible as did 47% of childminders (n=60), which suggests a felt need for government supports.

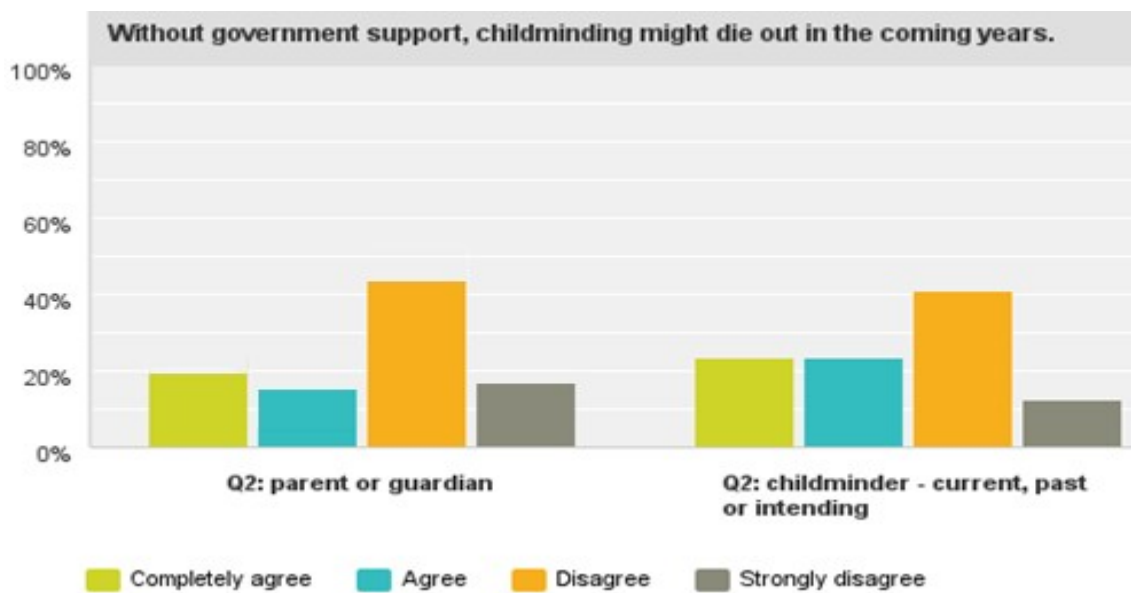


Figure 6-15 Strong disagreement with the possible disappearance of childminding

Parental preference for childminding was evident in the textual commentary, with remarks such as: “Childminders are and always will be a very important part of childcare in Ireland. I would hate to think that childcare would only be provided by commercial crèches and institutions” (PC12). Childminder doubts about the future seemed to centre on the lack of government support for childminding in our national discourse about childcare, as the following comment highlights: “However, despite the majority of children in Ireland being minded in homes, I find that childminding is never mentioned in any discussion on childcare at the moment - everything is centred around crèches and preschools”

(C1). Both childminders and parents argued for recognition by government of the value of childminding and the necessity of funding and support for this type of childcare to ensure its future availability, as this comment illustrates: “Further funding and support is vital to help childminders to survive and thrive in the future. I feel we are a necessary option for parents as we offer a different type of service that should be available” (C2).

6.1.5.2 Professional education and training for childminders

Another two propositions considered the relationship between professional education and standards. Both propositions dealing with childcare education for childminders were broadly supported although the free provision of such training nationally was more popular than the idea of mandatory training to improve standards.

While the idea that mandatory training would improve standards for childminders was accepted by most childminders, $n=110$ (85%) and parents $n=35$ (78%), it was rejected by 15% of childminders ($n=20$) and nearly a quarter of parents ($n=10$). An analysis of parents’ commentary showed that they had very little interest in their childminders’ qualifications; childminders also mentioned parent’s lack of interest in their ECEC qualifications as an area of disappointment with parents. In addition, standard of care by childminders was not prioritized as an issue in the comments. Reference to poor standards by childminders was only in relation to the black-market childminder, who takes on “a zoo of children for as little as €10 a day” (C3). However, apart from an acknowledgement of the need to monitor and prevent “rogue operators” (C5), there seemed to be little interest in improving standards among survey respondents, overall. By contrast, there were a number of parents who feared that improved training and standards would

simply drive the cost of childcare up. This attitude is exemplified by this parent, who remarked that this “All seems a bit much. I don't expect much from my childminder just to mind my children so I can work. She doesn't need all these courses and other things and who pays for it all?” (PC1).

However, responses were overwhelmingly positive towards the other proposition regarding the provision of training and education nationally for childminders. Over 83% of parents (n= 36) and over 93% of childminders (n=120) agreed with the concept of national provision of childminding training.

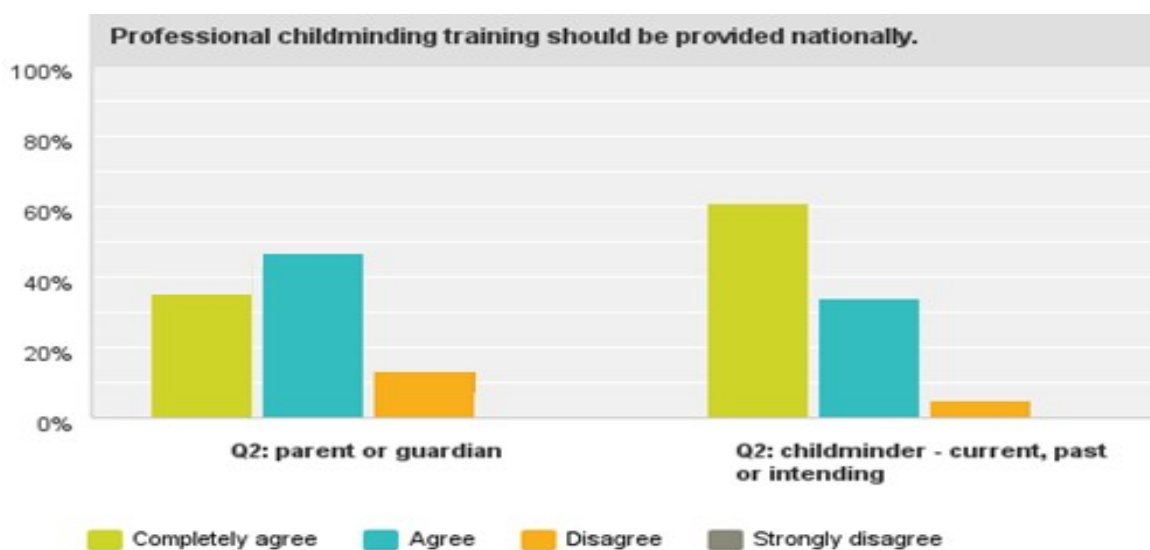


Figure 6-16 Parent & childminder support for the national provision of childminder training

The difference in response to these two education propositions may be due to openness to provision of training as opposed to mandatory training. In commentary, both parents and childminders called for easy access to subsidised training. The problem of training costs was consistently mentioned in childminder comments on childcare training, of which the following is a typical example: “There needs to be publicity to teach the public that (childminding) is a profession and not a hobby. That training and insurance costs money and that it is a worthwhile valuable job.....” (C5).

Furthermore, the second proposition mentioned childminding training specifically. Improved training was a constant refrain in commentary: training adapted to the childminding environment and easily applied to childminding in practice. Many childminders mentioned how current QQI childcare courses were difficult to complete when not actually working in centre-based childcare: the focus is on how to work with larger groups of children of approximately the same age, rather than a more individual approach needed for a small, mixed age group. The second proposition also mentioned professional training. There were calls for ongoing training and continuous professional development for childminders, through networking between childminders and preschools, or linked to grants or tax breaks, as the following example mentions: "...those tax breaks should only be assignable to a minding service where the minder can demonstrate continuous development" (PC6).

6.1.5.3 Specific regulations for childminding

Another pair of propositions explored the importance of specific regulations for childminding and the importance of supports for childminding. Agreement with specific childminding regulations was high among both parents and childminders, with nearly 80% of parents (n=36) and just over 80% of childminders (n=104) agreeing with the proposition that such regulations and inspection would benefit paid childminders. Across both categories, fewer than one in five respondents (n= 34) disagreed with the proposition.

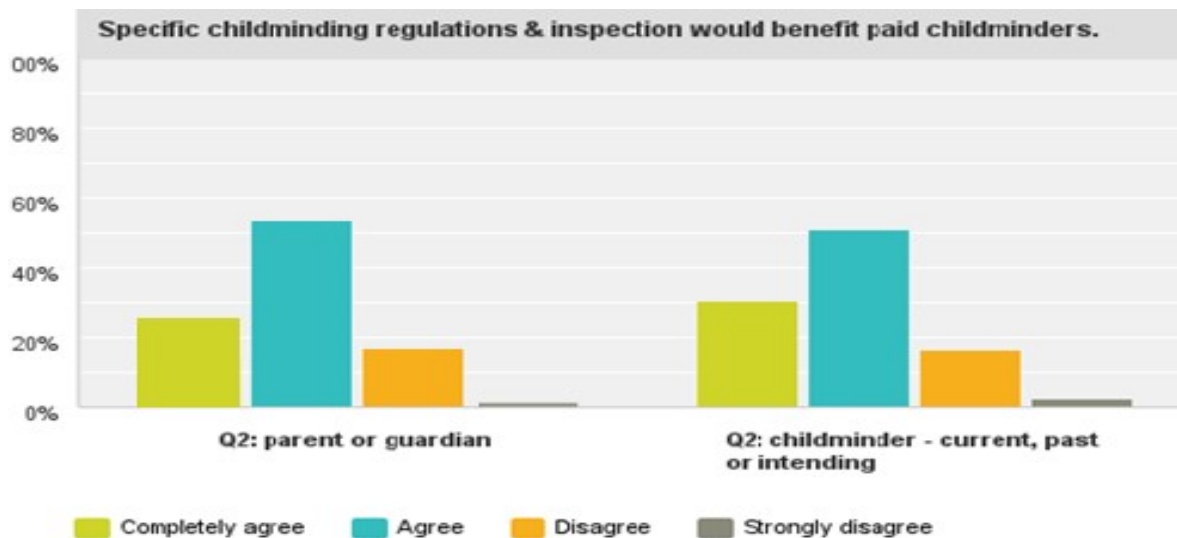


Figure 6-17 Support for regulations specifically for childminders

Qualitative comments also reflected these views, with both parents and childminders asking for government regulation as means of recognition of the valuable role childminders play in society: “Childminders play a very important role for working parents. They are a forgotten workforce. They should be notified and regulated.” (C7).

Among those who disagreed with regulation, some responses reflected cynicism, with a refusal to believe that any regulations could address the problem of ‘black market’ childminders. On the other hand, for some respondents, the danger posed by such childminders provided a strong rationale for the introduction of more rigorous regulation, as the following comment illustrates:

I think unless something is done soon to encourage some sort of regulations in childminding, then it's really going to be extremely unregulated and unsafe for children, with anyone who wants to able to mind. Lack of training, both childcare and business, is going to become an issue too (C10).

However, both parents and childminders agreed that supports for childminders were more beneficial than inspections, as can be seen in the figure below. Almost than 88% of parents (n=37) agreed with this proposition, as did over 97% of childminders (n=124). From the commentary, it is clear that the term ‘supports’ was very broadly interpreted by respondents. Some talked about financial support (tax breaks or subsidies), and some looked for educational support in the form of subsidised training. Others called for dedicated local support workers, while still others sought facilitation of peer support among childminders, and links between childminders and local preschools for continual professional development. In general, however, findings revealed that while childminders favoured supports over inspections, parents tended to favour a balance of both, as the following comment typifies: “Both supports and inspections are required in my opinion, to ensure the highest quality care and education for children” (PC9).

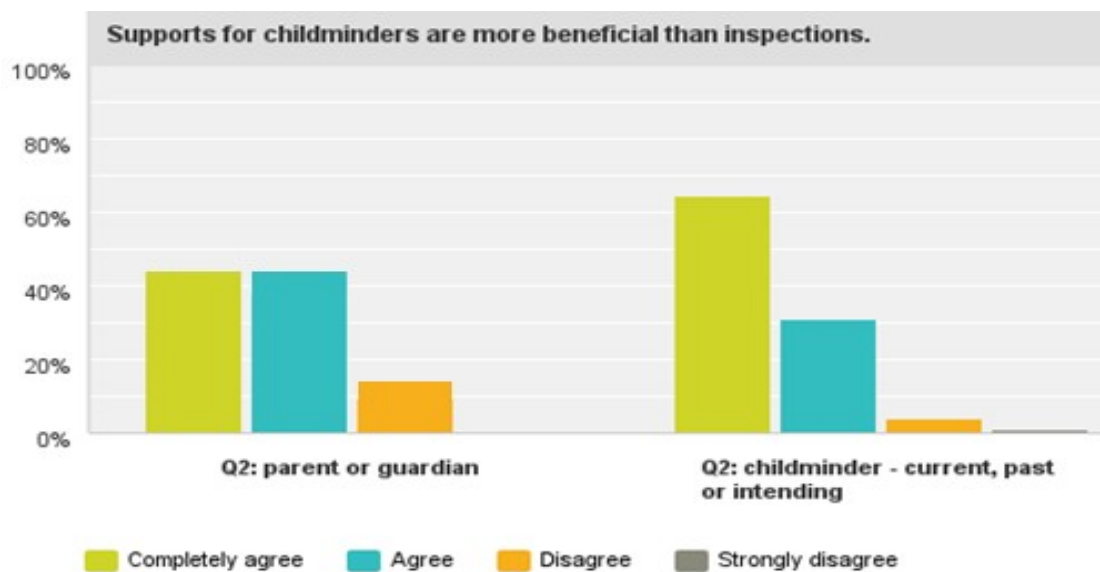


Figure 6-18 Majority agree that supports benefit childminders more than inspections.

6.1.5.4 Childminders as self-employed business owners

A further pair of propositions examined attitudes to the employment status of childminders, whether a childminder should be self-employed or an employee of a local authority. The idea that childminders could be managed by a government body provoked the strongest negative response from both parents and childminders. In all, slightly more than 72% of childminders (n=88) disagreed with the idea as did over 73% of parents (n=30).

For most childminders, the idea of working directly for a government agency generated a very negative response from participants with a particular emphasis on the challenge of dealing with excessive bureaucracy and paperwork. Only a few participants who contributed comments were aware of such systems in other countries, such as Denmark, and those who had experienced this approach to childminding expressed doubts, as illustrated in the comment below:

I have lived in a country where childminders are paid by government and this has worked very well. Unfortunately, in Ireland not a lot of investment has been put into this industry and I'm not sure if this would work here (C12).

By contrast, most childminders valued the autonomy of self-employment. Over 82% of childminders (n=106) agreed that it was best for childminders to be self-employed and run their own business; over 71% of parents (n=32) were also in favour of this approach. However, parents' comments expressed strong concern about the cost of childcare, with a preferred option being a tax break or subsidy for parents' childcare costs, as per the following: "The tax break should be at the consumer end to allow parents to be further involved in demanding a high quality carer" (PC6). This point of view was supported by several

childminders: “There needs to be also support to help parents afford quality childcare no matter what type they choose” (C14).

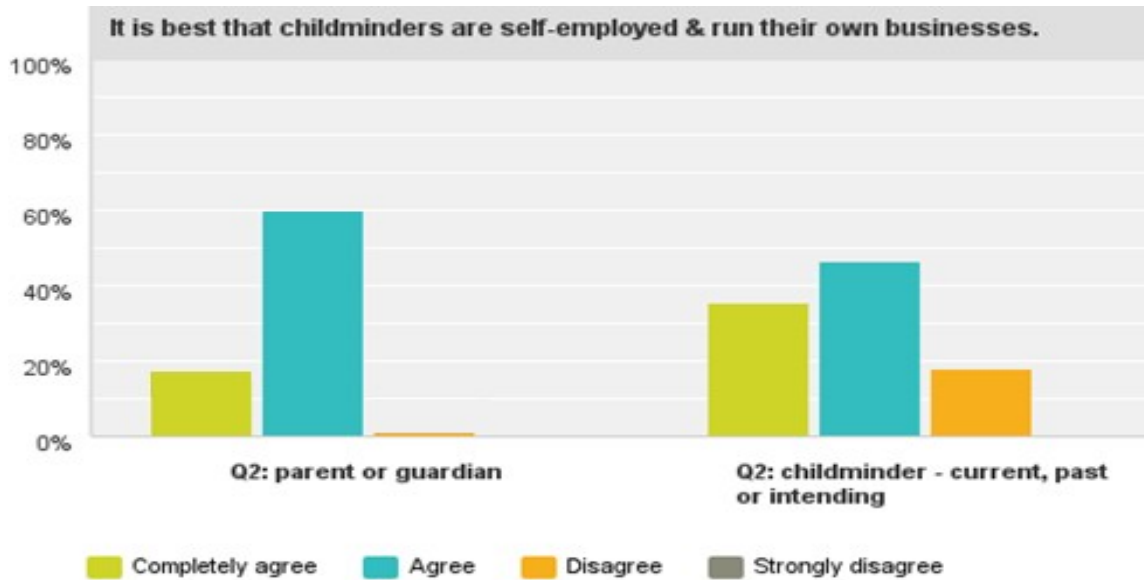


Figure 6-19 Childminder and parents prefer the self-employed business model

Nonetheless, most childminders were reluctant to embrace full government management, despite frequent complaints about poor pay, and desire for decent wages: “By whatever method possible, childminding should not be asked to work for less than minimum wage” (C12). While recognition, promotion, support and education for childminding were all frequently requested, there was not one childminder who suggested employment by the State. This ambivalence was perfectly expressed in the following comment:

Whether it is best that childminders be self-employed or managed by local government agencies depends very much on the attitude of the government. If they give autonomy to the childminders it would be good. But if it means childminders will be constrained in their movements or highly regulated with respect to activities, setup, etc. it might be more beneficial that childminders be self-employed as is the current practice (C15).

Furthermore, there was a certain level of suspicion and mistrust towards government among childminder respondents, especially since current policy seemed to focus on institutional childcare and ignore the large number of children in the care of childminders. The following comment reflects the key message identified in these comments: “Childminding is pushed aside as it's easier for the Government to regulate, inspect and control other forms of childcare such as crèches” (C17).

6.1.5.5 Inclusion in all national childcare funding schemes

However, even though direct employment of childminders by local government was broadly rejected by both parents and childminders, the present study findings identified many demands for inclusion in any government funding scheme for the childcare sector. At the time of the survey, tax breaks to help parents with the cost of childcare was a popular and promoted idea in the media, even though strongly criticised by childcare organisations eager for any subsidisation to be invested directly in providers’ services. With this in mind, it was to be expected that there would be high levels of agreement among parents with the idea the tax breaks as a means to help support regulated childminders. Unsurprisingly, over 98% of parents (n=44) were in favour of tax breaks for childcare costs. Commentary showed some parent respondents simply believed that the current situation is unsustainable, while others had clearly considered how a tax break could be used to support quality by linking it to the use of professional childminders. The following comment expressed the concept most fully: “Tax breaks should be linked to childcare provision only by minders that are insured, Garda vetted, self-notified” (PC6).

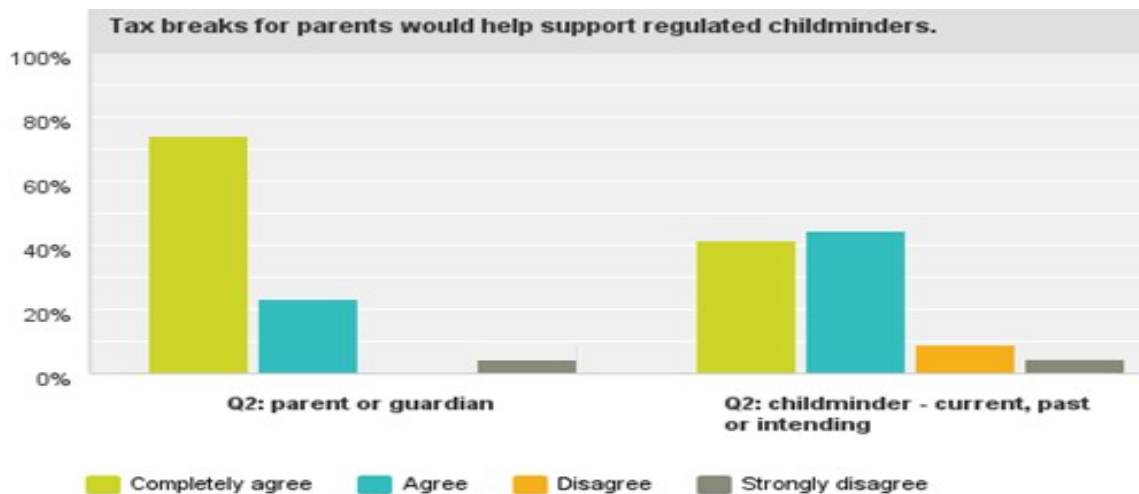


Figure 6-20 Parents strongly agreed that tax breaks could support regulated childminders

As can be seen in the figure above, most childminders also agreed with the proposition albeit less enthusiastically: only 41% of childminders (n=55) were in complete agreement. As some of the comments revealed, key concerns included possible income loss, should parents receive the subsidy. “Parents should receive help in paying their childminding costs but without the childminder losing income” (C15).

However, many respondents reflected that this paradox of high cost to parents and low wages for childcare workers was a dilemma that affects all practitioners working in early years. In whatever way this issue will be resolved nationally, many childminder respondents in the study sought to be included as the following comment shows: “Equal pay and recognition for qualified childminders as qualified early years workers” (C17).

6.1.6 Discussion on the Future of Childminding

At the conclusion of the online survey in August 2015, 48 participants, 11 of whom were parents, indicated their willingness to participate in a further

qualitative component of the study which would involve discussion in small focus groups. Given the large number of potential participants, it was considered that adopting a World Café forum would be more appropriate as research approach. The researcher approached Childminding Ireland for support in setting up a World Café forum; ultimately, 40 childminders (but no parents) participated in the forum as part of Childminding Ireland's Annual General Meeting in April 2016. The World Café approach proved very effective in generating robust discussion on the future of childminding, provoking a deeper discussion on issues raised by the provocative propositions at the end of the online survey.

Following transcription of the feedback sheets which childminders drew up during the World Café Forum, the patterns of discussion in the eight groups were collated and analysed inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Several distinct themes emerged in response to the three core questions considered on the day about the type of regulations, the type of training and the type of supports needed for childminding in the future.

6.1.6.1 Future Regulations for Childminding

A key finding to emerge from the World Café Forum was the need for regulations and inspection for childminders to be distinct and different from those adopted for group based childcare purposes. The view was strongly expressed by many participants that any such regulations and associated inspections would have to incorporate a greater emphasis on and sensitivity to the particular home environment in which childminding occurs. The inspectorate would have to remember they were, "Looking at a HOME, based on regulations for a home, not centre-based." Inspections should be "against standards" and would have to be "sensitive to the home-based setting." Several felt that "Balance must

be struck between professionalism and maintaining a home environment – no peepholes in bedroom doors for example”, as well as recognition that childminding was taking place “with the family.”

Secondly, many participants expressed a desire for a different type of inspection, which could be summed up in two words: “Less paperwork.” Childminders inspected under the current system noted how stressful and difficult it was to maintain crèche-like written records as a single-handed childminder. It was suggested that the regulations be “scaled back” and that the inspections should be “more than a tick box exercise.” One suggestion was “Child centred regulations, focussed on child”, while another sought “more themed inspections” as more useful to the childminder, especially if the theme is known in advance. Above all, regulations would have to be “realistic and achievable for childminders.” To this end, it was suggested that more photos or videos should be used as records, for example.

Thirdly, another common proposition was: “ALL paid childminders should be inspected.” Registration with Tusla should be mandatory for everyone minding in the home, except for relatives. There should be no more voluntary notification, but one set of standards should apply to all paid childminders. In fact, one group proposed: “Registration for all, maintained on a national database.” Once registered, childminders should then be allowed to participate in all tax incentive schemes, or other government childcare funding.

Recommendations about what should be included in childminding regulations included a number of possibilities. As regards child-adult ratio, there were various ideas such as 6:1 of mixed ages, as it was up to 2008, with school age childminding included. Other suggestions offered particular ratios per adult

to children under one or three years of age. The maximum group size allowed should also be fixed, it was proposed.

As regards registration requirements for childminders, the following were all mentioned: Garda vetting, Paediatric First Aid, Child Protection training, and a minimum level qualification in childcare. In addition, standards of health and safety for the environment and space indoors and outdoors were recommended, with a home visit when setting up prior to first inspection, alongside safety standards for cars used to drive with minded children. Furthermore, it was felt that parents' views should be considered: parent contracts and parents' requirements for their child should be part of any evaluation, especially when the parent asked for "something out of the ordinary."

6.1.6.2 Future Training for Childminding

Participants in the World Café Forum were also asked to discuss the importance of future training for childminders. The majority of participants expressed the view that childminders should have nationally recognised, accredited training through QQI to level 5 or 6 in early education and care, although others were happy to settle for a lower mandatory level as a starting point. For core childcare education, participants sought training on the lines of Aistear themes and Síolta standards as well as QQI level 5 core modules in ECEC, or "an ECCE programme specifically for childminders."

However, all participants were interested in either funded or subsidised childminder education through the Learner Fund¹⁸, for example, which would be flexible and also offer incentives to progress to higher levels, as well as access to continued professional training. The importance of providing such training locally was also highlighted. There was a definite desire for this training to be available locally, outside of Dublin, with time built in to allow for networking within a community of learning. Some childminders who were trying to complete a level 5 or 6 award while working as childminders requested that the QQI level 5 & 6 Work Experience modules be supported for childminding services: it was impractical for a working childminder to close her service while doing work experience at a local crèche, yet without that mandatory module, it was not possible to complete the major award at either level currently.

As regards the content of childminder education, the diversity of areas in which childminders expressed felt needs for training only underlines the demands of the role. Clear, unambiguous training on government regulations and guidelines was requested, including Children First child protection training for childminding settings. In addition, there were practical skills required, such

¹⁸ The Learner Fund is an initiative of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) introduced in 2014. The Learner Fund has two primary aims: 1) To provide subsidy funding to support existing staff working directly with children in registered early years services and registered childminders to meet the mandatory minimum qualification requirements which came into effect on December 31st, 2016 i.e. Level 5 in Early Childhood Care and Education on the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ) (or equivalent). 2) To provide subsidy funding to support existing Early Years practitioners who have an ECCE Major Award qualification at Level 5 on the NFQ (or equivalent), to attain a Level 6 qualification, in order to meet ECCE contractual requirements which also came into effect on 31st December 2016.

as Paediatric First Aid, Manual Handling, HACCP for food preparation, fire safety, and health and safety within the home for young children.

More specifically, many expressed the need for training in business skills such as basic account keeping, information on taxation, PRSI and social welfare issues, with specific training in developing policies and procedures, and drawing up contracts or working agreements with parents. Marketing skills were another felt need, as well as training in computer literacy, sales, social media. Finally, there was a desire for personal development in areas such as assertiveness, interview and communication skills to be able to deal well with parents, as well as training in family psychology, mental health and self-care skills.

6.1.6.3 Future supports for childminding

The most frequently requested type of support highlighted in the present study finding was having access to local development workers, “who specialize in childminding as a statutory post – outside of regulatory inspection team” to help with setting up services, training, and maintaining services. According to the comments generated in the World Café Forum, this dedicated person was envisaged as being available for home visits, as well as phone calls in order to be able to provide support around particular childminding issues.

Secondly, there was much demand for local networks for childminders, where they could meet with or without children, as peer support groups, and which could feed into a national support forum. On a related note, peer mentoring schemes were proposed, linked to inspections, so that more experienced local childminders could coach and mentor those in need of support. Thirdly, local access to training and ECEC education was highlighted across these findings. This training should be funded or free, flexible, and community

based, such that a childminder's learning group could also become the foundation of a local childminding network.

Fourthly, there were propositions around supports at national level: national recognition and support from Tusla as well as the Childcare Committees; a national register for childminders; a national media campaign advertising the benefits of childminding and a national helpline to field queries around schemes, training or regulations. Finally, childminders hoped for access to all government funded, national childcare schemes; this would constitute recognition, acceptance and a vote of confidence at the highest level.

6.1.7 Conclusion: Attitudes to Professional Childminding

The phase of research suggested significant progress on four of the five components in the process of professionalisation as promoted under NCMI and described by Brannen and Moss (2003). Childminders in the study have rising levels of education, they are more likely to embrace childminding as a career, they enjoy collaborative relationships within Childminding Ireland, and they value their distinctive practice as childminders. However, despite the enthusiasm and commitment reflected in the narratives of childminders in the present study, a significant challenge identified was the high cost of childcare for parents, and the relatively low earnings of childminders, despite their high level of qualifications.

Nonetheless, after a decade of investment under the National Childminding Initiative, professionalised childminders, such as the members of Childminding Ireland, seek visibility in a transparent system as part of a national ECEC infrastructure, such as in France, the Netherlands or Belgium (Boogaard et al., 2013; Laevers et al., 2016; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009). As such, they advocate

for specific childminding qualifications in ECEC, staffed local networks; and proportionate childminding regulations, once accompanied by supports.

Key learning from this phase of research involved recognising stakeholders' perception that childminding is fundamentally different from other forms of early years' provision. Noteworthy was the call to develop specific childminding regulations, tailored to meet the needs and values of childminders, in contrast to current centre-based childcare regulations, which many criticised as ill-adapted to the practical reality of childminding, similar to childminders elsewhere (Brooker, 2016; Ofsted, 2017). This necessitated a different model of research to document the praxis of childminders and describe their values and beliefs in the Irish context, prior to the creation of childminding regulations.

7 CULTURAL MODELS IN IRISH CHILDMINDING

This chapter will present findings from the Ecocultural Family Interview protocol, the result of a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, in which “analytic strategies remained open to unexpected processes and patterns while focusing on project-specific topics” (Weisner, 2014, p. 167). Similar to aspects of grounded theory, structured discovery is an analytic approach which explores patterns through close, iterative listening, reading, and observing of the sample data. However, structured discovery differs in that the analysis is guided by project specific questions.

Key findings in the present study on childminding in the Irish context have been identified through triangulation with multiple data sets, including indexed data from the EFICh interviews and the associated field notes, and analysis of the case study survey. In addition, findings derived from the holistic ratings in relation to Cultural Models (See Appendix 10) are presented specifically in this chapter.

7.1.1 Background

In the second phase of this study, an ecocultural approach was adopted to the research which was conducted in 2018, with 17 childminder participants, from 11 counties, from urban and rural areas. Most of the participants came

forward to participate in this research following an appeal at CMI meetings presenting the Pathway Report¹ to childminders across the country.

All the participants were female, 70% were over 40 years old, and most were Irish, with 4 non-nationals (23.5%), which was double the proportion of the population who were non-Irish nationals (11.6%) in the most recent census (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Over 70% had QQI level 5/6 as their highest reported formal educational attainment in ECEC. Nearly 30% (5) held qualifications at degree level in other disciplines, just over the national average of 27% for 25-64 year olds in 2018 (OECD, 2019a, p. 49). Over half of the participants had been working as childminders for less than six years, with five participants setting up in the previous two years; seven participants were childminders for nine years or more. The characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 7-1.

Table 7-1 Demographic Profile

Age	N	%
30-34yrs	1	5.9
35-39yrs	4	23.5
40yrs +	12	70.6
Ethnicity		
Irish	12	70.6
Other White	4	23.5
African	1	5.9
Years Childminding		
20yrs +	2	11.8
9-19yrs	5	29.4
6-8yrs	1	5.9
3-5yrs	4	23.5
<2yrs	5	29.4
Education Attainment		
Level 9 (Masters)	2	11.8
Level 7/8 (Bachelors)	3	17.6
Some college, no degree	3	17.6
Level 5/6	8	47.1
Secondary School	1	5.9
Childminder Income²		
<€15,000	10	66.7
€15,001- €25,000	5	33.3

¹ The report on reforms for childminding in Ireland proposed by a working group for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2018.

² Only 15 respondents answered this question on income.

On average, the childminder participants in this phase of the study cared for 6 children, 36% of whom were under three, just over 8% were attending preschool, and the remaining 56% were school age children. All except two childminders interviewed were parents at the time of the study, with over half also caring for their own young children up to twelve years of age. The majority of participants (over 75%) provided full-time care and school age childcare, while over 70% provided part-time care and flexi-care to suit parents working shifts. Most participants provided all these options, with less than 25% (N=4) specialising exclusively in school age care or in full time care for babies and toddlers. Only two participants were registered with Tusla, while 13 were notified to local Childcare Committees, and 14 were members of Childminding Ireland.

7.1.2 Profiles of Participants

The following vignettes introduce each childminder and their service individually, to consider their motivation and reasons for childminding, and their attitudes and level of satisfaction with their work. The information is drawn from observational field notes, and the childminders' own background stories collected during the interview. Pseudonyms are used to conceal participants' identity in order to preserve anonymity.

Áine

Áine started childminding 13 years ago, having worked abroad for years. On her return, she wanted to be self-employed, so she retrained by doing the

QAP³ through the local health board; she has worked as a childminder ever since. She has worked with many families and children, who generally stay with her for years. At the moment, she has a mixed age service, with six children, ranging from 15 months to nine years of age: one full time toddler, one little boy who comes one day a week, while the remainder are after school children. Áine feels no insecurity about losing children, since there is plenty of demand for her services after 13 years working in the area. She derived deep personal meaning and satisfaction from her work with the children and their families, especially those with additional needs. For Áine, the greatest reward was seeing the children going home happy and ‘proud as punch’ about what they had made or done while with her.

Cathy

Cathy was always interested in children and completed Montessori training long before she got to use it, after the birth of her youngest child. She has now been a childminder for over 20 years. Cathy has been notified to the HSE or registered with Tusla as a childminder since 2007, and having completed her QQI level 6 in ECEC, has provided the Free Preschool Year for five children every morning for the last two years. In the afternoon, she also has school age children coming in from the national school next door, in order to earn a sufficient income. For Cathy, the most rewarding part of childminding was the children’s happiness,

³ Quality Awareness Programme (QAP) was a free, government sponsored 10-hour training course for childminders, which aimed to promote quality standards and practices among childminders under the National Childminding Initiative 2002-2012.

while her greatest challenge was the responsibility for how the children would develop and grow up under her influence. Her understanding of her vital role in the children's lives, especially in times of family crisis, gave deep personal meaning to her work.

Chloe

Chloe was looking at changing career, because there were no jobs in the area in her field of expertise. Since she loved children and wanted to continue to be available for her own three children, she thought of going into early childcare, with a possibility working in a crèche or in preschool. While doing her QQI level 5 in ECEC, she was asked to mind the children of a teacher, who was job sharing. Since this fitted well around her family, she started childminding properly the following September, in 2017. At the time of the interview, she cared for four children: two toddlers, one preschool and one after school child. Her service fitted in well with her family's needs, the school and preschool were close by, so she enjoyed a nice pace of life with the babies and toddlers in her service. She viewed childminding as her career, with professional insurance, and a pension organized, she considered her service as a business. She was not just a casual childminder, she would view it more as a vocation.

Ciara

Ciara went back to college four years ago to do QQI level five in childcare, intending to work in centre-based care. However, a change in her family situation meant she decided to put her childcare qualification to use by starting a childminding service at home. She opened her service just seven months previously, and after a slow, difficult start, the service had finally got going, with two babies, a preschool child, and an afterschool child, from three different families. At the time of the interview, Ciara was in the process of registration

with Tusla so that prospective parents could avail of the National Childcare Scheme, and thus provide a secure stream of income for the service. While Ciara felt the registration process was both difficult and expensive for a sole childminder without a consistent income as yet, the reward of childminding for her was: 'Just the look on their faces when they 'get' something.'

Cynthia

Cynthia started childminding at the end of 2017, having worked as a crèche manager for 14 years. She was quite passionate about working with children directly. At the time of the interview, she was minding four school age children part-time, but her dream was to start a preschool and a larger afterschool club in a local community centre. Her current enrolment was insufficient to make ends meet; consequently, she worked in the mornings as a chef in a preschool, and she also worked three evenings a week as a carer for the elderly in their own homes. Nonetheless, for her, the most rewarding part of childminding was helping children reach their full potential, which gave a sense of personal significance in her work.

Joanna

Joanna's Mum was a childminder, however she only considered childminding after having her own children, and moving to the West, where jobs in her field were a considerable commute away. She could not face getting two very young children out at six o'clock in the morning, not really knowing her own children, and "paying to work" for a number of years. At the time of the interview, she was minding three girls, one at preschool and two toddlers, in addition to her own preschool children, in their new home. As a relatively new childminder, her income was not yet sufficient, and she needed to charge more or take on an extra child to make her service sustainable. Her greatest joy was

seeing all the children get out of their time with her and watching how much they learn.

Jill

Jill took redundancy in 2010 from a full time job after 22 years due to a family crisis, which changed her priorities. Wanting to put her children first, she turned to childminding and set up a school age childminding service four years ago. At the time of the interview, she was working with seven families, she had with no more than six school age children at any one time, and she was not obliged to register with Tusla at that time⁴. For Jill, the most rewarding part of childminding was “just the children themselves, just the good days, which in my case, is the majority of them, just the laughter, the fun and the laughter.” In addition, she loved being able to help children when they do come across problems, and their families as well.

Katriina

Katriina worked as a nanny on and off from the age of 18, but having tried another career, she found she missed working with children and decided to become a childminder in her own home. At the time of the interview, she was registered with Tusla, and provided childcare for 10 children, no more than six at any one time: most were babies and toddlers, but she had some preschool and afterschool children too. Spending two hours a day picking up and dropping of

⁴ The register for School Age Childcare was opened in 2019; however it excluded childminders who cared for 6 or fewer children of any age (DCYA, 2018b)

children in term time was her only major area of concern. She loved organizing activities for the children and sending a scrapbook home at Christmas for parents to enjoy. Her greatest reward was “to see these happy faces, and they're looking forward to coming and being with us.”

Marianne

On completion of a two-year childcare course, Marianne worked as a nanny for 25 years, until the birth of her youngest child, five years ago, when she opened a childminding service in her own home for the first time. At the time of the interview, she cared for a toddler, two preschool children and four school children on a part-time basis, in addition to her own three children. She was voluntarily notified to the local Childcare Committee, but as an exempt childminder, she was not registered with Tusla. Marianne considered childminding as her job, and as a business, and she planned to continue childminding until retirement, despite the insecurity of the work, and the inability to plan longer term, even two years ahead. However, she enjoyed a real sense of personal significance: the children themselves and the long-term close relationships made it all worthwhile in her view.

Mary

Mary started childminding after adopting a child, as part of a long-term plan to ensure she could stay home, and her child would have sufficient social interaction. At the time of the interview, she cared for 15 children part-time, whose ages ranged from 1-12 years old; she loved working with the mixed age group and considered it better for children in general. Mary viewed childminding as her career, but she felt somewhat isolated. For her, the rewards of childminding included: “Seeing these little people turning into adults, it's, I don't

even know how to describe it. And I just think it's amazing. Yeah, and that their parents trust me.”

Mary Lou

Mary Lou started nannying in 1996, when she was doing a City and Guilds diploma in childcare. Six years later she started a childminding service with her mother. For financial reasons, she has also worked periodically as a carer with young people in crisis and psychiatric care, but she finally decided that she could make the most impact by going back to working with very young children in small groups as a childminder. At the time of the interview, she had five children under four years of age attending her service, but she was not registered with Tusla. Mary Lou had very high levels of confidence and autonomy and focused all her energies on meeting the children’s needs. She had a very distinctive approach to caring for children, focused on building an emotionally warm and comforting environment, “heaven on earth”, as she called it. She truly appeared to love her life and her work and considered childminding as her personal calling and mission.

Nicky

Nicky worked in crèches from the age of 17, and with her QQI 6 qualification, she was a manager for a number of years. After the birth of her youngest child, she decided that becoming a childminder was the only way she could stay home with her children and have an income. In 2016, she was able to start her service by availing of the Back to Enterprise scheme and made a voluntary notification to the local Childcare Committee, as she wanted to do it right - be insured, notified and pay tax, “because I couldn't take that chance with other people's children.” At the time of the interview, she cared for three preschool children in addition to her own two preschool children, as well as one

child after school, who only attended seven days a month due to the mother's shift patterns as a psychiatric nurse. While she felt childminding was generally under-valued, she did feel appreciated by her parents. The best part of childminding for her was, "Spending time with my own children, and getting to know the other children that I mind really, really well."

Paula

Paula got into childminding for family reasons, so she could be home with her children and have an income; she had been a healthcare assistant up to that point. At the time of the interview, she minded six children from three families on a part-time basis: toddlers, preschool and school age children. Paula saw herself as a professional childminder, who had gone through several major transitions professionally in the 13 years she had worked in childcare. Having had a full daycare for two years, she really valued the "essence of childminding" as home-based, small group, individualized care. She had completed QQI level 6 in ECEC, and she was working on a degree in Social Care part-time, with a view to progressing on to other work eventually. Personally, she felt somewhat underpaid and undervalued by some parents. Her greatest reward was seeing how children turned out years later and knowing how her love and dedication had helped families.

Rianne

Having worked in social care for the 10 years with a master's in social care, Rianne started childminding after the birth of her third child, because she wanted to be with her own children more. At the time of the interview, she minded three preschool children and one afterschool child from two different families. Rianne is from the Netherlands, and her husband is Swedish, so that means they have no extended family network to rely on. Her greatest personal challenge was the

lack of any sick leave or holidays, but her greatest reward was: “Just being with the kids and also the other kids, I just love kids. I just love having them around.”

Sonya

Sonya started childminding in 2007, when her own daughter was two years of age, when approached by other parents at a local toddler group. At the time of the interview, she had moved more into school age care. She minded just one toddler and one preschool child, the remaining seven children are all at school, with different children attending two or three days a week, including a child with special needs. Since she took no more than three preschoolers at any one time, she was not registered with Tusla. She enjoyed a good work-life balance, with a schedule that gave her three mornings off for leisure pursuits and housework. While the greatest challenge was the isolation, Sonia found the love and affection of the children and the appreciation of the parents most rewarding, especially since she felt she was “rearing a lot of these children.”

Shona

Shona has worked with children for around 24 years and holds a QQI 6 equivalent qualification. Having managed a childcare centre, she decided to become a childminder because “there was too much paperwork and not enough time playing with children.” Shona has been childminding since moving to Ireland from Scotland ten years ago. At the time of the interview, she provided care for three babies, toddlers and preschool children, and had plans to offer school age care also. She took no more than three preschoolers at any one time and is not therefore registered with Tusla. While Shona still felt the job was isolating, the rewards of childminding were two-fold: the close bond she developed with the children, and the freedom of running her own service.

Therese

Therese started childminding 14 years ago, because she just wanted to stay at home with her own four children, aged 4-12 years at the time. At the time of the interview, she was caring for two toddlers, one preschool child and three schoolchildren. She held QQI level 5 in ECEC, including a module in Special Education Needs (SEN) and the Childminding Practice module. Despite concerns about the instability of enrolment, she planned to continue childminding until all her children have finished college in five years' time. She expressed concern at the lack of recognition and respect for childminders, but her greatest reward was hearing the minded children refer to her house as home.

7.2 CULTURAL MODELS

In the current research, as in the study carried out by Tonyan et al. (2015, 2017) in California, a key project-specific topic was Cultural Models, as revealed through childminders' descriptions of their daily routine interactions with children and families. Childminders in the current research were initially rated as either High, Medium or Low, according to their fit with two cultural models identified in California - Close Relationships and School Readiness. To receive a HIGH rating, the childminder must value a model in what she says, enact it in her daily routine activities, and see (or evaluate) its impact on the children's outcomes in some way. A MEDIUM rating means the childminder values, enacts or sees that particular model in terms of children's outcomes; perhaps she often faces barriers or simply prioritizes other things. A LOW rating is given when there is little or no evidence for valuing, enacting, or evaluating the model in her work with children.

7.3 CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

The Close Relationship Model was identified as the most prevalent cultural model among childminders in Ireland, with all 17 respondents scoring a HIGH rating. In addition, a substantial number of sub-themes associated with this model emerged, contributing to a model of Close Relationships, which specifically reflected the cultural values, scripts and routines enacted in childminding in the Irish cultural context. In particular, sub-themes identified in the analysis of the narratives highlighted a value for long term, enduring relationships, beyond the boundaries of the childcare arrangement, and a conceptualisation of the childminding service as extended family.

Consistent with findings in the study in California, in this cultural model the childminder's primary goal is for each child to feel loved and special. The childminder prioritises showing love and affection to children, interacting with the children through play and conversation, and building relationships through these interactions. The Close Relationships childminder frequently talks about the strong relationships with children who are or who have been in their care, and mentions it as one of the rewarding aspects of the role (CCCRP, 2014; Tonyan, 2017). Key features of the Close Relationship Model as identified in the present study findings, are outlined in the following sections and illustrated with quotes from the relevant interviews.

7.3.1 Love and affection

Deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships between adults and children are essential for children's holistic development (Page, 2011). A key finding in the present study is the primacy and pervasiveness of the references to the emotional warmth and affection of relationships between childminders and the children in their care. When describing the emotionality of their relationships

with the children, childminders openly use the language of love and affection alongside terms derived from attachment theory (Bowlby, 2007; Cousins, 2015; Page, 2011, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013).

7.3.1.1 The close bond

Narratives included many references to the physical and emotional closeness which evolves through interaction with the children, as illustrated in the following quote: “You can never spoil a child ... keep them up, and haggle them, and cuddle them.” –Marianne.

This particular closeness was frequently described as a ‘bond’, reminiscent of the language of attachment, referring to the capacity to form close and secure interpersonal relationships, developed over time as an infant and primary caregiver interact (Bowlby, 1969, 1984). Such supportive relationships have a tangible, long-term influence on children’s healthy development, contributing to optimal cognitive and social emotional development for infants and toddlers (Schore, 2001; Sroufe, 2005).

Quality interactions between childminders and children were typically valued for the emotional warmth which they generated. The childminders’ stories showed how much they enjoyed the interactions with the children; this enjoyment was in itself a primary motivation for interaction. Where these interactions and activities were perceived to achieve a different aim, such as allowing the children to burn off excess energy for example, this led to a slightly lower rating on this model, Medium-High, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Even the walk up there like, they love walking. I shouldn't be saying this out too loud {laughs} but it's like the dogs, I used to bring the dogs up there too, but you can leave the two lads off to run, there's no cars, do you know? - Therese

A key feature which was perceived to facilitate the development of close bonds was the intimacy and familiarity associated with the home setting, where close interactions with the same small group of children occur on a daily basis. This feature of the bond of childminding was clearly identified as a motivating and rewarding factor in choosing to mind children in the home, as this quotation exemplifies:

I'd say one (reward) is the bond that you get with the children that you're looking after because it's a lot closer than say when you're in a crèche where it's bigger and you might not be with the same children all the time. -Shona.

For some participants, that bond between the children and childminder is the defining characteristic of childminding. One childminder described how she grew her service to accommodate up to 40 children in a full day care service, built an extension to her home, employed two assistants, because she felt that being a full day care provider would make her more “professional” than working as a childminder. However, after two years, while doing a play therapy course, she realised she was not being true to herself, that managing a service had distanced her significantly from what she called the “essence of childminding”: “The essence of childminding (is) like a close bond with a few children in a home environment.” -Paula. Hence, scaling the service back down, and returning to childminding became an issue of personal integrity; in being true to a deeply felt belief, she regained a sense of meaning and purpose in her work once more. These descriptions reflect the meaning systems childminders in the study drew from to understand their childcare practices and careers (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014).

7.3.1.2 Interactions with children

Significantly, the present study findings also highlight the central role which regular, warm and meaningful interactions with the child play in terms of developing this emotional bond with children. The unique quality of interactions which childminders can achieve with children, including those very young infants in their first year, is captured in the following quote:

And he, he just loves if you talk to him, and he'll talk back to you. He gives it loads, and he just, he really enjoys that interaction. And he loves it and it's just beautiful. It's wonderful. I love it. -Ciara.

The rich interactions conveyed in the participant narratives are in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (2006) concept of proximal processes in the Bio-Ecological model, which states that, "To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time." (p. 797). The early years of a child's life are a time of unique dependency, during which caregiving routines (eating, sleeping and bodily care), in a stimulating environment are appreciated as opportunities to develop a relationship with the child (CECDE, 2006)

The value of having slow-paced, unhurried time in which to build these interactions was underlined in these narratives, with childminders emphasizing the time they spend interacting with children: talking with children, while making things, and growing things, and going places. One particular childminder, who provided childminding for children of school age, emphasised the importance of supporting children's communication: noticing a child's mood, listening, and creating time space for a child to express themselves, as the following quotation illustrate:

It's a foundation. In school, the teachers try their best, but sometimes because they have so many children, they cannot get into that child's

mind. But when I'm here, I can say to one, 'Go and watch TV, I want to work with your sister on one to one.' And then you will really get out if a child has behaviour problems, you will be able to know, okay, what is happening here? - Cynthia

The value of such interactions is highlighted in Siolta (CECDE, 2006), as the quality of young children's experience is closely linked to the interactions between child and caregiver. Children in such secure relationships with adults are more likely to explore their environment, thereby enhancing their learning and development; they can be more sociable and interact better with peers, as well as displaying greater verbal precision. The usefulness of such verbal precision for a four year old is well illustrated by a childminder's description of taking directions in play: "Down on the ground, yeah I've put holes in my jeans in the last month - crawling around, playing with farm animals and moving the tractor." – Chloe.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) also underlines the central importance of interactions with those with whom the child has developed "a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person" (p. 60) in facilitating learning and development, highlighting the importance of having the time and motivation to play with children at the level of the child.

7.3.2 Fun and happiness

Child well-being is a multifaceted concept that refers both to subjective feelings and experiences as well as to living conditions. Happiness is, in general, understood as a basic indicator of subjective well-being (Garrick et al., 2010; M Kernan & Devine, 2010; Koch, 2018), related to the fulfilment of desires, to the

balance of pleasure and pain, to self-fulfilment and development. In 2007, well-being was incorporated into the Danish Day Care Act as one of the utmost aims of early childhood services in line with development and learning, after a study of implicit values and ideals among Danish ECEC professionals pointed to an ideal of the happy child as a dominant cognitive structure that guided professionals in their support of child well-being (Koch, 2012). Similarly, in the present research, it is noteworthy how pervasive was the emphasis which childminders placed on the constructs of fun and happiness in children's everyday lives throughout the narratives, and the role which childminders could play in generating invitations for children to have fun and be happy in their settings.

7.3.2.1 Play as fun

For childminders in the research, play was mainly about fun, and it was not seen or described as a means to another end, such as learning a concept or skill, but rather the emphasis was on how meaningful relationships grow in an atmosphere of play and fun. Childminders described how much they enjoy the children, actively playing and laughing with them. Several childminders mentioned how much they loved hearing the children's laughter in their homes as one of the most rewarding parts of childminding, especially with the younger children under three years of age.

I just love children. I just love having them around. And I think it's a really happy environment when we all come together. And when you really see it, on the days that everything goes really fluidly. And, you know, we're out, and we're playing, and they're all giggling on the floor. And I just love to fill the house with lots of happy sounds. –Rianne.

For another childminder, who provided mixed age care, with many children coming to her home after school or preschool, this translated into some simple all-encompassing house rules: “My only rules are like: ‘You're here to have fun. You're here to have fun, and you're here to play,’ you know? And they're like going, ‘Ok, Ok!’ {nodding vigorously}” –Marianne.

7.3.2.2 Well-being

Having fun was seen as the basis for the child’s happiness and well-being: an important goal for childminders. Well-being focuses on developing as a person, with two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being. Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included. They become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are and when they promote warm and supportive relationships with them (NCCA, 2009).

The significant role which childminders play in supporting and encouraging children and meeting the needs of children at different developmental stages was emphasised in the present study findings. For childminders caring for school age children, cultivating happiness can be more complicated, and can involve supporting the children to develop resilience in challenging situations at school or at home:

The ideal day it will be when the children are back from school maybe something happened. They're not happy and I'm able to sit down and talk to them and they express themselves and from there we work it together to make it better. So that even if it happens tomorrow, they know how to handle it. -Cynthia

Close attachment relationships, along with routine, are among the widely observed protective factors for individual resilience in children, reflecting adaptive systems shaped by cultural evolution (Masten, 2014). Where a child is experiencing family breakdown, a childminder can provide a consistent attachment relationship for the child, supporting resilience in the midst of the distress, as can be seen in the following story:

I had children that had a relationship breakdown, and the counsellor told the Mum, she said, 'Well, they're going to a childminder. I want to keep them at home.' 'No, no, don't you dare,' he said, 'Are they happy there? Do they get on well with her? Keep them there, she's the only constant in their life at the moment, part of a routine, don't want dare break that,' he said, 'whatever about anything else.' -Cathy

7.3.3 Interactions with parents

The case for partnership between parents and early educators is now well established and a partnership approach is widely agreed to ensure best outcomes for children. For childminders in the study, this involved more than merely valuing and involving parents and families in a 'proactive partnership approach' (CECDE, 2006), it involved ensuring, on a daily basis, that parents are happy with the childminding service as far as possible. According to childminders in this study, most parents were happy once their children were happy, as the following quotation illustrates: "I don't think that I will change anything because kids are happy, parents are happy, and I'm happy, so I don't think there is no point to change anything like..." – Katriina.

7.3.3.1 Support for working parents

Many participants discussed the process of developing a healthy dynamic in relationships with parents, communicating via daily diaries, emails and conversations at the door, as well as sending regular photographs of children at play with WhatsApp, for example. Other communication strategies included having a regular newsletter, both to share photos of events like a Halloween party, as well as to inform parents of upcoming plans. One childminder was using the Irish online service ChildDiary, which allowed parents to track children's routines as the childminder posted updates during the day, including photos. Other family members, such as grandparents also received the updates, at the parents' request.

Partnership with parents went beyond daily communications for many childminders. Some participants spoke of supporting mothers finding it difficult to leave their child to go to work, struggling with feelings of guilt with regard to being separated from their child (Sullivan, 2015), and fearful that their child might not settle in or suffer in their absence, as the following narrates:

...a very anxious Mum at the start, so she needed a lot of reassurance, tears in the hallway from her and from the child. So, and I think what has helped me, is that I was a working Mum at some stage, so I knew, I nearly cried with her at some stages, like, 'Ahh, this is so hard'. Because I could give examples how it was for me, and I could kind of tell her like, 'Listen, I know it's really hard and you tell me anything, you know, that you want me to do different or that I can do to help you.' And so, she's been very comfortable. And because I said, 'I will tell you if she doesn't have a good day.' And those things really helped. Because she said, 'I know you will be honest, and I don't have to think, 'Is she okay?'" So, I think again, just

giving them a lot of time, both in the morning and the evening especially, just helps to create the relationship and it really works. – Rianne.

Childminders become interwoven in the child's microsystem, and a key member of the families' ecological niche, supporting the child-rearing project of all the parents involved in the small childminding community (Tonyan, 2012, 2017). Some childminders having an occasional party so all the parents could get to know one another in addition to the parent/childminder relationship. In other cases, childminders reported assisting parents struggling with children's routines at home, out of hours, with sleep or toilet training, for example, in ways that go beyond what may be considered partnership with parents in most ECEC settings. Other participants indicated their commitment and dedication to their role as childminder when describing supporting families who have received a diagnosis for a child or helping care for a terminally ill child. As illustrated in the following quote, such actions go beyond personal commercial gain as a childcare service provider, and dedication becomes in itself an act of personal meaning:

I've been called up to people's houses, to get them to bed. Yeah, Oh, I've had to sit in a hallway, because I was always, 'Do the baby whispering, like, don't talk to him, just go in and fix him and come out.' 'Will you come up for the night with me?' {laughs} But you know, I wouldn't take money. But things like that, you know you really dedicated... -Paula.

As Garrity & Canavan (2017) describe, the growth of trust is slow, built through vulnerability met with loving support, and mutual open, honest communication in negotiating evolving, very personal relationships.

Childminders in the study built supportive relationships with the parents, who were sometimes in need of reassurance as they navigated parenthood, particularly for the first time. They described building open, honest relationships

with parents who need it, giving the parent/s plenty of time in the morning and evening until s/he is comfortable, providing emotional reassurance in a relationship of trust, assuring the child will be well cared for, with any issues openly discussed so as they can leave their child to go to work worry free as can be seen in the following narrative:

People forget that when a child is born, a Mum and Dad are born, you know, and there's that part of the journey as well. So, when they come first, it's not just the child you're minding, you're supporting a family, and it's a vulnerable time and it's a wonderful time and parents can be exhausted, tired, genuinely overwhelmed, you know. –Mary Lou.

This commitment to supporting parents went beyond just providing childcare for the children; childminders provided all types of emergency support out of hours too. One childminder was expecting a call from a mother who was due to go into labour at any time: she would be caring for the siblings while the parents were in hospital. Another had continued minding a baby over the summer months, when the mother was unexpectedly taken into hospital for emergency surgery, followed by a lengthy recuperation. The following narrative gives another example:

But like if there was a family funeral or something now, I would always offer, be it weekend or whatever, to take, you know, the children. You know, I would always offer, you know, in a crisis situation...You know, like, that's quite, Mum going into to labour, they've got the children here, you know. You will be part of their family expanding... – Paula.

However, there is a level of reciprocity in the childminding ecological niche; there is that working together to “negotiate the project of raising children” (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 119). For some childminders, the parents form part

of their support network, people they can depend on for help. For example, one childminder could complete a QQI Level 5 in ECEC thanks to her parents' cooperation in making arrangements for her to have a day off each week to complete her Work Experience component in a local preschool.

7.3.3.2 Conflict with parents

However, a key challenge which was identified across a number of the study narratives was the experience of relational conflict with parents, when either the parent, the childminder, or her family was not happy. These narratives highlighted the very personal nature of childminding, articulating most clearly the vulnerability of childminders as lone workers involved in emotional labour.

Lynch et al. (2009) acknowledge how our feelings are essential to the making of personal meaning and identity: "These culturally shaped emotions are fundamental to the efforts required in love and emotional labour..." (p. 159). However, these very feelings of love can also hinder effective conflict management and business practices. Because childminders typically work alone at home, and not in a centre-based setting, they can struggle with emotional ambiguity in charging money for labour that women usually supply without financial compensation (Nelson, 1990).

Thus, a significant source of conflict was the payment of fees for childminding service. For some participants the issue was one of timing, continually being paid late, while for others, it involved attempts to defraud the childminder of fees due. While most participants described resolving issues with open conversation and dialogue, many acknowledged how difficult it was to broach certain subjects, money in particular, even if a contract or working agreement had been put in place to ensure payment, as the following shows:

And even though he has a contract signed, again this year, for the fourth year, no holidays paid for, no sick days paid for, and I think in the whole year I've maybe been paid on a regular basis for about a month. 'He'll bring it', 'I'll drop it', that means you'll get ... I actually only use their money now for savings, because I know I could not depend on it for a bill or anything.

–Paula.

A further challenge identified by some childminders was the experience of feeling “taken for granted” by parents. An example of this challenge included a parent texting to cancel booking at the last minute, when food was already prepared, leaving the childminder not just unpaid, but out of pocket. Some childminders felt unable to confront the parent in this type of situation.

Paradoxically, the emotional bonds the childminder develops with the child and the parents can render such business conversations all the more challenging. One childminder described her sadness when a parent tried to bargain down the cost of childminding, despite dedicated service provided during the child’s illness. The disappointment experienced in response to situations is communicated in the following quote, with the sense that these negotiations reduced all that emotional labour to little more than financial considerations:

And then he went to a big school, and I turned around and I said to her, 'We will sort out something, because now he's in big school, you know, for his fee.' ...I did it by the hour, 'because he's kind of gone for it, so will we do, you know?'

And she went, 'Really? Is that? Can you not go any lower?'

And I really went, 'Is that what this is all coming to? It's down to money?'

And it wasn't. I said, 'But you're paying the same as all the other after schoolers,' I said.

'So that's the fee?'

'That's the fee.' I was going, 'Would you go to your doctor, ' Can you go any lower?" ... But she just asked me three times, 'Can you go any lower?'

That was a low day. I said, 'Actually, no, I can't. For me to work and to be proud of what I do. I give ye, like I do give a good service. I am very professional, I hope, and you know, that's it really.' – Marianne.

This dilemma is one of the primary reasons for the breakdown of a childminding relationship, when the only way to resolve the conflict is to let the family find another childcare provider. One illustration of such a dilemma involved a childminder minding twins one day a week for a longstanding client family, who had the opportunity to take on two children five days a week, something she was obliged to do out of financial necessity. When she regretfully informed the mother of the twins, the mother became so upset, she drove over to pick up all her equipment right away:

And she came over, and she loaded up the car and everything and she turned around she says, 'I loved you while I had you.' she says, and then she was bawling, and I started bawling crying, so it was, it was fierce emotional. I kind of realized that she was more upset because I was her only break in the whole week... -Cathy.

Some childminders felt they understood the source of some parent's difficulties, having worked previously as mothers, using a childminder or crèche themselves, they understood how conflicted parents can feel:

I think when the parents of this little baby of six months or seven months, and they're handing over to you, they're kind of, they don't want to hand it over to you. So, they feel really bad about paying you, and it's kind of nearly your fault that they're handing the baby over to you. – Therese.

Such parental guilt regarding separation from their child can render the childminding relationship unworkable unless the childminder and the parent learn to negotiate the ground rules of professional love and reach a mutual understanding. As Page (2018) describes it, a childminding practitioner must build: “a gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationship with the child and parent... which determines the level of acceptance and trust ...between the practitioner and the parent” (2018, p. 136).

7.3.3.3 The importance of boundaries

Some more experienced childminders describe putting clear boundaries in place as the key to keeping conflict to a minimum, treating childminding as a business with distinct hours of business from 8am to 6 pm. These childminders also put clear expectations in place as to the type of family they would work with, under what terms and conditions, and they stipulated that they were unafraid to end an unworkable arrangement.

For one childminder, nurturing emotional intelligence was essential to her mission as a childminder, and she had learned she needed to choose parents who appreciated the emotional intelligence undergirding her approach. This childminder narrative indicated that if parents treated her badly or were disrespectful in any way, the childminder would give immediate notice. After a few unhappy experiences, she now knew the kind of family she was willing to work with: “Yeah, I will be looking for a parent to come in and see the emotional intelligence behind what I do here, as well as my own work ethic, and what I'm coming from, and what I'm about.”—Mary Lou.

Study narratives indicated that given the small size and intimate nature of settings, childminders must learn to choose client families whose approach to

childcare is similar to their own. One significant source of conflict highlighted in the present study stemmed from what could be called a mismatch in parenting styles between childminder and client family. One childminder told the following story, which well illustrates how such a mismatch can lead to a breakdown in the childcare arrangement. She found she could not please a particular mother, with what she discovered were unrealistic expectations: for example, the baby was not allowed to cry under any circumstances, and certainly not in bed. Instead, the childminder was expected to pick him up immediately and carry him around; allowing the baby to fall asleep in a stroller before putting him to bed was also forbidden. In addition, the baby was not allowed in the car, not even occasionally in an age-appropriate car seat, and furthermore, the baby was supposed to come home spotless at the end of the day. After two months of dealing with the tensions generated through such restrictive conditions, with constant complaints, the childminder took action to end this unworkable arrangement:

I rang and I told her that I was giving them 30 days' notice. She didn't take it very well, she had to work, like we had a blazing row on the phone on Thursday night. She was very confrontational, but I had a witness. I had (my husband) here all the time while I was on the phone. And she sent her son to me the next day, after having a row with me on the phone. But she sent her son, and I don't think she fully told the husband what happened. Like I'd a witness, so I had a witness to back me up. The husband did seem to think that I had just woken up one morning and decided that N. wasn't to come anymore. He was very threatening, he came to my... came in to collect N. He was very rude, very intimidating. I had my own children here and he was very confrontational at the door... So, I

had given them 30 days' notice, but they didn't finish it out, thank God. – Nicky.

The challenge of balancing the needs of several stakeholders within the childminding service was also highlighted by a number of participants. Previous research has identified how personal relationships with children's parents may interfere with business aspects of childcare, resulting in difficult attitudes, late pick-ups, and/or late or inadequate payments (Morrissey & Banghart, 2007). Given that the childminder's home becomes a place of business, and the necessity of balancing their own children's needs with those of the children they care for, work life and personal life can become enmeshed. As an addition to Page's (2018) principles for professional love, findings in this study suggest for childminders, choosing compatible families and learning to put appropriate boundaries in place can help to build and protect childminding relationships.

7.3.4 Enduring relationships

A significant finding in the present study was the unique nature of the relationships which childminders developed with families and the children in their care in Ireland; one unique characteristic was the potential for enduring and lasting relationships to evolve. Bowlby (1988, p.32) distinguishes between displays of "episodic ... attachment behaviours" and "enduring attachments ... to particular others" involving love and closeness between two people achieved through reliable, consistent, warm exchanges over time.

Many participants described long term relationships with children and family, often using the language of deep attachment and bonding with the children in their care. Narratives in the present study reinforce the notion that for most childminders these emotional bonds were not experienced as temporary

or passing attachments, but rather as lasting and enduring. Older childminders described caring for a child for up to nine years, or working with the same family over 12 years, or having a minded child return as a teenager to become the family babysitter. These enduring relationships are well illustrated in the following quotation:

And you know what? I have kids coming back to me, like S. comes back, she's 22. She comes back to me....and now she's 22, and she comes to visit. So that's lovely. I've had kids, who have had their kids, you know, and they'll go, 'Oh!', they'll ring me up and they said, 'Any chance you're free? That's lovely, that's rewarding. –Marianne.

It is worth noting that for many of the participants in the present study, childminding was consistently conceptualised as being more than just “a job” (Garrity & McGrath, 2011, p. 78). A number of activities described by childminders reinforced the notion that the nature of the relationship that develops between childminders and children was unique and clearly distinct from childcare in group based settings. These activities included taking children out, or caring for them outside working hours, in order to allow more contact with these children because they and their own children loved having the minded children around. Moreover, childminders were aware of the needs of specific families they worked with, as, for example, families particularly needing extra support due to illness.

For a few childminders, this depth of attachment could cause separation difficulties when a child moved on from the setting. One childminder went so far as to describe her grief when a child left her care:

But anytime a child leaves me here, I'm bawling where they're going away, it's desperate, it's awful, desperate all together... You get fierce attached,

you do, you get fierce attached, because they're like your own, do you know like, when they're around. – Cathy

The findings identified in narratives in the present study indicate that relationships between childminders, children in their care and their families, go beyond the type of close relationships described by most childminders in California. It is also worth noting that the depth and enduring nature of these relationships may also go beyond the type of relationship developed in most forms of ECEC provision in Ireland. The nature and dynamics of childminding relationships in this Iris study were described in terms more closely resembling a family bond.

7.3.5 Extended Family Belonging

In Aistear (NCCA, 2009) the curriculum framework in ECEC, the theme of Identity and Belonging focuses on children developing a positive sense of who they are, feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community. Relationships with family members, other adults and children, play a key role in building their identities, creating an important foundation for their learning and development (NCCA, 2009). This theme of belonging was evident in the Close Relationship Model as it emerged in the present study findings: the closeness and lasting relationships which developed between childminders, and the children and families they worked with, were described in terms of extended family, often explicitly. In several cases, childminders' mothers or mothers-in-law had also been childminders or were acting as volunteer assistants to the childminder, suggesting an intergenerational aspect to the extended family concept.

It was evident how much the minded children were embraced as they developed close relationships with the childminder and her family. Many of the respondents used the language of love and affection, making explicit declarations such as the following: “I think well, you see, you grow to, you grow to love the children, and they become part of nearly your extended family.” – Chloe. Other sub-themes related to the extended childcare family included prioritising the wellbeing of their own family as a rationale for starting a childminding service; the development of close sibling-like relationships between minded children and the children of childminder; the whole family involvement in childminding; the responsibility of influencing and shaping children’s social and emotional development in line with parents’ views and values.

For Bronfenbrenner, relationships were the main mode through which children develop (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b); in Tonyan’s childminding research, one ecocultural model of childcare, identified as *Home*, emphasized flexibility, intimacy, and relationships within a substitute home in which the childminder perceived her role as that of a substitute mother (Tonyan, 2015; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Many childminders in the current research simply described their minded children as becoming part of their family and conceptualised the care of the children in terms of an extended childcare family.

7.3.5.1 The priority of family

Apart from two participants, most of the childminders in this research started childminding because they wanted to be able to care for their own children at home, while making a contribution to the family income; a motivation commonly identified in previous research (Brooker, 2016; Kontos et al., 1995; Mooney, Moss, et al., 2001; Morrissey & Banghart, 2007; Nelson, 1990; Tonyan &

Nuttall, 2014). There was also variation in the underlying family reasons for this choice: for some it was the lack of or dissatisfaction with the childcare options available; for others, it was a temporary career change until their children became self-sufficient; for still others, the choice was partly due to the lack of local opportunities available in their original profession. For some, childminding was a conscious career choice, for others, childminding became a vocational career as they discovered high levels of job satisfaction.

Given this motivation, childminders seek to organise their childcare work such that it supports and does not detract from meeting the needs of their own families. Findings in the present study indicated that childminders in the Irish context prioritise healthy relationships between the members of their own family - husbands/partners, children, grandparents - and the minded children and their families. However, if the childminding service is causing issues for their own family, the childminder will consider any necessary adaptations, letting a child go, reducing the number of working days, or even closing the service.

The wellbeing of childminders' own children and family was a primary consideration among study participants: several participants mentioned changes and adaptations they had made in order to ensure that their own children were happy with the service. One childminder described how her school age children had a "love-hate relationship with the childminding". Because she was caring mainly for babies and toddlers, she felt her children were not getting enough attention, and noticed that it was affecting the behaviour of her oldest child. As a result, she reduced the number of babies she was caring for, and reduced her working days to four, to allow her children to have schoolmates home after school one day a week.

Older children and adults in the family also needed to be accommodated in the childcare family, according to the study participants. The challenge of ensuring that study for exams, and more broadly educational achievement of children in the family home were not negatively affected through childminding routine, was identified by one participant. A further finding was the need to balance the needs of the children in childminding context with the needs of other family members (as, for example, spouses and partners having limited access to the home during childminding hours) were also highlighted; family members could also find it particularly stressful if the childminder is struggling with interpersonal issues to do with children or parents.

Failure to successfully navigate such issues was the primary motivation for considering the closure of the service. Ensuring the wellbeing of the childminder's own family was a non-negotiable element to sustaining a childminding service long term, as this was a primary motivation in starting a childminding service for most participants.

While most childminders drew a firm line between themselves and the children's families, with no participant referring to themselves as a substitute mother, yet some described their role in terms of "rearing the children." Some participants mentioned the sense of responsibility they felt having so much time with the minded children, who were spending more time with them than with their own parents, and therefore just how important they were to the child's life, shaping the children's values, all the while hoping the children will "turn out alright". The ambivalence of such a role, dealing with the significant responsibility, while, at the same time, feeling a sense of pride, was expressed in the following extract:

And like I feel I'm rearing a lot of these children. And they're picking up traits from me and my children and some of them are with me, like eight hours a day, more than they spend with their own parents. So, with that, they're obviously going to become so much part of our family, and they pick a lot of expressions from me, and the parents will say it to me, because it's actually very funny, they could come out and say something I'd say, you know, so that would be the main... It's just very rewarding knowing I'm putting something into their... their future. –Sonia.

7.3.5.2 Mixed age groups and siblings together

Childminders in this research often mentioned the benefits of a mixed age group and sibling-like relationships and interactions, they also highlighted the benefits for siblings of being together in the childminding setting.

This is down in the wildlife park... And two of them are siblings, and that's G., and that's my little one. And I picked it, because ...there were siblings in it, that they're kept together, and they have another little one here as well. That they're all, they're not in a different room, or a different part, they're together. –Marianne.

Mixed age play offers opportunities for learning and development which may not be present in play among those close in age, permitting younger children to learn more from older playmates than they could from playing with only their peers (Gray, 2011). The potential for relationships to develop between minded children and the children of the childminder's family was also emphasised in the present study narratives. An interesting feature of these relationships is the fact that in many cases these children will be of mixed ages, which provided opportunities for an exchange of learning and interaction between these children.

For example, Sonia's 11 year old daughter loved playing with younger children, doing art, organising dress up, photo shoots, and role play. She became so attached to one three year old child, that one Sunday they arranged to go together to the cinema by train, not for payment as a minded child, but as a part of their family, as their little sister. Others mentioned how childminding created a big family for their lone child, or for their isolated children, who were far from extended family who lived abroad: "My children don't have really like, yeah, a sibling, they're just two. So, they feel when they have these children, 'I have a little sister. I have a little brother.'" – Cynthia.

Findings also revealed that many childminders in this sample were included in the family celebrations and rituals of the children they cared for with many having attended children's birthday parties, communions and confirmations, even the parents' weddings, and one had all her minded children and families attend her wedding. Such involvement in family rituals and celebrations has the potential to reinforce the sense of identity and belonging for the children in their care, through these respectful relationships with their families within their broader communities.

7.3.5.3 Whole family involvement

With the family home being used for business purposes, all childminders in the present study openly acknowledged the importance of support for the childminding service from their own family, whether that was their husband/partner or children. Levels of involvement by family members in the service differed: it could mean tolerating the usage of the family home, without complaining about the mess, or it could mean being actively involved in supporting the service in various ways. Some family members were actively

involved in cooking for the family, helping with the cleaning or doing the family laundry, alleviating the burden of the domestic workload for the childminder. The particular contribution which other family members made to the childminding service were illustrated through reference to, for example, taking on the development and maintenance of the property for the purposes of childminding. Other examples included helping with picking children up from school, or standing in for the childminder when needed, acting as a back-up person in cases of emergency, with parents' knowledge and consent. Adult children, the childminders' parents and other relatives helped with school runs, food purchase and preparation, or playing with some of the children while the childminder attended to one particular child, if needed. Some husbands/partners became part of the children's lives as they helped out by playing with the children, particularly if they worked from home, as some did:

My husband is here probably three days a week. ... But he finishes work early. So, he's finished work by four o'clock. So, if he's, if I'm going out with the lads, and the girls he might come with me, and we'll bring the dog and yeah, he'll do a kick around with the lads. - Jill

While childminders in the study all acknowledged that family acceptance and support was vital in running a childcare service; at the same time, this could cause difficulties too, if the family members were not at ease with the service. For some, the enmeshment of work life and family could be the most challenging part of being a childminder, as the quotation summarises: "...the whole dynamic of having a business in your own house with your own family. And I think just balancing the dynamic of that." –Jill. The interface between private life and public service was thus emphasised as a particular challenge in the present study and can be considered to be at the heart of the dilemma which

childminding can represent for public policy too: the direct involvement of the whole family makes it even more difficult to regulate than centre-based provision, as it concerns more than just the professionalism of the childminder, it concerns a whole family.

7.4 SCHOOL READINESS

In contrast to the findings by the Tonyan et al. study in California (CCCRP, 2014; Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014), the cultural model School Readiness was not found to be a prevalent cultural model among childminders in this study. In this cultural model, a primary goal is seeing changes in what children know and can do in preparation for school. The childminder prioritises supporting the development of literacy & numeracy, using rhymes, stories, counting, crafts as well as placing substantial emphasis on supporting and promoting positive social & emotional development, such as taking turns, waiting in line, in order to prepare the children for learning in a classroom context. Elements of the daily routine might include having daily 'circle time' or 'learning time;' embedding learning into other activities during the day, such as opportunities for exploration and child-led play. Such a cultural model also emphasises a play-based learning pedagogy, where play is seen as a means to an end, such as learning a particular skill or concept.

Very few childminders in the present study referred to having circle time or a learning time, sending scrapbooks of work or crafts home, or holding meetings with parents to review their child's progress. However, it must be pointed out that only one participant ran a preschool as part of the Free Preschool scheme, and the play-based approach she described is in keeping with the very small number of children (6) in the session.

So, they love all that stuff as well, they love the art, the painting, and the colouring and all that kind of stuff we do. So, we'd do number recognition and all these kinds of stuff as well, and letters you know. It's all singing, dancing, fun it is. It is all fun and loads of chat. They all love telling their bit like... -CATHY

By contrast, in California, childminders can hold a large-scale licence for up to 14 children, and run a pre-kindergarten service, where School Readiness is an openly expressed goal. Such a service resembles solo sessional providers in Ireland, who take up to 11 children for preschool sessions, often in a specially adapted room in the family home. An Irish version of the School Readiness model would be more likely in evidence there, recent research suggests, (Ring et al., 2016a), even if such a model is not espoused in Aistear and Síolta (NCCA, 2015).

7.5 REAL LIFE LEARNING

A key finding to emerge in the present study was the prevalence of a cultural model which can best be described as Real Life Learning. More specifically, many childminders in the study described a relationship-driven learning environment (Freeman, 2011b; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012), reminiscent of Hayes' concept of nurturing pedagogy (Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Hayes, 2007; Hayes, 2019), which emphasises both "the educative nature of care" (2007, p. 4) and "an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction" (2019, p. 6) between adult and child. The Real Life Learning model described an informal, child-led, emergent curriculum, comparable to praxis in early years' settings in Reggio Emilia (Biermeier, 2015; Edwards et al., 1998; Osberg & Biesta, 2008; Rinaldi, 2006).

Following the EFICh protocol, the name given to this model, Real Life Learning has been drawn from the childminder's own words and descriptions of

their approach to working with children. In this model, the primary goal is relationship-driven learning, with child-led play mediated through real life experiences. Significant sub-themes included the rich home-from-home learning environment, the mixed age groupings, with siblings together; the ease of access to the outdoors, and the flexibility and frequency of outings in the community.

7.5.1 Learning from everyday experiences

Childminders placed considerable emphasis on the value of ordinary experiences for the children in their care. An insightful illustration of this concept of Real Life Learning was provided by one participant, through the photographs she had taken to portray aspects of her service, which clearly demonstrated an emphasis on supporting learning and development through facilitating real life experiences for the young children in her care. For example, one photograph showed a three year old child chopping vegetables with a real knife, while helping to prepare a stew for the evening meal, and the expression “real life experience” was highlighted the conversation. In the following example, the photograph the same participant used to illustrate this was one depicting children playing together on a tyre swing:

But I just think children need to have real life experiences instead of something that's orchestrated [and so safe that it's...] yeah that they can't climb, they can't experience what it's like to climb up a tyre and sit on the swing or up a tree, or up on the climbing frame things in the play centres. They can't experience that in crèches. –Nicky.

A significant feature of this approach is being flexible, even while maintaining a secure daily routine; such predictable yet flexible routines are also highlighted in Aistear (2009), as vital to cater for individual needs, interests,

preferences, and capabilities of toddlers and young children. 'It all depends...'
was a frequently recurring phrase in the present study, reflecting the need for
adaptability and being able to accommodate the needs of particular children on
particular days. While the skeleton of the day's routine was clear with naps,
meals and school runs scheduled by childminders, the details were usually filled
in flexibly by participants on the day, depending on the weather, the individual
children's needs or moods, and the childminder's energy levels. Other everyday
experiences included outings, both regular outings to the school, the library, the
playground, and occasional special outings to the forest or the petting farm.

It is worth noting that almost all of the study participants described their
childminding approach in such a way as to contrast it with the more artificial
environment of centre-based provision, highlighting the everyday experiences the
children enjoyed in the freedom of a home, rather than being "isolated in a room,
like in a lot of childcare services, more so the crèches and that kind of institution"
-Sonia. For participants who had previously worked in group care, the crèche
was associated with "too much paperwork, too much administration, not enough
playing with the children" -Shona, which formed part of the motivation for
another participant in opening a childminding service: "Because my priority is to
let these children to be children, not to sit down and do paperwork." -Cynthia.

7.5.2 Relationship-driven learning

A key feature of this model identified throughout the study narratives, is
the way in which childminders can focus on getting to know each child in their
small group very well, which, in turn, forms the basis of child initiated activities,
and the building of close relationships among the children too:

I want to have a small home-from-home, that the kids can all be treated individually for they're different. They're so different. So individual. You have to realize that. They all don't eat at the same time, they all don't, you know, want to do their homework at the same time. They all don't feel great all the time. Some of them need to go to bed. You need, some of them might wet themselves because... I don't know. It's just different and I think I can tell you inside outside about my kids. –Marianne.

In addition to facilitating the learning interactions between children of different ages, a striking finding in the present study was how well the childminders knew each individual child, and how they described the variety of ways they would work with different children. Almost all the childminders mentioned specific children by name, describing these children using terms of affection, similar to how parents might talk about their own children. Knowledge and familiarity with the individual children in their care also generated a sense of pride in what the children learn with them – whether it is learning to be friends, growing their own vegetables, or learning the resilience to keep trying with difficult spellings or to handle a difficult situation at home or school, learning which was emphasised in the study findings.

Childminders in the present study clearly understood their work as ‘child-led’ in very concrete ways, in keeping with their flexible approach to each child, which was not constrained by a structured schedule, as the following quotation illustrates:

So, it's lovely, I have a one-on-one with him...so in the morning we deal with N., we have changing, feeding, nap time, play, all of the above. But that's all led by him, you know what I mean? I don't sit down with one and a half year old and go, 'Right now for the next hour, we'll be doing this...'

I'd be on the floor playing dinkies, or at the bay, whatever he decides, you know? – Marianne.

Other examples of relationship-driven learning involved picking up books at the recycling centre for the toddlers' 'book club', which was perceived as an effective way of keeping up with the changing interests of children.

The particular interests, knowledge and characteristics of the childminders also played a significant role in influencing and shaping elements of their practice. An illustration of how child interests and childminder knowledge and skills interacted was provided by one childminder, with a scientific background, who, since her group of toddlers was interested in all the flowers and plants around the house, decided to teach them about capillary action – something they still remembered almost a year later as they went around watering the plants inside and outside.

These findings draw attention to the fact that, as described by the study participants, the unique nature of each setting reflected the interrelation between the particular interests, abilities and characteristics of the minded children and the interests, knowledge and skills of the childminder. Bronfenbrenner posits that the child's personal characteristics and dispositions interact with the personal characteristics and dispositions of the other children and adults in the setting in a process which generates new knowledge and transforms the environment (Hayes et al., 2017). In ecocultural theory (Tonyan, 2015), this web of interactions shapes the daily routine of activities, the visible result of a process of adaptation of people in relationships, resources, emotions and motives, values and beliefs shaping the cultural organization of a particular niche.

Attention to and respect for children's knowledge and learning was also reflected in the participant narratives, supported by the visual representations in

the photographs. One photograph showed a very young toddler busy playing with a doll and pushchair, and the following is the detailed description the childminder gave of this photo, chosen to illustrate the best of her practice:

I'd say in the last couple months, she has really taken interest in the baby dolls. And I'm just fascinated with how she actually interacts with them, and how she knows how to treat the baby, because she's the youngest in the family, and as far as I know, there aren't any immediate babies in the family. ...One day she brought the baby up and she's giving me the baby. And then she toddled off, and then she came back with a blanket, and she was suggesting to me, she wanted me to wrap the baby up, so I wrapped the baby up. And then I gave her the baby. And then she cradled it, and then gave it a kiss on the head, and then she took it off to put it down to sleep. ... It's just fascinating. – Chloe.

The particular interest in the child reflected in this narrative and the love she had for this child were evident in this animated description of this interaction. Although none of the childminders were conducting formal observations, except for the childminder running the Free Preschool scheme, many offered such detailed descriptions of the personalities and activities of the children in their care, prompted by the photographs they had chosen to share. The majority were photographs of the children, albeit amended to remove any identifying features and to ensure anonymity.

One boy with dyspraxia had a special cushion for his chair and was

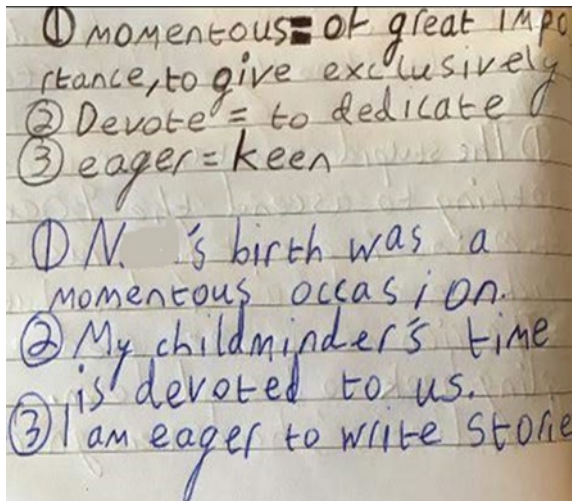


Figure 7-2 A special piece of homework

learning to persevere with his schoolwork. He needed to take frequent runs in the garden to help him cope with his homework. His childminder was obviously proud of the resilient approach to failure he was learning in her setting. She chose a photograph of his English language home work to share as an example of her best

practice. Of particular note in this child's schoolwork was how he mentioned the birth of the youngest child present at the childminder's – N. is about 18 months at this point, and how he applied the word 'devoted' to describing the childminder's use of time with the children. Sharing this photograph illustrated the depth of connection between the childminder and this child. This exemplifies the relationship-driven approach to learning which many childminders demonstrated.

7.5.3 Mixed age learning

One significant aspect of the Real Life Learning model identified in the present study findings is how children are grouped: of the 17 study participants, 13 worked with a mixed age group of children, varying from babies and toddlers to school-goers of 11-12 years of age, many of whom were also siblings. In mixed age play, the more sophisticated behaviour of older children was perceived as providing role models for younger children, who also typically receive more emotional support from older children than from those near their own age (Gray,

2011). As Katz (1990) also emphasised, mixed-age settings encourage empathy, cooperation and other social behaviours. Drawing heavily on the theory of Vygotsky and the concept of scaffolding, Rogoff (1990) describes guided participation in cultural activity, noting how such environments “provide many benefits, including the opportunity to practice teaching and nurturance with younger children and the opportunity to imitate and practice role relations with older children” (p. 184). Pertinent illustrations of these benefits for the children’s relationships and learning were frequently mentioned, as the following narrative exemplifies:

They’re holding hands coming up the hill, you know the way, they're all just, just having fun and G. is here as well, but he's only here part-time.... He is 11 now, and L. was three at the time, and I just thought, ‘broad range of ages, mixing together, it really is a family.’ It's not their... as in it's not their immediate family, but it is a family and that's what they have. – Marianne.

The possibilities for mixed age groups facilitating bi-directional learning were also emphasised in the study narratives. Specifically, older children were perceived to learn by teaching and were provided with opportunities for practising nurturance and leadership; at the same time, participants reported that these older children were often inspired by the imagination and creativity of their younger playmates.

The value of visual aids as a supplementary research method in capturing the essential features and characteristics within the childminder’s practice was confirmed through the study data. A clear illustration of how younger children look up to and “idolise” older children was made possible through the use of some of photos, which childminders used to depict elements of their practice:

But the two babies are not interested in any way, shape or form in what's going on, on the TV because they have A and B (two school age children) to look at. And they literally stood there watching them for about ten minutes, because they just idolise being around the bigger ones, they just idolise the big ones.... So, I just think it's nice that babies - also all the children I mind are only children currently - so it's nice for them to be around older ones to have this bond with the older ones. –Shona.

Younger children were represented in some cases as copying things that older children do and wanting nothing more than to be involved in their play, such as playing shop, as observed on a visit, or following the older children's lead in a doctor and nurses role play as one participant recounted. These findings about mixed age settings are echoed by Fagan (2009): "Play, particularly dramatic, is more complex for young children." (p. 21).

The value of mixed age learning in promoting and supporting the development of socio-emotional skills in both younger and older children was also emphasised in some of the study findings. In particular, the development of empathy and a sense of responsibility with reference to the younger children was identified, for example, by taking care of them when out on a walk or in the playground, as illustrated in the following quote: "They're holding hands at the playground, they're looking after each other, they're pushing the other on the swing, they... you know, they just play and it works really well...[laughs]" – Rianne.

Much of this practice is reminiscent of that in Reggio Emilia preschools, where small mixed-age groups are used to provide more family-like environments than homogeneous groups can, to harness these dynamics in the service of a child-led emergent curriculum (Katz, 1998). An example of such practice was

provided in one of the study narratives where, in one home, the school age children were playing shop with two younger toddlers, where each was assigned the role of shop assistant or customer, with ‘goods’ exchanging hands and plenty of ‘money’ being counted. When they tired of that, the older ones brought the younger children outside to play on the scooters and bikes, helping them negotiate the skills of turn taking, while they practiced nurturance at the same time, epitomising the dynamics of bidirectional learning. According to Gray (2011), such bi-directionality seems to occur especially in cases where the difference in status between tutor and learner is not too great, so that the latter feels comfortable questioning and challenging the former. Thus, when older children explain concepts, such as turn-taking, to younger ones in mixed age play, they must turn their previously implicit, unstated knowledge into words that younger children can understand (and question), so that both “tutor” and “learner” are helping each other to learn.

7.5.4 Enriched home learning environments

The home learning context has been studied extensively, especially in the area of developmental psychology, and it has been linked to the child’s cognitive and social development (Bradley, Caldwell, & Corwyn, 2003). Much attention has been given to the relationship between the home learning environment (HLE) and the development of language and vocabulary, or early cognitive attainment in preschool. In the Effective Provision of Preschool Education project, HLE was conceptualised as the frequency of educationally oriented activities undertaken by parents and their young children within the home (Sammons et al., 2015). In the present study, the HLE in childminders’ family homes is linked to both daily

routine activities and the presence of enriching materials within the home, affording opportunities for educationally oriented activities.

In the study, nine of the childminders lived in a town or city, while eight resided in small villages or more isolated rural areas. Most participants owned their home, with only two childminders in rental homes. All the homes looked like regular family homes from the outside; only one childminder had signage advertising her preschool and childminding service. Almost all of the childminders had availed of the Childminder Development Grant⁵, as was evident in the richness of materials and equipment at their disposal. The following is a summary sketch of typical childminding homes, based on the field notes from initial visits (See Appendix 6).

7.5.4.1 Urban homes

In this study, a typical childminding home found in a town or city, is a semi-detached home, in a suburban estate, often in a cul-de-sac, or on a quiet road. There was only one service in an apartment, and one in a detached home in the urban sample group. Usually the house is well maintained, with at least two rooms used for childminding: a kitchen and dining area, where children eat their meals and do crafts or homework, and either a playroom or a living room,

⁵ The Childminders Development Grant is small capital grant (€1,000) designed to assist childminders to enhance safety/quality in the service through the purchase of small capital items, equipment, toys or minor adaptation costs. It may also give financial assistance to new or prospective Childminders with initial set up costs. It may be requested every two years, through the local Childcare Committee.

typically well equipped with a rich variety of toys, books and craft supplies, all of which were in daily use. In addition, most participants described using at least one bedroom where babies may nap in a standard cot, though some may use a foldup one. There is usually a changing station in the bathroom along with potties, toilet steps, and toddler toilet seats. Most of the homes had low level shelving that allows the children easy access to books and toys, which the childminders described as being used fluidly throughout the day, although some had regular quiet time with a child, reading a story. There are usually boxes indoors or a storage area in a shed outdoors to allow for rotation of toys. Often, the children have access to a computer on a desk. Most childminders mentioned using rhymes and music online with the children on a daily basis.

Outside, these homes have a back and front garden, and there is a variety of push-pull toys, scooters, and cycles, trampolines, swings and jungle gyms to be seen, as well as football or basketball nets, sand pits and paddling pools. There is often a shed to store some of this equipment during the winter. Usually this garden space is easily accessed from inside, and the children go in and out of the garden freely during the summer. Most did not have a pet, such as a cat or dog.

Most of the urban homes were within walking distance of local schools and preschools, and had a variety of buggies, and buggy boards, which they used to bring the younger children outside. Only two urban childminders had to do long school runs in the car to pick children up during the day.

7.5.4.2 Rural homes

Most of the rural childminding homes were larger, detached houses, sometime two storey, often near other similar properties. They tended to be more

spacious, with a playroom, a living room, the kitchen and a dining room, all used for childminding, with toys and books to be found in each room usually, and sometimes a computer, which the children could use, as would the childminder, to access songs and rhymes or craft ideas. Usually there was a wide variety of play equipment easily accessible to the children, with craft materials stored for supervised usage. There was also a bedroom used for sleeping, with cots available for naps, depending on the age group of the children in the service.

The outside spaces also tended to be larger, with all types of swings and slides, ride-on toys, bikes, trampolines, and sports equipment; sometimes there was a gardening area for the children too, where they planted flowers or vegetables depending on the season. Pets, such as cats or dogs, were more in evidence in the rural childminding homes. Often the children had access to nearby fields, and would visit the farm animals, such as lambs or horses too.

Only two rural childminders lived within walking distance of the local schools or preschools. Most needed to use their cars to go and pick up children once or twice a day, and some were on the road for up to two hours per day. Some had relatives helping with school runs or standing in for them while they were on collection duty, so that the younger children were not spending excessive amounts of time in the car. For most of the childminders, this support was indispensable to running their service. For the children, these helpers became another aunty, grandma or grandad, who were also involved in reading stories, or bringing in a baby animal for the children to see and sharing local knowledge with them.

7.5.5 Out in the community

A particular feature and finding in the present study, in contrast to the study in California (Tonyan, 2015), was the emphasis which participants placed on the role, not just of the outdoors, but of outings in their daily routines with the children in their care. Classical pedagogical theories, such as Froebel and Montessori, emphasize connection with nature, learning by doing, play, movement and significant sensorial experiences, in the belief that children learn through nature, and should have a possibility to observe, explore and experience the natural setting. Concurrently, concerns about the impact of a sedentary lifestyle on children, and rising obesity levels (World Health Organization, 2016), have influenced the rise of forest schools throughout Europe, even as regulation is perceived as a hindrance to risky, outdoor play (Waller et al., 2017).

In this context, all the childminders in the study frequently mentioned how often they went out, whether outdoors in the garden or yard, or out on routine daily drop offs and collections at schools and preschools, or simply out for a walk to a local playground, park or green, the shops or a library. This is a distinctive pattern in the present study in comparison to California, where children usually stayed in the childminding home and property all day.

For most childminders, time outside and on outings was perceived as essential for the children's physical and mental well-being, in line with the emphasis in Aistear and Siolta on environments which provide a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative, and enriching experiences for all children (NCCA, 2015), as the following excerpt confirms:

Every day, every day I would try to get out, either for a walk or just to the garden. We try never to stay in the whole day because they just end up going crackers {laughs}. So, I'd say it's easier, and like that, I have the

double buggy so I can take them for walks if we're not going away somewhere, then I take them for a walk, we go down to the shops or the play park, that kind of thing and we come back... Or we out to the forest cos it's only like five minutes down the road, so we go the play park or for a walk. –Shona.

As Gibson (1977) observes, the natural environment provides rich affordances for the small child: the vegetation provides shelters and trees for climbing, fields are for running and tumbling. The childminders in the present study reported having standing agreements with parents to allow for both regular and spontaneous outings, unhindered by regulatory risk assessments, as some noted. For example, one childminder presented a photo of tropical fish to make this point: having picked the children up from school one day, on a whim, she asked them where they would like to go. As a result, they spent an afternoon at the local aquarium, where one child became fascinated by the fish. The photo was taken so her parents would know about this and together they could continue exploring the topic. For her, this was one of the enjoyable aspects of childminding: “I think that’s what I like about childminding, it’s so flexible and you’re out and knee deep in snow, you still go out and play that kind of thing. We’re not restricted.” –Shona.

7.5.5.1 In the garden

Natural environments represent dynamic and rough playscapes that challenge motor activity in children: the topography, such as slopes and rocks, afford natural obstacles that children have to cope with. Children’s play in an unstructured environment, preferably a natural one, gives the children a genuine understanding of reality (Gibson, 1977). Gibson’s theory of affordances in

ecological perceptual psychology (1977) highlights that the affordance of an object is what a child begins by noticing: the meaning of a thing is observed before the surface and form or colour are perceived or categorised as such. Fjørtoft (2001) has explored the relationship between environmental affordances and children's play and development, suggesting that environmental complexity and diversity in nature are highly associated with increased play opportunities and activities, which impact on children's motor skills and fitness.

In this research, childminders highlighted the freedom the children have to play in the garden at any time as allowing for such increased affordances. Once they could walk, usually the children had easy access to run in and out to the garden often during the day with a high level of indoor-outdoor connectedness; the children were not restricted to a scheduled outdoor play time, as they might be in large centres. The children can experience child-led interactions with nature in the relatively safe environment of the garden:

This summer has been fantastic, we've just, I've just opened the door. All of that routine has gone out the window for the summer, and it's out into the garden, and it's picnics in the garden and pools and slides and water slides and all kinds of things out there. –Nicky

There was conscious interaction with the changing seasons, and the different affordances each season offered. Most childminders particularly loved summer because of the increased freedom and flexibility, and the importance of sunshine for children's vitamin D levels. However, they all spoke of making the outdoors accessible in winter too, allowing children to develop awareness of the seasons in a natural daily rhythm of interactions with the outdoors, as the following excerpt shows:

This is the back garden then where they love playing out when it's dry, or even in the winter if it's dry and cold. Now we have other stuff in the shed, shells and stuff like that, chairs, tables, all kinds of stuff, ah sure, listen. But most of all we love to take a turn at the hose, spray the place, we love to go over and try and dig up those plants with a golf stick {laughs} –
Mary Lou

Messy, unstructured outdoor play was presented as a healthy thing for children's development. Often the children kept wellingtons and outdoor play gear at the childminders so that they could go out at any time, in any weather, and to allow for splashing in puddles and playing in the muck. Many of the childminders explicitly asked parents to send the children in their oldest clothes, to allow for the muck and dirt involved in playing outside:

If the weather is good, we're outside, we have the wellies and everything with them, they leave them here. So, we'd have the outside, we'd be down round looking at the leaves and the apple trees, and all the rest of them. –
Cathy

These sensorial experiences ground the children in the everyday experience of nature and allow them to develop a concrete understanding of risk in real settings. Several childminders mentioned how the children loved to explore the flora and fauna in the garden, and many children were involved in planting and keeping the garden too, through the seasons.

This in the summer was veg, and now it's the winter garden and in there are daffodils and winter pansies. And that'll be it then until we start off again in the springtime. –Áine

Such concrete learning experiences in the natural environment are vital precursors to the development of more abstract learning skills in Piagetian

theory, allowing the child to gain understanding of the world through repeated proximal processes in the context of the natural world.

7.5.5.2 Routine outings

The importance of facilitating outings for children was also associated with creating and developing opportunities for children to make connections beyond the home setting of the childminder and with the broader community in which these settings were based. Almost all the childminders in the study followed a daily routine of drop offs and pickups from local schools and preschools, sometimes to pick up the siblings of their younger minded children. This is of consequence when considering transition to preschool or school: these children felt very secure and welcome in these settings when it was their turn to go to ‘big school’; they had already seen or met the ‘teachers’ as all staff working in centres were called (Ang et al., 2016). They feel so at home in school that some younger children were even keen to go to collections early in order to play with friends:

They do that, they get changed, and we walk down again for 20 to three.

They have a snack on the way, fruit or crackers, walk down. They want to get there early because they meet their friends in the yard. Social life is very important to four and five year olds. – Marianne

These children also get to visit the post office, the library, and local shops where they meet the shopkeeper, the librarian and many people who live in their community and become known as children living in that place. Many study participants used their photographs to tell this story of difference from centre-based care emphasising this ordinary, routine contact in the community, where the children are doing everything with the childminder, as illustrated by the following description of a photograph taken during a school run:

...it kind of symbolizes that the children really come with me for everything. You know, if I do shopping, they come along, for the school run they come along, if we have to go to the post office. they come along. So, they are comfortable in the environment really, because they are there every day so Yeah, they're not all the time in one room, or one outside play area, we go everywhere with them. –Rianne

Childminders also take the children to visit the local parks and playgrounds as well as local Parent & Toddler groups, which allows them some initial experience of interacting with larger groups of children, in an emotionally secure way, with their childminders close at hand. “Then here we have a picture of somebody down at toddler group in a little pink tike car. That's their Wednesday morning fun. They love it.” – Mary.

All these community outings allow the children to participate in the life of the adult community around them. At that early age, they may know more people in the community than their working and commuting parents. This informal community involvement gives concrete expression to the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging in an organic, unforced manner.

7.5.5.3 Special outings

As young citizens, children at childminders can choose from an array of play environments in their locality (NCCA, 2009). These child-led, somewhat unstructured interactions with the natural environment form a significant element of this ecocultural model, the freedom of which seems to constitute a key component of childminders' conceptualisation of childminding. Most childminders in this study went with the children occasionally on special outings to neighbourhood playgrounds, parks or forests, where the children would have

favourite haunts and playscapes. In an urban area, this could be the local green or playground. In a more rural area, these walks will take place in local fields, where climbing and jumping on hay bales appeared to be a popular pastime:

And it's like they have their wellies here, and up the road there is a gateway, and there's a lane just goes up through the fields, and we just walk up through there, you know? [Yeah] And what used to be up there, now they weren't there this year, was bales of hay. Actually, I should other pictures of those, but I've taken them on the bales of hay, pictures of them, and you know, it's just, it's grand like. – Therese

During the summer, there were more special outings to adventure playgrounds or the beach. Many childminders with school age children particularly loved this time, when there were no collections and homework, and there was time available for outings to different places, in a relaxed, unhurried manner.

They don't have school, and I have a lot of children whose parents are teachers, so I have a lot less kids in the summertime. So, we can either go to the beach, or they love C. fort, absolutely love it. We can go to play centres, different playgrounds. Yeah, I love, I love the summers. – Mary

Because childminders often had fewer children during the holidays, it meant they could go further afield by car, allowing for a variety of different outdoor experiences. Almost all had photographs of children by a lake or at the seaside. Some seemed to have spent most of the summer outdoors. This affords the children the greater flexibility of an unstructured natural environment, where their imagination can flow freely, or where they could start building a collection of shells or stones, for example.

So, we went out to B. for a trip, a day trip, so we're on the beach there.

They're collecting stones, beach combing. They had a great day that day.

Just to be able to get out and do something different. – Jill

This freedom of choice afforded children by childminders seems to constitute a key component of childminders' conceptualisation of childminding in Ireland. It was strikingly different to the descriptions of Californian childminders, although it could well be replicated in the United Kingdom, France and other parts of Europe, where childminding numbers are sufficiently low to allow for such outings.

Nonetheless, the outdoors was central to participating childminders' daily routine, for the benefit of children's development and physical and mental health. Furthermore, as Bioecological theory emphasises, the child's learning dispositions are both shaped by and shape the interactions that children have with others – people, places and things, as those dispositions are attuned to the affordances and constraints of the learning environment (Hayes et al., 2017).

7.5.6 Home-from-home

Almost all the childminders were keen to emphasise the ordinary, everyday experiences children had at a childminders, in a relaxed setting, where children feel at home, as opposed to the more institutional, centre-based service. The environment, routines and people within a home provide opportunities for the spontaneous learning that should be a feature of all early years contexts (Hayes et al., 2017). Many of them used the somewhat contested phrase '*home-from-home*' to capture the essence of this childminding philosophy: "Again this was, this was them, it just captures the freedom of how the kids feel at home. It's like a home-from-home environment." -Sonia

Historically, the term 'home away from home' has been associated with negative reports in the UK in the late seventies, and associated with a 'home as haven' ideology held responsible for promoting motherhood as the only qualification needed for childminding (Vandenbroeck & Bauters, 2017). Nonetheless, the well qualified childminders in the current research used the term frequently to emphasise the unique attraction of childminding for parents, to contrast its points of difference with centre-based ECEC, and as a term of advocacy, consciously chosen to highlight the need for different treatment for childminding within a competent ECEC system. From an ecocultural perspective, the childminding home is regarded as the locus of an ecological niche of families working together in raising children with shared values and cultural models. Furthermore, in terms of the Bio-Ecological Model, the phrase could be seen to express an example of overlapping microsystems: the home setting and the childminding setting.

In this context, supporting children to take responsibility for themselves was seen as part of a maturing process for children of certain ages. For example, the privilege of walking back to childminder's home from school without adult supervision was seen as a mark of respect by the children, an acknowledgment of their increasing competence: the younger children looked forward to the day when they would earn this freedom. This approach to increasing responsibility was viewed as a value which parents prized, and a reason for choosing childminding care for their children. Commenting on age-appropriate, unsupervised play on the local green with other children in the neighbourhood, within agreed parameters, one participant opined:

I think they (parents) just feel that they have this home-from-home environment, that if they were at home in their own house that they would

do the same things, you know. And they need to have risky play and to climb a tree down there and, you know, not have an adult looking at them the whole time. - Mary

There was an emphasis on being part of the little local community of children, echoing again the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging. One shared photograph showed the children cooking on a mini-barbeque, joined by other children from the homes around the cul de sac:

That's out, in the front of the garden. You can see that, and you can see how open space there is, and it's not enclosed by fencing or hedges. Kids get a sense of freedom when they're there, and also, they love that they're not confined you know. ...And they're sitting around, you can see they're colouring, and I just captured their... the neighbours' kids would all join in, everybody's here. They all actually play with everybody. - Shona

The development of everyday, practical and useful skills was also highlighted as particular to childminding settings. Cooking and baking were frequently mentioned activities; some were baking scones or cookies regularly, others were helping make their dinner for the day, peeling and chopping carrots or other vegetables. Again, these activities were linked to developing practical competencies in everyday living.

The neighbour came this morning with cooking apples, so that's a crumble or a tart they'll make maybe today or tomorrow. Yeah, they can all bake, they all know how to bake. They're very good, you know, if you're by them and put them through it. - Áine

For the children, further home-from-home routines included going to afterschool activities, such as swimming, football or dancing, helping to hang out the laundry, packing the dishwasher or helping with the grocery shopping at the

local supermarket – all things they would do, if they were at home with their own parents. In this way, the children were learning not only practical skills, but also how to share the burden of care and the mutually supportive roles in home life. For example, one childminder shared a photo at the local supermarket, where she does her weekly shop on a Thursday, when she only has a baby and a couple of school age children.

And what's fabulous is in the summertime, I have one of the girls who comes and my own daughter, they actually take my shopping list, split it between themselves, they're fantastic at checking the best before date and everything already on all the stuff {laughs} They tell me, 'You stand there, Mum!' I just stand at the top of the aisles and they go up and down and get all the stuff. It's good fun. - Mary

The stories told in the photographs revealed childminders' very conscious emphasis on real life learning for children, and their understanding of its importance in children's socio-emotional growth and development. For participants, the freedom to experience these everyday realities was one of the major benefits of childminding for children, as well as an important part of the attraction of childminding for parents: "But it's the freedom, and just the way they can play. They're not isolated in a room, like in a lot of childcare services, more so the crèches and that kind of institution." – Sonia

All the childminders in the study expressed such views to varying degrees: they wanted to emphasise the freedom and flexibility of Real Life Learning in a family home, in a nurturing relationship with the childminder, who understands the responsibility of her role in helping raise the children in partnership with the parents. They were eager to describe relationship-driven learning in mixed age groups, with siblings together, in a cultivated, rich home learning environment,

with ample opportunities for outdoor play as the children wished. They highlighted the freedom of outings in the community, and the flexible spontaneity of everyday experiences the children could enjoy - cooking, gardening, organising their own play - without the restrictions imposed by a large group. They see the value of being able to trust the children to walk home from school or play on the green as a maturing experience of appropriate risk to develop the child's sense of responsibility. This is an approach which childminders in this study clearly believe works very well for children's development and learning, and for which they articulately advocated in their interviews.

7.6 CULTURAL MODELS AND CHILDMINDING IN IRELAND

Drawing from cultural approaches to human development, all daily life is understood as embedded in a local setting (Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004), variously called a microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), a developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986), or an ecocultural niche (Tonyan 2015, 2017). The ecocultural models of Close Relationships and Real Life Learning identified in the present research are in certain ways more proximate to the ecocultural definition of childminding offered by Tonyan and Nuttall (2014) than the models described in California.

From an ecocultural perspective, childminding can be understood as a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family, and children's families) negotiate the project in raising children. (p.119)

Firstly, childminding services in this study were family-sized, with no more than six children in group, where family childcare providers in California can cater for up to 14 children with a large licence. Since nearly all the

childminders in the study were parents themselves, many with children under 12 years of age, they were co-operating with other families in family-oriented ways, providing activities with the minded child which the client parent would want to do themselves, if they were at home with the child.

Secondly, these childminding services constitute an ecological niche, where parents choose a childminder, who espouses similar beliefs, core values and cultural models as they do, and together, they co-operate in this project of raising their children. In practical terms, a set of parents provide the financial means to a childminding parent, which allows her to remain in the home to raise her own child(ren), while she provides the minded children with the kind of upbringing, which these parents would ideally wish for them, if they were at home with their children.

From an ecocultural perspective, childcare will be of “higher quality when daily routine activities are aligned with the cultural models of the adults in a child’s ecocultural niche(s)” (Tonyan, 2017, p. 18). Since childminders in the study work with very small groups, they are able to practice the family-based approach which many Irish families seek (DCYA, 2018a). In this ecocultural understanding of quality childcare, there is an opportunity to practice what is valued locally; this appears to be the type of quality childcare which these parents desire for these specific children in a home-from-home environment in their own community.

8 CHILDMINDER AGENCY, CONNECTION AND ADVOCACY

This chapter will present further findings from the second phase of data collection with the EFICh protocol, using the qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, which explores patterns by close, iterative listening, reading, and observing of the sample data, guided by project specific questions (Weisner, 2014). Key findings in the present study relating to childminding in the Irish context have been identified through triangulation with multiple data sets, including indexed data from the EFI interviews and the associated field notes, analysis of the case study survey, in addition to the holistic ratings. In the current research, as in the study carried out in California, key project-specific topics included Cultural Models, as highlighted in chapter 7, which presented the cultural models identified in the present study and specifically relevant to the Irish cultural context: Close Relationships and Real Life Learning.

In this chapter, findings on two further project specific topics are presented: childminder agency in directing their own service, and childminder connection and advocacy in relation to external bodies. The first of these topics explored is the construct of childminder agency, which refers to an analysis of childminders' level of autonomy and sense of agency in directing and improving their service in light of the sustainability of their service, in terms of complexity of roles, routines and funding streams. The second of these topics explored is childminder connection and advocacy which captures childminders' external engagement with support services, and involvement in and views on the larger field of childminding, locally, regionally or nationally. These findings relate specifically to the holistic ratings regarding Quality Improvement, Advocacy &

Complexity (See Appendix 8), Sustainability of Daily Routines (See Appendix 9) and Service Needs and Use (See Appendix 11).

8.1 CHILDMINDER AGENCY

In the EFICh protocol, the working definition of agency is simply the extent to which the childminder feels in charge, which is, in turn, linked to the sustainability of their childminding service (CCCRP, 2014). According to ecocultural theory, in order to thrive, childminders, parents and children make adaptations in their niche in ways that are meaningful to them in terms of their beliefs and values; congruent with the needs and characteristics of family members and service users; and sustainable for relatively long periods of time, given the constraints and opportunities of all the families involved (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Gallimore et al., 1989a; Tonyan, 2012). Consequently, the sustainability rating considers: firstly, fit with resources, (economic situation, support); secondly, the balance of conflicts, (how congruently inevitable conflicting needs are balanced); thirdly, stability and predictability (daily routine); and fourthly, personal meaning, (feelings about daily routines, feelings about economic situation). The level of sustainability is determined by the effectiveness of the childminder's agency in creating and sustaining a viable childminding niche. Hence, these findings on agency are presented according to the most significant sub-themes which emerged in relation to sustainability: fit with resources, balance of conflicting needs, stability and predictability of daily routine, and personal meaning and significance.

The levels of childminders' agency were determined through analysis of childminders' feelings about their lives and service, and researcher ratings based on the data collected. In the course of the EFICh interview, wishes for change are

interrogated in relation to every topic, from the daily routine to economic subsistence. Analysis of childminders' expressed wishes for change in the interviews was particularly revealing with regards to levels of agency: high levels of agency were identified where planned change was anticipated and going to be implemented, and lower levels of agency were associated with a childminder feeling unable to progress, or to bring about a desired change. In addition, the case study survey (See Appendix 4) poses a series of questions relating to agency, regarding the childminder's sense of capability to make positive change, and levels of job satisfaction, for example. Supplementing these were two forms of researcher generated data, the first from the post interview summary, and the second from the holistic rating of the sustainability of the service (See Appendix 9). Furthermore, in the post interview summary, completed as soon as possible after the interview (See Appendix 7), the interviewer describes areas where the childminder expressed high or low levels of agency.

8.1.1 Sustainability of the childminding service

From an ecocultural perspective, childminders' level of agency is directly linked to the sustainability of their service: a high level of sustainability bespeaks a high level of agency, where meaningful, congruent, sustainable adaptations have been implemented by the childminder within the childminding niche, in line with the constraints and opportunities of all the families involved (Bernheimer et al., 1990; Gallimore et al., 1989; Tonyan, 2015; Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). Consequently, these findings are presented according to the most significant sub-themes which emerged in relation to sustainability: fit with resources, balance of conflicting needs, stability and predictability of daily routine, and personal meaning and significance.

8.1.1.1 Fit with resources

In services that are high in sustainability, the childminder has enough resources to run the service as she would like, either through income or support from others. Where there is a good fit with resources, given the constraints and opportunities in that ecocultural niche, the childminder will usually express a high level of agency, as in the quotation below, which reveals how the childminder is improving her materials in line with her own ethos and values:

And I think being able to choose, like being to choose to go out and about and doing your own thing, being able to choose the toys and activities you provide is something I like, because I like, I like those nice things... I like them to have things that are a bit different to what they'd have at home as well. ...That's my current thing – to change over a lot of the plastic things that they would have themselves at home into more wooden toys, more natural toys. That's what I'm working at fully.
– Shona

8.1.1.2 Childminder income

All childminders interviewed in this study were self-employed; only three were the primary provider in their household, and one of those worked at two other jobs in addition to childminding. For the majority (12/17), their childminding income made a small contribution to total household income, with only two childminders contributing approximately half of the household income.

Table 8-1 Income Profile

Childminder Income⁶	N	%
€15,000	10	66.7
€15,001- €25,000	5	33.3
Contribution to Household Income		
Very little	10	58.8
Less than half	2	11.8
About half	1	5.9
More than half	1	5.9
Almost all	3	17.6

For some participants, particularly those childminding for two years or less, income from childminding posed considerable concerns. For these new childminders, there were considerable costs associated with opening a service: the cost of extra insurance for the home and the car, the cost of extra equipment or adaptations in the home, and the extra costs of registration with Tusla, such as fire certificates.

I just want to have... I just wish I did...you know just I would like, you know, enough money that I could say there's this much amount of money and that's my wages. I'd like that to be consistent. At the moment, it's just ... it's not that way because I still need so much stuff so... –Ciara.

For some of these new childminders, the income was still falling considerably short of what is needed, such that one had had to work at two extra jobs to generate sufficient household income. However, all of these childminders had ideas or plans for increasing their income – taking on extra children, raising fees, moving to a larger premise – in order to achieve economic viability for the service.

⁶ Based on responses from 15 participants.

About 20 percent (more money) would do it, that would leave you fairly reasonable you know, that you'd have money at the end of the week. At the minute, paying tax and the car insurance on the car, you're like, so it's, you know, it's a struggle. You go from week to week to week trying to spare a few quid, to build it up to pay off the credit cards. And I just think, you know... or just even in one or two more children would leave it a lot easier. –Joanna

However, the instability of childminding income was highlighted as something that could not be guaranteed by established childminders also. Sometimes this was due to seasonal fluctuations in the families' childminding needs, as the following examples illustrates:

First of all, like, I've no full timers [right]. It all changes. So, like for Christmas and Easters and summers, I mightn't have anybody. It can like go down, so then you have no money coming in. I have one set of parents who are good to pay, but I might have them two days one month, and no days the following month. – Mary.

Another factor contributing to this instability of income identified in the present study was irregular payment of fees by parents, despite efforts to establish a consistent rhythm of payments through the use of contracts, as the following commentary reveals:

And then you have the parents who tell you, they value you so much, you're indispensable to them, they just cannot do without you. And even though he has a contract signed, again this year, for the fourth year, no holidays paid for, no sick days paid for, and I think in the whole year I've maybe been paid on a regular basis for about a month. – Paula.

Even the most established childminders expressed awareness of how dependent their income was on the changing demands of parents and families, and resultant concerns about the future in terms of enrolment:

If it [income] stayed as it was just now, and I could guarantee it would this way, then I'd be happy. But I think that's one of things with childminding, it's never guaranteed. And you never know when someone's going to come and say 'Something's changed. We don't need a childminder any more' [Yeah] And you never know when that's going to happen. – Shona.

Nonetheless, there was a sense of relative satisfaction with the financial situation in general, due to other non-monetary rewards of childminding. While many wished for greater, more stable financial rewards, most of the participants expressed relative satisfaction with their economic situation within the constraints and opportunities present in their family, with high levels of agency in that regard. The following comment illustrates that satisfaction in an oft-mentioned approach which considers savings on childcare, or other costs associated with working outside the home, alongside the opportunity to stay home with her own children, as part of an overall socio-economic package.

I think I'm being fairly paid at the moment [right]. And the parents I work for tend not to have any issues. I'm very fortunate, they will pay me every Friday, never had to ask for money. I do have a friend, a childminding friend, who has to ask, constantly ask and it's very uncomfortable for her to ask. I'm very fortunate they will always pay me, a lot of respect and a huge amount appreciation at the end of the week, and that's nice... so financially, I actually feel, I'm at home, I don't have outgoing costs regards my own kids, I don't have to pay childcare costs myself, personally I'm happy enough. -Sonia

Concurrently, some participants expressed concern about the impact of new childcare funding schemes on childminding more generally amid fears about the sustainability of their service, unstable enrolment, and relatively low earnings. Of those with lower levels of agency in this regard, two participants were considering moving into another role in the field of childcare or social care, and one was simply planning for retirement. These childminders were not optimistic about increasing their income from childminding in the future: “Economic situation - I don't see it improving as a childminder.” - Paula

8.1.1.3 Spousal income support

The majority of childminders in this study were earning less than half of household income; while most participants were contributing very little. Thus, while these childminders were enjoying high levels of agency in terms of the operation of their service, such feelings of agency were to some extent due to the support of others. In effect, this means that most of these childminding services were subsidised by husbands or partners, as the childminders readily acknowledged. The following excerpt illustrates a typical situation among study participants:

I'd say we're very lucky in that we have our nice house, that we have our nice car, that we do pay a lot of money for both, but we can afford to pay lots of money for just now ... Because hubby's got a very good job, [right] not because I'm childminding! {laughs} But then again, the childminding just now, touch wood, is going well, and I have regular customers, one of which I've had for nearly 18 months now and it's very stable. –Shona

For these childminding families, this was experienced as an acceptable exchange because it aligned with family needs and values regarding children: it

allowed the childminder to stay home with the children while they were young, while also bringing in some extra income. Some childminders mentioned paying for extras, such as a family holiday, as one of the economic benefits of their childminding service. Nonetheless, not all husbands or partners felt that the childminder was being sufficiently rewarded financially for amount of work involved, as the following quotation shows:

Really, I think, I think my husband thinks I should be charging a little bit more {laughs} But I think again, it's because he sees how much work goes into it. That it doesn't stop when the kids leave. – Rianne.

8.1.1.4 The Enriched Home Environment and the Childminder Development Grant

The parental home learning environment has been identified as key to a child's development and learning (Melhuish, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2001). In the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) in the UK, a higher Home Learning Environment (HLE) score was associated with higher verbal and non-verbal ability and better outcomes for prosocial behaviour and behavioural self-regulation measures. It is important to note that virtually all the childminders in this study were parents caring for their own children also; thus, these homes could be viewed from the perspective of the HLE index.

Therefore, the home environment was an important area of resource for childminders in the study. In the initial survey in phase of the present study, the home environment was ranked the third most important reason for choosing a childminder, by both childminder and parent participants. Consistent with principles of ecocultural theory, the desire to adapt aspects of the home environment in order to align it more appropriately to the needs of a childminding service, was reflected in the present study findings. It was a common subject of

wished for change: almost all participants had plans to improve or upgrade their homes to better facilitate the childminding service in one way or another.

Examples of such adaptations included the addition of equipment: a double buggy, or outdoor play equipment, or making changes to how rooms were being used, as the following example illustrates:

So, there's days when I kinda wish I had the playroom back, but then I have it as my craft room {laughs} so it's a fine balance, which one you need more [yeah]. I think the craft room for my sanity, and the playroom would just be kinda handy now and again. - Shona

Further examples of the adaptations which participants considered making to the home environment of childminding settings included plans to build a new home, with plenty of space for a playroom, bathroom and bedroom downstairs, that could be dedicated to the childminding service, separated from the family space. A further example of such adaptation was a plan to demolish a wall in order to create a larger playroom, and move the family room upstairs:

Only what I want to do is to knock down one big wall and make one huge playroom. [Right]. That's my plan once we get our own bedroom upstairs. Because I can work there are six rooms... [okay so you're about to extend upstairs for your own family?] For my own, and downstairs I will have then only one spare room, my sitting room, and the rest of it will be for the kids. -Katriina

Almost all of the childminders interviewed had availed of an existing economic support, the Childminder Development Grant, regarding it as a real contribution to maintaining and developing an enriched home environment. This €1,000 grant is available biannually to childminders notified to local Childcare

Committees, or where it is not available in certain area, a childminder can gain access to it through Childminding Ireland.

For most participants, the experience of obtaining this grant was perceived as very positive in terms of supporting personal agency for childminders. Specifically, the grant facilitated desired improvements to be carried out on a regular basis; double buggies, swing sets, storage, equipment needed for children with additional needs had all been purchased on receipt of the grant, often in collaboration with the children and families, as the following enthusiastic response shows:

I initially tell the parents, 'We have 1000 euros, what would ye like?' And I asked them, this year nobody came back to me actually. Oh, I got books for one of the little boys, I've bought buggies, I've bought high chairs, I've bought sand pits, I've bought trampolines. It is like Christmas here, and I say to the kids, 'Right, it's grant time!' and they all get excited. It's brilliant.
– Marianne.

One long established, registered childminder participant had received a Capital Grant back in 2007, which had allowed her to add on an extension, a much needed playroom, to her home, in which she runs a free preschool service currently.

I had the whole advisory thing with them as well, when I was building this extension. There was the National Development Grant ... So, there was a lady ... who filled up all the forms with me. And then I had to go away and get quotations and plans, come up with the plans, and the whole lot. So they were, anything that I did then, any plans or anything had to be sent into Tusla... - Cathy

However, while experienced childminders understood the procedures and took advantage of the grant to benefit the children in their service, for new childminders, the process was not always so simple. Initial eligibility requirements in local Childcare Committees could constitute a barrier to applying at all:

But in order to be eligible for the grants, you also needed to have visited a workshop or things like that. And I just don't get to do that. Because everything is often far away. And by the time my kids are in bed, or even the parents have left with their child, I can't make it somewhere. –Rianne.

The need to fund €1,000 worth of payments prior to reimbursement also proved to be a significant hindrance for less well established study participants:

We still have to fund the payments ourselves and then apply for the refund afterwards [yeah] so that's really [was it unexpected?] It was unexpected, well I knew before I got it, I found out in the summer that was the case.

But yeah it was unexpected, because I thought the idea, to be honest of, you buying things you couldn't afford to get [otherwise]. Yeah, and being the summer as well, you have back to school and all those things, I didn't really have much to spare. So, I had to restrict what I could apply for then.

I did ideally want to get some things outdoors... - Chloe

Furthermore, not all items required for registration with Tusla could be purchased with the grant, as one participant explained:

I spent a lot of money this year, because I'm going to be registering with Tusla. [Yes.] And to get things like fire extinguishers and stuff, and they're not cheap. [No. Did you use the grant for some of those things?] No, because you can't. – Ciara

In spite of a number of minor complaints about bureaucratic delays expressed in the present study, all childminders in this study expressed their appreciation for the grant and expressed the view that it contributed to enhancing the material environment of their services, facilitating the creation a rich home learning environment in ways which aligned with the ecocultural values of childminders and parents.

8.1.2 Balance of Conflicting Needs

In childminding, there are competing interests and needs of different stakeholders, including children's families, children of different ages, and the childminder's own family. Competing needs might include children of different ages within the service, or between the needs of childminder's own children and the demands of child care, for example. Children's parents, own family, agencies, regulators are all stakeholders with potentially competing interests. In a highly sustainable service, the childminder's needs are met, (there are no signs that childminder's needs are unmet or compromised) as are the needs of all other stakeholders involved in the service. (See Appendix 9 for template.) In balancing the conflicting needs, the majority of childminding families in this study enjoyed and benefitted from the childminding service within their homes; however, a small number were experiencing it as stressful and potentially disruptive.

Key to a sustainable childminding services is managing to balance relationships congruently so that the needs of all are met; mutually supportive family relationships are vital in this regard. Among the childminders interviewed, almost all spoke of their family's support for and involvement with the childminding service, be it their husband/partners, their children –both older and younger, and extended family members such as parents or aunts.

With the very youngest children, aged three years and under, childminders in the study enjoyed interacting with a small group of children, minded children and their own, who formed a little play group of friends each day. An example of these connections in the present study was provided by one participant who described one child, who formed such a close bond with the other children, that s/he occasionally asked to go home with one of the minded children at the end of the day. When asked about managing conflict between the minded children and her own very young children, one childminder gave the following illustration of the interactions among her group aged 18 months to four years:

No, our children are great. It works really well and I'm so proud of myself! We use an egg timer, except we look at the clock. It has a minute hand on it, and we watch the minute hand. And they've become so consumed about this now that they forget about the toy or whatever they're arguing over. They've got so good at it that they'll do it themselves and they mediate themselves now! -Joanna.

The potential for negative impacts on childminders' children was also mentioned with one participant describing how her own two young children tended to become clingy at the end of the day, after the minded children have gone home around five o'clock, and how she attends to their emotional needs at that point, as seen in this description: "My two usually dive on top of me and want loads of attention and cuddles and a bit of time with me, [yeah] and they can throw their little tantrums and whinge and cry."- Joanna.

Older children were characterised as playing an assisting role in the operation of the childminding service. Childminders with older, school age children, described how supportive and helpful they could be in the group dynamic, or in playing with the younger ones, as the following excerpt from a

school age childminder shows: “I mean, my own son, my youngest, my young son, he is, he's key to the guys getting on with each other, he's got a good relationship with a lot of them.” – Jill.

However, the needs of the childminder’s family were found to take precedence in the present study in order to sustain such supportive attitudes. Adaptations and adjustments were made as illustrated by one childminder, who described an adjustment she felt had to make to ensure that her own children were not missing out on time with school friends because of the service:

I was actually considering reducing the numbers of babies I was minding [yeah, right] and the days, just to make it a little bit less cos I kind of felt that they [own children] were a bit put out by it, I won't say suffering... the eldest one's behaviour wasn't as good as...things like that. [yeah] ...So I've one less child. So, it means now every Friday afternoon I've got no children so they know on Friday afternoon, we can go and do things with them.

We're trying to do more play dates with the kids from school and things. – Shona.

This decision to keep Friday afternoon free of minded children demonstrates the high level of agency necessary in balancing the competing needs of minded families with her own children’s needs.

Adult children were also described as supportive and two participants had children, who were studying for degrees in Early Childhood Education and Care. However, all could become actively involved when needed, as would their husbands or partners if available, whether in maintaining the home or standing in for the childminder briefly, or doing a school run, as the following typical quotation illustrates: “If my husband is around, he'll do any work that I needed

doing outside or inside. And my daughter, she'd be here to dig me out if it was busy and my husband is not here.”- Áine.

However, one childminder acknowledged that the childminding service was causing friction and had become an issue for her children:

They hate... the older three hate it. Yeah. ‘Get shot of it.’ That would be one of the major reasons I'd finish up. It's not the oldest girl just, I suppose she's grown up with it for the last 13 years, and just I'd say never having your house to yourself. – Paula.

8.1.2.1 The Needs of Spouses/Partners

An essential support for most childminders identified in the present study was that provided by spouses or partners. An essential part of this support was partners’ acceptance of the constraints and sometimes disruptive features involved in running a childminding service. For many childminders it went further, as they depended on the active support and involvement of their husbands or partners, if they were also working from home during the day. Most described that support in practical terms: playing football with the children or putting up a needed fence; or standing in for brief moment, if the childminder needed to do something urgently.

However, having a childcare business in the home could also create tension for other adults in the home, and for husbands, in particular. When asked to describe concerns about the impact of the childminding service, one childminder reflected:

Number one the usage of the home, the family home, it is it is a lot for them to tolerate. You know, I have an adult son as well as my younger son who's 11, and also my husband works from home three days a week, as I

said before. And yeah, they basically, they can't use downstairs, well the two older adults can't really use downstairs, that's kind out of bounds unless they're just coming in to get a quick cuppa, or whatever. And the noise level obviously, the wear and tear on the whole house. – Jill

These constraints are inherent in home-based childcare, where childminders feel that the needs of the minded children take precedence during service opening hours, leading to some unspoken house rules which can govern an adult male's interactions with minded children, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Like he'll say, 'Who's upstairs?' to me. I'm very... A family I worked for ages, years ago, they were always like, you know, if they're bringing one of the kids home, bring somebody with them, never do it on their own. And I just stick to that. I'm just protecting everybody involved, and like I'll say to [him], you know, 'Don't go up, so and so is upstairs, they're getting changed.' And he'll go, 'Grand,' and stay downstairs. And then he'll say, 'Can you just find out? I really need to go upstairs.' It's just unspoken rules, do you know what I mean? Not that ... I'm just protecting everybody involved and actually probably protecting [my husband] more than, as much as anything. – Marianne.

In a small number of cases, the disruption experienced by partners was a strong influence in considering the closure of a childminding service: in one example, the childminder's partner was simply no longer comfortable with the service in the home, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

You know, I thought he didn't [have an issue with the service] until a couple weeks, couple months ago, he said 'You know, when are you going

to finish it up?' Not so much from the point of view of the lads missing out or my time, it's just, it's in your house. – Paula

In this case, the childminder was pro-actively pursuing career progression outside the home by doing a degree part-time at night, displaying a high level of personal agency, in planning and managing the transition to service closure within a certain number of years.

8.1.2.2 Childminders' Need for Adult Support

Key challenges identified in the study included having to cope with a number of obligations and tasks – one of these being long commutes for some participants in order to collect their children from school. No participants had a paid assistant, although two participants had a cleaner coming into to do a deep clean once a week, a wish for change which many participants expressed. However, extended family members offered invaluable support where they were able to be involved, with five out of the 17 study participants describing how members of their extended family or neighbours were regularly involved in supporting the childminding service; these included their own parents or parents-in-law, and in some cases, other extended family members. The most common form of support was with school runs: a relative or a neighbour might pick the children up to take them to school, or come to the house while the childminder went for collections from school: “I'm very fortunate, my aunt would come up then, and she will take my older kids to school and the older child that I have that goes to primary school. –Paula

Parents and parents-in-law were also viewed as offering invaluable support in the present study with examples such as grocery shopping, or emergency

substitute cover, which further allowed for the development of intergenerational relationships, as the following excerpt illustrates:

And if on the rare occasion she [Grandma] can't do it, her husband Jimmy, my father-in-law, he'll do it. So that's why I will make sure that they're asleep, you know, or they're in bed. And if they wake up, no big deal. They're so used to him, call him Granddad, and she [Grandma] adores them, you know, I have no fear in that respect. – Joanna.

Support from extended family members with everyday domestic routines was also emphasised by a number of participants; for example, the purchase or cooking of food for the service, by family members who live close by, as illustrated in the following example:

She [aunt] would make dinners, like today now they had shepherd's pie so, I'll have bought the ingredients the day before, she'll make it at her own house, and bring it up. And on a Friday then, she might do something here like they might have chicken nuggets, or waffles, or fish fingers, or something like that. - Paula

Another childminder's parents helped with shopping for food for the service: "I'll get bread and milk, and other bits and pieces during the week. But the mother goes into town every day, they go in for their walk, so she'll pick up whatever I need." - Cathy

This practical help was perceived as significantly relieving the childminder of some of the burden of care, such that she could focus on those activities she deemed more valuable, spending time building relationships with the children: "Anyway, I suppose you see, like, it's I know I might just be doing Marla and things like that, but I do spend like, a considerable amount of time doing things with them. I do play with them." – Paula.

8.1.2.3 Conflicting needs among children

With regard to mixed age groups, most childminders in the study managed the interactions well, with clear rules and boundaries helping to promote more sophisticated play with younger children, and responsibility among the older children. However, several mentioned the issue of conflicting needs among the children in the care of the childminder. One experienced childminder found it difficult to get the balance right, partly, she felt, because the older children had not grown up with her, as she explained:

She's meeting me at ten [years of age]. But now she has settled a bit. But like I said, she's inclined to tell a lot of lies. So, you have to watch everything and double check everything. But that preteen phase, hormones are starting and all that kind of stuff. But my son said to me, 'Mum, it was your decision to go to preschool and after schoolers and get rid of the babies!' Because we're always mad about the babies, babies are brilliant, and that age group. Yes, but I find them a bit harder. -Cathy

Childminders work to create a happy atmosphere for all the children, with good interaction between all the children of different ages, but this can involve monitoring the development of relationships, particularly between the childminder's own children and minded children, when they are older, as the following story also shows:

I'm kind of in two ways about the after school, for that one girl, because I suppose it's personalities in the house. Herself and my daughter, sometimes a bit of a... I wouldn't say clash, but there's a lot of whinging, there's a lot of friction, a bit of tension. And I suppose we kind of have to

be careful what effect that has in the family... So, I'm thinking, yeah, we kind of have to review it, and maybe Christmas time to see if it's really worth it, in that sense. – Rianne

For another childminder, such interpersonal conflicts among children were opportunities for her daughter to learn about relationships:

It's interesting, there's some children she's mad about. She loves the babies. I have one boy who she is absolutely allergic to. Doesn't get on with him at all. And he needles her, and I just tell her, 'You're never going to get on with everybody in life.' It's actually good for her. {laughs} - Mary

In summary, childminders in the study managed children's conflicting needs to achieve a harmonious relational environment as far as possible, but would consider letting a disruptive child go, if the family was being badly affected.

8.1.3 Contracts, terms and conditions

This research revealed aspects of the unique nature of the childminder and parent relationship, which is very personal and similar to close family relationships, but also involves a transactional, business dimension to the relationship. Childminders emphasised how essential it was to have clear boundaries in order to ensure fair treatment for all concerned.

One way in which childminders in this study attempted to achieve a harmonious personal and business relationship was through the use of a contract or a working agreement, setting out the details of services agreed, resultant fees due, and other conditions, such as arrangements for holidays or sick leave, and permissions to do with outings, photographs, and administration of medicines. Usually, these childminders also used written policies and procedures to outline their practice in regard to behaviour, food, and intimate

care, and also to give details of emergency back-up arrangements. Most participants appeared to feel that contracts, policies and procedures facilitated the conduct of their service as a business, as the following exemplifies: “Yeah, I felt like I actually am a business rather than just childminding, ad hoc.” - Chloe

Some childminders felt this type of paperwork had been very useful in setting boundaries and gaining desirable conditions of work, such as paid leave, and in commanding respect for childminding as a profession, as the following description of changes in the sector shows:

I suppose in the beginning when I started childminding, you were very much taken for granted. It was 'Ah sure, you're only babysitting. Here you are.' And I used to have, I had parents who'd come say, 'You know what now, I'm off. I've holidays for the rest of the week. So, I won't bother sending him to you, which meant I didn't get paid [Right.] It was very hit and miss. And I felt very undervalued, and taken for granted a lot of the time, because I can't talk about money, it was a big issue then you see? [Right.] I wouldn't stand up for myself. So now things have, I found down through the years things have gotten better. And the parents, both parents are working. They both understand that it's a profession as well. They understand the whole thing about holidays and all that kind of stuff. [Ok] And we have kind of a good agreement. I have contracts now, which I never had before. – Cathy

For these reasons, one childminder in the study group, who had not been using a contract, was seriously considering implementing a contract with new parents: “I don't do contracts personally, but it's changing. My attitude to them is changing, and it's only changing because of the money issue. And that's the only issue.” – Marianne

8.1.3.1 Difficulties with contracts

However, such informal contracts were of little value unless they were reinforced with punitive action when necessary. Some participants acknowledged how difficult this aspect of the business relationship was when the parents involved had become friends: “I suppose if I had a set, maybe I need to be stricter myself in, you know, regarding my own worth, and say, you know, ‘Look, if you don't turn up, you still pay, that it's a set wage.’” –Mary

Failure to enforce contracts was a source of frustration in the present study, which resulted in childminders’ feeling lower levels of agency, and in one case contributed to the desire to move into a different occupation. By contrast, one childminder in the study group who relied on verbal agreements had no qualms whatsoever about enforcing that agreement: “Just saying on the off chance, a parent treats you very badly. Like I would put them off the property straightaway. I would not have any tolerance of anybody being disrespectful, or not nice.” – Mary Lou

Paperwork was not usually valued by parents in any meaningful way according to the study participants. Several childminders in the study mentioned parent disinterest in policies and procedures; they were surprised how parents never asked to see policies, or qualifications or insurance certificates, things which they believed were important aspects of their professional approach to childminding. While parents might approve of the concept of a contract, policies and procedures in theory, participants felt that they made little impact on their conduct in relation to the childminding service, as following quotation shows:

I think the contracts are there and everybody's all happy, when they come, and that's great, and yeah. that's a brilliant idea. And I think they then

forget about them until it comes up again, and then, do you know, I really don't think it makes much difference. It makes a difference to me to have them, but it makes no difference to them. - Therese

Parents appeared to be completely indifferent to this documentation, even when offered the opportunity, as the following quotation illustrates: “ I have policies and procedures there, I have, you know, my Garda vetting, I have all my qualifications, and at the end of the day, none of the parents have ever even been interested in looking at them.” – Mary

The priority placed on relationship in the childminding setting may help to explain this lack of interest. For one childminder, it was an issue of focus: parents really want to meet you as a person, as the following quotation explains:

No, they don't want to see them. And I have them, and they're in the drawer... They're not bothered. Do you know what they want to see? They want to come, and they want to see what you're like. They want to see, more than anything, your experience. And they want to see how you are. – Marianne

Nonetheless, this friction around money, terms and conditions impacted childminder's sense of agency significantly, especially if the childminder experienced loss of income due to parents' lack of consideration and respect. The dual nature of these relationships sometimes posed a challenge for the childminder to create and sustain a sense of agency.

8.1.3.2 Childcare Services Tax Relief, Health Insurance and Pensions

Traditionally, childminders in Ireland have operated in the informal economy, paid in cash and unregistered with Revenue, they have paid no income tax; as such, they have been excluded from any form of social insurance, such as

a contributory pension, which effectively consigned some childminders to poverty in old age. In order to facilitate exempt childminders participation in the formal economy, the Childcare Tax Relief was introduced in 2006, which allows a childminder to earn up to €15,000 per annum without being liable for tax and pay a voluntary annual contribution of €500 in order access a basic level of social insurance, which covers maternity leave and a contributory pension.

Since this study sample was composed of a professionalized group of childminders, it was to be expected that some exempt childminders would claim this tax relief, in order to be tax compliant, and to avail of social insurance. However, while some paid tax on all their income (of over €15,000) as self-employed individuals, just over half of the interviewees had signed up for the Childcare Tax Relief, although some newer childminders were in process of doing so.

At the time I was on the dole, [yeah], and there was a scheme for people going back to work, where they were starting their own business, they could, you could get grants and stuff like that. So, I thought, I thought that was the best way to go down. I always knew that I couldn't do childminding in the black market. I couldn't be unregulated because I couldn't take that chance [yeah] with other people's children. I wanted to be insured and I wanted to do it right. So, going down that way, they led me to all the other Childminding Ireland, I had to be registered with Childminding Ireland, I had to be registered to pay tax... - Nicky

In order to avail of the Childcare Tax Relief, some participants claiming it had deliberately limited the extent of their service they would be liable for tax on all income, if enrolment exceeded three children of any age up to 18 years at any one time, or if earnings exceeded €15,000 per annum gross:

And as well, you see, I'm in the bracket there for €15,000, you're not taxable, you see like, and I'm careful about what would happen if I went over that, you know, I go to an accountant. There's never really any need, but just in case you did go over that bracket. It's not worth it in a way, you know. Well, I've always been like that. People said, 'Why are you registered? You'd to get away with it.' I'd say you'd get with it until something goes wrong. - Paula

However, even those availing of the relief were unsure of which benefits were actually included, such as pension, as the following quotation illustrates:

Personally, I don't have any pension... And PRSI, I do pay PRSI, I pay it every year. I use an accountant and he does it [the Childcare Tax Relief] for me [right.] I really don't know what it's all about, because he does it, but I know I do pay 500 and something PRSI every year. – Therese

Equally, even to those planning to avail of the tax relief, the criteria and benefits of participation were uncertain, as the following quotation shows: “This year I'm registering for tax so [so you start to pay PRSI?] I doubt that I will be. Or do you have to give to PRSI? See I'm totally new to this again.” – Joanna.

In addition, some were not availing of the relief, either because their enrolment was too high, or their earnings exceeded the threshold, posing a certain dilemma for one study participant:

I'm minding more than three children at any one time, I wouldn't be entitled to the €15,000 allowance. [Yeah] I did have a meeting with an accountant last year with regard to it. And we came to the conclusion that if I was to continue on the way I'm doing with six children, that it actually wouldn't really be worth my while after paying full tax on the income that I'm making. I wouldn't be coming out with any proper income [Yeah],

compared to the work I would be putting in [Yeah] so I was faced with the choice of either not paying tax or packing it in. – Jill

In terms of childminder agency, therefore, it appears that the Childcare Services Tax Relief acts as a constraint because of its limitations and inflexibility in terms of income and child numbers, which is undoubtedly the reason behind childminders' reluctance to engage with it – only 610 childminders did so in 2019 (DCYA, 2019a). To balance this particular conflicting need, some childminders have simply chosen to remain unregistered for tax, outside the formal economy, running the risk of fines, or closure in the worst case scenario. Others have chosen to limit the number of children in their care to ensure that their income does not rise above the threshold.

Nonetheless, in terms of social insurance, some participants had access to private health insurance, often thanks to their spouse/partner's employment, or their own previous employment: "So when he's doing our tax returns, you know, Med1 forms and all of that, he does all my bits [okay.] So, I pay, we have health insurance, private health insurance." – Marianne.

More established childminders in particular were more likely to have their own private healthcare arranged; some had simply maintained the pension fund from previous employment, as the following case illustrates:

Yeah, well, we have health... {pause} Yeah, I cannot come up with it now, but it is a family fund, kind of, for health insurance. So, it's private. And then also pension, started putting away money again, because I used to be covered ... by my employer, and they would contribute. So, I needed to take that fund out, and then weekly, or monthly, put money away. -

Rianne

Remaining in the informal economy would clearly threaten the sustainability of childminding services in the long term. In general, the childminders in this study had taken or were taking the initiative to manage their own social insurance, either privately or through the Childcare Services Tax Relief; as such this contributes to the sustainability of their service, and evidences higher levels of agency.

8.1.4 Stability and Predictability of Daily Routine

In a highly sustainable service, the childminder, the children and the families know what to expect, with stable and predictable routines. For all those

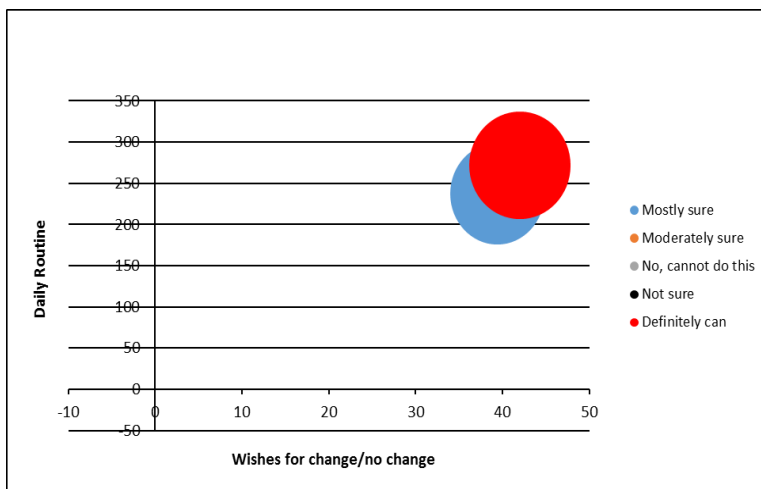


Figure 8.1 Childminder Capacity to Implement Change

involved in this research, there were high levels of satisfaction with the daily routine in the service and capacity to change it as needed. As can be observed in figure 8.1, all participants were either

definitely or mostly sure of their capacity to effect change at the level of the daily direction of their service. For some, this capacity to direct their own work was a key attraction in providing a childminding service; the routine was stable and predictable while retaining enough flexibility to allow for spontaneity and freedom, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I like running my own business, and I like being my own boss, and I like being able to do the impromptu – go to the Fish Centre or that type of

thing, whereas you are so much more restricted in other childcare facilities. - Shona

8.1.4.1 Scarcity of time

However, three key areas of potential stress in the daily routine were identified, all in relation to scarcity of time, these included time spent on school runs, time required by the domestic work load, and insufficient time for self-care.

The most frequently mentioned wish for change, among rural childminders in particular, concerned the amount of time spent in the car doing collections: picking up and dropping off children to and from home or school. One childminder was spending up to two hours a day driving children to various destinations, as her comment here explains:

Do you know what, I absolutely love the school holidays! Absolutely love the holidays. Because ... I don't have to get them six times a day into the car seats, or out or in and out, and I don't have to bring them into the bumpy roads all the time. - Katriina

Thus, reducing the number of school runs, or having someone who could do all the collections for the service was an oft-mentioned wish for change, as the following example shows: “Routine wise, I would love ideally, not to have to do so many school runs.” – Paula

Another commonly mentioned wish for change had to do with the domestic workload associated with running a childminding service in the home. All childminders in the study had at least an hour of domestic labour incorporated in the daily routine, before the children came, and/or after they went home. It was described as part of the second shift, and for most this resulted in an 11 to 12 hour working day. In addition, there was a ‘deep clean’ usually done at the

weekend by the childminder, with help from her family, or hindrance, as in the following case:

Sometimes I would love to have an uninterrupted hour, or even a weekend day where my husband would take the kids out, and I could actually just clean the house and have no little feet following me. Or sticking their hands into stuff. That would be ideal, I wouldn't know myself. - Rianne

For most, a truly desired change was being able to employ someone to help with domestic chores, and in particular, cleaning, as the following quotation shows:

If I could change something? I'd love to get a cleaner in! {laughs} Take away that at the weekends. Yeah, not have to give so much time to it. Yeah.

Yeah. Because you do. You need to give it a good old clean, I love to have the place nice and clean for them coming back on Monday. - Joanna

However, some acknowledged that finding a suitable individual was also problematic as they found it difficult to delegate something so personal in their own home, as the following example illustrates: "I wish I could have a cleaner. Actually, I have been trying to get a cleaner. I can't find a good cleaner. I just don't want a stranger, a total stranger, in my house at the moment." -Jill

Most depended on help from their husband/partner or grown up children; a few confessed, somewhat guiltily to having employed someone to help with the cleaning, as the following response regarding the cleaner shows: "Once a week for two hours... Wash floors, whatever I want {laughs}. Yeah. [And when is that, a Saturday morning?] Yes. Yeah. I feel terrible saying it." - Áine. For another study participant, employing someone to help with domestic chores meant getting Sunday afternoon with the family, and time to visit grandparents. Evidently, those with a domestic employee felt they had found a balancing solution to the

dilemma of sufficient time for family and themselves, and the hygiene requirements of running a childminding service, which contributed to sustainability and longevity of the service.

A significant finding in the present study was the importance which childminders placed on the need for self-care. More specifically, some childminders found that they had very little time to themselves, because they may have taken on that extra child on a day that was previously their day off, as in this example: “I would like one morning back to myself, to go for a bigger walk. I find the five days a week, especially with having the babies, it’s tiring. So, by Friday evening, like I’m knackered.” – Mary.

Failure to make and take this time for themselves was a source of concern expressed in participant narratives. Some acknowledged how they had failed to take the time they needed for themselves in the course of the interview, and one resolved to create such space for self-care, as can be seen in the following quotation: “I suppose I need to be better with making time for myself at the weekends, which I’m not doing.” –Rianne

Since childminders have no access to sick leave or substitute services when ill, most will work through any sickness out of financial need and the desire to maintain a reliable service for their minded families. Lack of sick leave necessitated spouses covering for childminders when they became ill, in several accounts. In the most dramatic example of lack of self-care and resultant illness, one childminder described how she had collapsed of exhaustion:

I suppose the most challenging thing sometimes is you do get exhausted. There are some evenings where like seven o'clock, you actually couldn't speak. If someone around you on the phone, you just {whispers} wouldn't be able to speak. And there are no sick days. For the first time ever, last

year I was extremely sick. ... I had to close for the week, because I was actually so sick. Also, I'd a chronic infection, right in my sinuses which led to my body nearly going toxic. So, and then it was exhaustion, burnout because we'd moved house, and just non-stop going. And I just went blank. – Mary Lou

The need to remain strong, illness free, and fit to meet the emotional and physical needs of lively young children every day of the week were foregrounded as a significant challenge in being a childminder. For some, the solution was to reduce opening hours to allow for rest, recuperation and time with their own family.

8.1.5 Personal Meaning and Significance

As the EFICh protocol describes, in highly sustainable services, the childminder gets personal meaning out of their work and explicitly states that it is worth it (See Appendix 9). Childminders in the present study expressed satisfaction with their daily routine, and the rewards of running a childminding service, even if these were not primarily financial. All participants were highly or moderately highly rated on the Close Relationships cultural model, and all conveyed a deep sense of personal significance about the impact of their work on children and families, even those contemplating a change of direction in the future: “I just think it's where for me personally I feel I can make the most difference by giving them that solid grounding, that start, and also that support and confidence to parents and families, you know.” – Mary Lou

8.1.5.1 The rewards of childminding

The main source of personal significance derived from the relationships with the children; it was the close, enduring relationships which were most highly

prized. The depth of love and affection shared between child and childminder was also highlighted, as seen in the following quotation: “The love and the hugs, and the kisses and the warmth from the kids. And 'I want to be like you. I want to be a teacher...' It'll melt my heart, nearly bring tears to my eyes.” – Joanna

A significant finding across many of the childminder narratives was the priority they gave to children’s happiness and sense of wellbeing while in their care. For many childminders this was highlighted as the most rewarding part of childminding and the feature of childminding which motivated them to continue in this role. These features of children’s responses to childminders are illustrated in the following quote:

I think it's to see these happy children. Like they are so delighted, and they don't want to go home in the evenings ... I think that's the thing to see these happy faces, and they're looking forward to coming and being with us. - Katriina.

It was also clear that the joy of those daily interactions which the children offered the childminders was experienced as rewarding in itself, as the following commentary illustrates:

They're just all loving each other's company, you know? And they're laughing and they're giggling and they're just having a great time, and I've had loads of that this year, and it's been so rewarding. It's been lovely...it's really got me to just love it, very much so. – Jill

The sense of contributing meaningfully to the children’s lives at a fundamental level, which would continue with the child into the future, was also prevalent in the narratives as the following quotations exemplify: “I think the most rewarding part is to help somebody reach that child's potential. It's a

foundation.” – Cynthia; and “It's just very rewarding knowing I'm putting something into their future.” – Sonia

The significance of parental expressions of appreciation was emphasised as a factor in sustaining their commitment to continue childminding, especially through challenging situations. This is well illustrated by the following excerpt, in which a childminder describes how the parents of a non-verbal child expressed their thanks for the weekly afternoon of respite, when the child came to her with his siblings:

And then I'd be the type of person that just felt for the Mum and Dad, and the appreciation I get from the parents, and the kindness, the way they are so kind to my kids, and gifts, like over the top. Like the Mum is nearly in tears, saying 'Sonia, thank you thank you so much', that sort of thing... - Sonia

The opportunity to be at home with their own children every day was a very significant benefit for many participants; this was to many a privilege which childminding afforded them, even at the cost of lucrative careers, as this quotation highlights:

I'm actually very privileged that I'm with them all day long [Yeah], I love that, and I don't beat myself up over the giving the other kids that five minutes more during the day because I'm around my own. - Joanna

This sense of personal meaning and significance in relationships with the children was the main factor sustaining these childminding services, despite financial or social challenges.

Nonetheless, despite this awareness of relational significance personally, childminders in the study also expressed a relational deficit in terms of isolation and even loneliness in their work. Nearly half of participants (8/17) specifically

mentioned the lack of interaction with other adults, and lack of opportunity to discuss issues arising during the day as a source of isolation: “I love having the kids with me, but sometimes you feel a little bit like, you know, I need to have some adult interaction.” – Rianne. For some, this isolation and lack of interaction with adults constituted the greatest challenge of childminding, particularly so in light of poor networking supports for childminders in local areas.

8.1.5.2 Professional pride

A further finding related to childminders’ self-esteem and self-image as competent professionals. Narratives highlighted how important it was felt to be, trustworthy, reliable and flexible as a professional childminder in relation to client families, as the following excerpt shows:

To be considered trustworthy to be entrusted with the care of other parents’ children was seen as an honour and a responsibility by childminders in the study. One participant mentioned parental trust as one of the privileges of childminding: “...that their parents trust me. Like I have them longer than what they spend with their parents, you know, yeah, it really is lovely.” – Mary.

Another participant also mentioned the challenge of this responsibility of being entrusted with such an important role in children’s lives:

So, I think it's a big responsibility that they're going to turn out right, because I'm putting my values in, [shaping them] or the way that I do things could be different to the way they do things at home. - Cathy

Such relationships of trust require considerable emotional maturity as Page (2018) has specified: emotional resilience and the reflectiveness; the capacity to act with the needs of the other person in mind, non-judgementally; and the

patience to build a gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationship with the child and parent in order to create an enduring mutual relationship of affection.

Reliability was another important trait for professional childminders in the study. Several childminders mentioned working through illness in order to provide a reliable service, to avoid the letting the people down, as this quotation shows:

Sometimes I work my days through migraines. And it's, you know, you don't want to disappoint the parents, you don't want to ring them in the morning and go like this, And I'm not well, because it's just, you don't want to do that. So, you want to be reliable. - Rianne

Other participants mentioned flexibly extending hours in order to support minded in times of family crisis, as the following narrative illustrates:

At one stage in the summer, her Mum had to go into hospital supposedly just for a day operation, but ended up getting an infection and had to stay in. And it had been 11 days where she hadn't seen the kids.... And I said, Look, if you need any help, yeah, any extra hours. So, I had her, say when I was supposed to have her to two on Wednesday and Thursday, I had her all day, [right.] And I think I probably had her on one of the Fridays. ... So, I just said when, you know, whatever helps... - Chloe

Narratives in the study revealed a professional pride in building and maintaining secure, long term, childminding relationships with families through consistent love and kindness over long periods of time; being considered trustworthy, reliable and flexible were vital components of their personal pride as professionals as well as their reputation in the community.

8.1.5.3 Low status in society

This professional pride articulated in childminders' narratives contrasted with a related finding in the present study: concern over the low status of childminding in society. While childminders loved the children, and many felt deeply appreciated by the families they worked with, a perception was also expressed concerning the low status of childminding in society.

My parents are very appreciative. But in general, it's not seen as a worthwhile occupation. 'What do you do?' 'I'm a childminder' 'Oh, you stay at home all day.' 'Yeah, I stay at home, twiddling my thumbs all day while the kids run riot! {sarcastically}. That for me, that's the hardest part, the isolation. - Nicky

In particular, one participant's narrative captured the lack of respect and disdain in how childminders are perceived by some:

There was one, actually she was a teacher, when I don't know which of the lads was in school, she was a teacher, teaching them. And she said something to me about being a childminder. No, she didn't actually. She said something about daytime television. And I said, 'What?' And she said, 'Sure you must be watching that all day at home?' I said, 'Are you joking?' I said because I don't put the telly on for the kids... But she really thought that that's what I did all day, sat at home. - Therese

Several participants mentioned that sense of being held in low esteem as childminders in society in general and spoke of the desire for recognition for the impact and influence of childminding on the young children and their families: "It's a very unrecognizable career. I don't think it's recognized enough for what we do." -Sonia

This parallels findings in many other jurisdictions, (Boogaard et al., 2013; Brooker, 2016; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017), as Urban et al. summarise in the CoRe report: “In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce...” (Urban et al., 2011). For study participants, this was a point of advocacy, that the public should be made aware of both the benefits of childminding for young children, and its contribution to sustaining the economy.

8.1.6 Sustainability and agency

As the above findings show, the majority of services involved in the study operated at a high or moderately high level of sustainability, where childminders envisaged continuing to operate their service long term. Some newer childminders received a moderately high rating, mainly due to the financial struggles associated opening a childminding service; nonetheless they remained committed to childminding in the long term in any case. Only three participants received a moderate or moderately low rating on sustainability: they envisaged winding their services down in the next three to five years, as a consequence of various factors, such as a lack of space, friction with family regarding childminding, or a need to progress to another job once their own children were finished primary school.

However, in all cases, childminders demonstrated high levels of agency in regard to the management and direction of their service. Their self-perception as competent professional childminders meant they felt capable of developing resources and the service in response to the needs of parents and children. Newer childminders facing challenges also demonstrated strong intentionality in their plans to reach full sustainability. Even those considering a change of career demonstrated a certain level of agency; their stated intentions to wind down their

services in the next three to five years was accompanied with an exit plan, such as pursuing a degree part-time in order to be ready for employment when the time was right for both childminder and family to close the service down.

8.2 CHILDMINDER CONNECTION

One domain in the EFICh protocol focuses on the childminder's personal level of connection with government agencies, associations and colleges outside of the immediate niche of the childminding home. The Services Needs and Use rating (See Appendix 11) places particular emphasis on connection in relation to quality improvement; for example, holding formal qualifications in ECEC is considered in terms impact on childminding practice and children's outcomes: whether a training course or educational qualification changed the way in which the childminder works with children. This is the approach underlying the following findings regarding childminder connection with support agencies, funding schemes and education in ECEC: the focus is on childminders' perception of the impact that engagement has on the care and education the children receive.

Overall, most childminders received only a moderate rating on level of connection, since only two study participants were registered with Tusla and in receipt of childcare funding, although most were members of Childminding Ireland and many were notified to the local Childcare Committee. A few participants (3) were rated low due to almost complete lack of connection and evident isolation; this reflects the virtual absence of any formal, support networks in some areas currently with the dismantling of the National Childminding Initiative, as the following comment highlights:

I don't have any support, I'm not registered with any groups. There is... I would go online to X or Y websites, they have discussion forums [Yeah]. That will give you an idea of what the rate is at the moment, they will do statistics. - Sonia

8.2.1 Connection with Childcare Committees

Connection with Childcare Committees was positively perceived to be beneficial, even if relatively inaccessible in more recent years as Childminder Advisory Services were discontinued. Almost all childminders in this study had engaged with their local Childcare Committee, particularly in the initial phase of setting up their service, even if only 13 were currently notified to one, as this excerpt demonstrates:

I inquired with the Childcare Committee when I was setting up... Although technically ... you don't have to notify with them anymore, they did provide me with a letter, they were in contact with me, they did a home visit ... and I took all my certificates and everything in that I had, first aid and insurance and garda vetting, and so they all had that on file. So, I was official at that stage. - Chloe

Several participants mentioned the initial training courses they undertook with the Childcare Committee: the Quality Awareness Programme for Childminders (QAP), Paediatric First Aid and Children First Child Protection training. While the QAP was the sole ECEC qualification for just two participants, nevertheless it was mentioned as a vital resource when starting a childminding service, as the following quotation illustrates:

That QAP was, the standard of it, I was blown away by it, because I didn't expect that... I don't know what kind of expectations I had. I just didn't

believe how much material I even got. [Right.] It was really good, you know ...the detail in it...And just, I didn't expect to come away with anything. And just to have this folder, and you know, you could refer back to it...I still have it in the press over there. - Mary

In addition, most participants were in receipt of the Childminder Development Grant on a biannual basis, which was facilitated by regular contact with the Childcare Committee, as well as access to ongoing short workshops for some. Such workshops were seen as a form of professional development and considered highly beneficial for childminder and children, who enjoyed the fruits of their childminders' participation, as the following description shows:

They (County Childcare) did a thing now this year, Fizzy Kids, where they had a big bag of activities and a girl that worked - I can't remember what organization - came and gave us ideas on how to use the pack, for like for... And you know, parachute, a rubber mat, beanbags, things you'd use with your kids. -Paula

However, participants also mentioned the lack of support currently available from Childcare Committees, particularly since the gradual departure of Childminder Advisory Officers from 2010 onwards, which had impacted the continuous professional development which used to be offered in network training days for childminders. The more established childminders expressed their regret at this change in terms of both the lack of upskilling training workshops, and the lack of contact with other local participants which had resulted. Noteworthy were the more varied experiences with local Childcare Committees recounted by those who had started childminding most recently; the absence of support was evident, as the following quotation shows:

I feel childminders should be more supported. I think childminders feel very {long pause} victimized but [left out?] Yeah, it's very hard to get yourself established, and when you're trying to do stuff, just not enough support to help you get along there, you know. – Ciara

While most of the newer childminders had accessed online supports from Childcare Committees and Childminding Ireland, fewer had made contact with other local childminders through them, which undoubtedly contributed to the feelings of isolation some described. For more experienced childminders, a sense of isolation was compounded by the withdrawal of local Childminder Advisory Services over the last decade, as the following excerpt highlights:

While [the childminding officer] was there, the County Childcare was good, you know, it was very good. They used to have meetings regularly and there was a lot going on, like those courses, and people talking and all kinds of things, It was, you know she did put a lot into it. – Therese

For some, this had led to feeling neglected by the local Childcare Committee for example, workshops scheduled during the daytime on weekdays when childminders cannot usually attend. Current systemic neglect of childminding in Ireland, was an important point of advocacy for study participants, with demands for ongoing professional development seen as vital in maintaining the quality of services.

8.2.2 Engagement with education

A significant finding in this research was the level of interest and engagement with education in ECEC among childminders. Although non-registered childminders in Ireland currently receive no subsidies to support their education in ECEC, a significant number had invested considerable time and

personal income to complete various childcare courses. More childminders in the study had paid for and completed QQI level 5/6 in ECEC and Paediatric First Aid, than had done the free Quality Awareness course. In addition, several older childminders had also completed a two year City and Guilds in Diploma in childcare in the 1990's prior to the creation of the QQI qualifications.

The enthusiasm for education was clearly highlighted in the present study as childminders described how much they loved doing QQI level 5/6 courses, and the influence the courses had had on their practice with children. Specifically, the necessity of the child development module was emphasised, while the arts and crafts module was a frequently mentioned favourite. Learning observations skills was emphasised by more than one study participant, as for example, in the quotation below:

I loved the level 5, because I did learn a lot. It's different when you're adult and learning than when you're forced to go to secondary school and all that... I do use it day to day. And even observation I do also like. If I wouldn't have level 5, I probably wouldn't even have any idea about this observation. – Katriina.

However, while many participants had completed QQI levels 5/6 in ECEC, they felt that these courses were not best suited to childminders' educational needs, as home-based practitioners with a small number of children, as the following quotation illustrates: "I don't really think the way, the course was set out, I don't think it was geared towards my type of practice, childminding in the home. It was more to do with Aistear and Siolta, all that sort of framework." - Chloe

Nonetheless, interest in pursuing further education was evident on the part of participants - in business, psychology or ECEC programmes at degree

level - even if cost and time constraints made such ideas difficult to implement for many. Study participants were actively following their own path in education, as self-directing adults, pursuing lifelong learning, largely in the absence of any external regulatory pressure or prospect of economic benefit, but rather from internal motivation and interest in learning for its own sake (Govt. of Ireland, 2002; O'Dowd, 2005; OECD, 2006b).

8.2.3 Registration with Tusla

As could be expected given the low rates of registration nationally, only a small number of study participants were registered with Tusla. Of those required to register with Tusla by law, two participants were registered, and a third was in the process of registration. A further two participants had been notified to the Health Service under previous regulations in the past. Of those registered, one was registered as a childminder providing a full day care service, and another was registered as a sessional childminding service, i.e. providing the free preschool service for three hours per day in term time to no more than six children at any one time. As such, both these childminders had access to childcare funding schemes. The sessional childminder received both preschool and national childcare funding, while the childminder only had access to the latter.

Access to the National Childcare Scheme (DCYA, 2019c) was the primary reasons given for registration with Tusla by one childminder, citing the example of the benefits received by her parents as follows:

I have one parent, who has two kids, who's a single parent with a medical card, so she's getting €58 a day and she has to pay me €6 for two kids for eight hours. So, she's absolutely in the right place. She's looking to go back to work so at the moment she's doing her course, so she's doing her

assignments. And all the rest of the families who I have, they're all getting their €4 per day, but they're still delighted because they said they got the refund for like €300, and they were so delighted to get the refund. -

Katriina

As a result, a third childminder, her friend, was in the process of registration in order to be able to offer this funding to parents and to develop a stable income for her service: "I pushed her to register with Tusla, because I think that's the only vehicle get a decent wage and dedicated too." -Katriina

By contrast, a childminder who had previously been notified to the HSE for several years, was no longer registered as she did not feel that inspection process was appropriate or supportive. In her opinion, the inspections were focussed on property, equipment, and paperwork, rather than the well-being of the child and the childminder. Her critique of this focus of inspection was harsh, as the following excerpt illustrates:

It was the equipment, and not the childcare. Now some of it obviously was, you know, like mats on the floor for them to sleep? You know, it's a child in home care. If one of the children was that tired, a three year old, I would go down and put them into a single bed. I'm not going to put a rubber mat on the floor... -Paula.

Furthermore, the lack of interest in the relationships connected to the childminding service was also highlighted as point of criticism:

And I never once remember in any of the inspections, asking how the parents felt about the childcare, you know. Or have you lost any children? Have you had any, you know, problems like [with families?] ...It was just more about the ticking the boxes for the paperwork, than are those children actually engaged? Are they happy? No one ever asked, 'Are the

parents happy?’ or ‘Have you lost children due to concerns?’ or ‘How are you doing? How are you feeling? Do you feel pressure in this job?’ – Paula

An additional participant should have been registered with Tusla, as she had four or five children in her care daily at the time of the interview. However, she did not wish to engage with Tusla due to lack of confidence in the system, as the following quotation shows:

I thought about it, [registration with Tusla] and I just feel I've worked in organizations where it's regulated but it's not checked, it's not ... I don't feel the standard is great, and I would have an exceptionally high standard in my work and I just haven't signed up with them, to be honest, because I feel like there's a part of me that doesn't have faith in them, being very honest...it was just paperwork, paperwork, paperwork, pass it on, pass it on, pass it on, but nothing was dealt with, you know so sadly. – Mary Lou

Among those who were or had been registered with Tusla, there was a certain sense of caution regarding their levels of agency in implementing desired change due the need for approval from the agency. For example, one registered childminder in particular believed that Tusla would not approve her preferred solution to poor lighting for homework at the dining table, and had simply not proceeded with it:

I was saying about having this light down over the table. That's why I have the spotlights or the recessed lights. I'd love to have the one like that goes over the table, and I was discussing it with my young fella, who's an apprentice electrician, and he was saying, 'Yeah Mum, it would be lovely but Tusla will pull you on it, because they'll say the kids will be swinging off it.' But I think the light would be better for the homework... -Cathy

The constraints of meeting the requirements under the current regulations were often mentioned, as in the following example, which highlights the high costs associated with meeting all Tusla's requirements in a family home:

He [husband] designed the house and built the house, and I was very lucky with these Tusla regulations that he did it for me, I didn't need to go and pay for it. But I'm just bringing that many people would need to pay for it, that's why it's slow with Tusla. -Katriina

These examples highlight the type of constraints which childminders fear would result from regulation by Tusla; above all, a reduction in their agency and autonomy in directing and developing their own service, as the following excerpt illustrates:

I'm not registered with Tusla. And I don't think I would want to be. Do you know, all the paperwork and all the regulations and the 'You can't have this, and you can't have that'? Like, if people want those, they'll go to crèches. - Therese

Registration with and inspection by Tusla were poorly regarded by the majority of professionalised childminders in this study; they were not considered factors promoting quality in childminding. This negative attitude was evident among almost all participants, for whom inspection under current regulations was a point of concern, perceived as a potential threat to childminding in Ireland, and a highly important point of advocacy. This reveals the extent to which autonomy and agentic professionalism from within (Jones & Osgood, 2007; Osgood, 2006) are vital constructs for childminders in this study: they vocalised considerable reluctance to relinquish the independence they currently enjoy.

8.3 CHILDMINDER ADVOCACY

Childminder advocacy functioned at a personal, local and national level among childminders in the present study, as found elsewhere (Tonyan, Nuttall, et al., 2017; Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017). In exploring the concept of advocacy for childminding, it became evident that there were participants who were advocates for childminding at different levels: personally, in recruitment to the profession, locally in promotion of best practice among childminders, and nationally in terms of involvement with and advocacy through the national childminding body and other childcare organisations.

A strong belief in the benefit of childminding for children and families led some childminders to actively recruit others into childminding, sharing their own practice with the newer practitioners in the field, so as to multiply the availability of this vital form of childcare, as the following quotation illustrates:

I'm all the time saying to my parents and stuff, 'If ye know anybody, or somebody really lovely that maybe might want to stay home with their kids for somebody else?' There's such an outcry for it. And unfortunately, like every profession, we've people that shouldn't be in it. And then ... you're mad to get people on board. That would be like, you'd have a really lovely life and income from it. And do so much to the community as well, because you're massively, you're giving back to the community, you're supporting parents and it is massive, because the parents have huge commitments professionally, financially, they're trying to give their children the best of everything. And for them, it means an awful lot to go to work and just know that they're safe and loved and cared for. And know who's looking after them cares about them as a family, not just, it's not just making money or it's not, you know what I'm saying? – Mary Lou

Another common thread was the desire to promote doing childminding 'right', through membership of Childminding Ireland, through involvement in mentoring new childminders or through supporting childminder registration with Tusla and the National Childcare Scheme to childminding friends. This desire to promote good practice and good quality childminding is evident in the following comments:

I would consider myself an advocate for, I think you have to be registered in some capacity. It's not that I think, 'Oh, they're making a quick buck.' They're not making a quick buck. They're making the same as me, but I just feel, it's not that the guys.... something really bad has to happen, but just that like... I've gone to the trouble of doing my courses. I've gone to the trouble of making sure everything is, you know, right. It should be the same... – Paula

By contrast, the low status of childminding in society at large hindered advocacy for childminding, leading to active discouragement from entering the profession, as can be seen in the following quotation: “If my daughter said she wanted, she has a degree now in childcare, if she said she was going to give all that up and stay home to be a childminder, I would be telling her, no.” –Therese

8.3.1 Membership of Childminding Ireland

Membership of Childminding Ireland was perceived in terms of advocacy for childminding at national level, in addition to its support role. In terms of membership of professional bodies, almost all study participants were or had been members of Childminding Ireland at the time of the interview, and their experiences of membership were described as positive and empowering. This was

particularly true of newer childminders, who did not have access to much support from local Childcare Committees, as the following excerpt shows:

That's when I started the process, starting to talk to Childminding Ireland, to call them to find out how could I start and to look for guidance and advice from them. So, I got really, really good advice from them. They are very, very supportive...- Cynthia

There was appreciation for Childminding Ireland as the only support organisation for childminders, whether through phone calls, or via the members' forum on Facebook, as described below:

It's nice having the Facebook forum just to see your online friends, and if there's any... Even just reading other people's posts you get ideas, and they might be having the problem that you're having, and just having all this input of ideas of how to do it. And everybody has all the different views. Yes, so it's a great resource, and even just to have little banter as well, and so get to know... Because there's probably 200 odd people who are on there, but you have the regulars that are on there, and then you can sort of feel like you get to know them - Chloe

However, most also viewed their membership as a matter of advocacy for childminding nationally, as being the organisation which represented childminding interests at governmental level, as the following quotation reveals:

I joined them [Childminding Ireland] straight away when I started, you know, I was very adamant about getting my insurance. Like when they've had the talks, like in the last few weeks, I went to them. Very few people did. I don't understand why more childminders aren't part of it, because then they could be a louder voice for childminders. – Mary

Finally, membership of the Board of Childminding Ireland, was an eye-opening experience for one well established childminder, as this commentary shows:

I've been on the board of Childminding Ireland, and I have been for.....two and a bit years... and I think doing that opens your eyes to a lot of things you don't realise are happening with childminding things... and before I did that, I would say I pretty much kept myself to myself, but I wouldn't have been, there's not a lot of other childminders around here to do things with... - Shona

In addition, participation in this study was viewed as a means of advocacy for their profession, as a means to raise their issues and concerns about childminding and allow the voice of childminders to be heard on the national stage.

8.3.2 Recommendations for policy

Several themes emerged in discussion of possible government policy on childminding, with an emphasis on the location of services in the family home, the unique role of the childminder in relation to children and families, the type and style of education required, and the need for a tailored approach to childminding regulation and taxation. The need for change was strongly emphasised, with most participants looking for the registration of childminding under specific childminding regulations, with a suite of associated supports and measures. The need for regulation was often expressed in the following terms: "I don't think there's any harm in things being regulated with childminders, because there's a lot of people out there that shouldn't be childminding." -Cathy.

However, proportionate regulation would be required, based on evidence from actual childminding practice, many participants highlighted. Study participants frequently mentioned the need for those writing policy and regulations to come and spend time on the ground with a lone childminder at work in a family home, as the following quotation illustrates:

I would wish before they sit down and write the policies, to visit us and see what we do every day, so that once you know what is happening in our life, you'll be able to write them. I think rather than designing things that doesn't happen practically, even just to think, okay, these people are going through this problem, how do we help them, rather than working against them? -Cynthia

In making recommendation to policy makers, many study participants voiced similar understandings about childminding, emphasising respect for the family home, recognition for childminders, the specific type and style of education required, and tailored approaches to childminding regulation and taxation. These four themes form the focus of the following sections.

8.3.2.1 Childminding and the family home

Childminding regulations must be family-friendly, attuned to the usage of the family home for both family and childminding, according to study participants. The most often expressed concern was that regulation would try to enforce crèche norms inappropriately in family homes, and thus drive ordinary childminders out of the profession, deterring young parents from even considering starting. Perhaps the most frequently voiced recommendation for policy makers was simply to remember that childminding takes place in a family home, as the following quotation highlights:

Really just to remember that it's a family home more than anything. I don't want to go too far down the route of turning us into crèches... But just really to say that, you know, to sort of respect us as a profession as well, that, you know, at the end of the day, the majority of us have our own families and, you know, we're working in our own homes. And, you know, the whole point of parents choosing childminders, I think, is to have that home-from-home environment, otherwise they would send them to a crèche. – Chloe.

Some innovative suggestions were made by study participants regarding inspection, in particular the idea that the evaluations of parents using a childminding service should be involved in inspection protocols, as already happens in some early years services in Germany (Bundesministerium für Familie Senioren Frauen und Jugend, 2015). With the common childminder practice of 'open door' for parents allowing them to come to in and out of the house at any time, in essence, parents 'inspect' what is happening on a daily basis; hence the following suggestion: "I definitely think parents should have some input into the inspection process... Like an annual survey to do on the service." –Cathy.

8.3.2.2 Recognition for childminders

Childminders seek recognition for who they really are and what they do: parents who open their homes to care for other parents' children, as the following quotation illustrates:

I think the appreciation that goes into or that needs to be given to families who are willing to mind children in their home. ...And I don't think it's fair to ask of parents to open their home to millions of checks, to a ton of

paperwork, when there's already so much to do, I think very small scale services like these. Yeah, I mean, I would like my own child to be there. Yeah, you know, because it's they're become part of the family, they become part of, you know, a really nice small place. -Rianne

Nonetheless, the value of professionalism in childminding was also considered paramount by study participants. Childminders in this study took a professional approach to their services both in terms of quality care for children and ethical relationships with families, as well as accessing relevant training, insurance, and participation in existing schemes. Many expressed the view that childminding was more than a business, it was their career, that this was how they wished to see childminding promoted, as the following quotation emphasises:

I'd like them to realize that childminding is a career, and that it's part of Irish society. And instead of trying to push it out, that they embrace it, and have it work in some way where people are like putting their hand up to join Childminding Ireland, that they're not hiding, that they're not afraid. – Mary

Study participants also emphasised that unsuitable people should not be able to become childminders or continue to work as childminders; specifically, one participant offered the following observation and proposal in that regard:

The biggest thing if someone is going into childminding, you have to, have to be a loving, loving person, because it is it's the only thing they're going to grow from, and everything from that outwards will be great...But I find the best thing is to do three months trial. Okay, month to month meetings. But I think that if somebody has a natural genuine interest in something, it will just ooze out. It'll just be a natural love and care that

you can't put on, you can't. And especially with these kinds of jobs, because very quickly, if people aren't caring, it can show very quickly. – Mary Lou

The study participants were in favour of the type of regulation which included markers of professionalism such as those currently necessary for membership of Childminding Ireland: training in First Aid and Child Protection, Garda vetting and insurance for the service. In addition, there was a call for specific education for childminding, as described further in the following section.

8.3.2.3 Specific education for childminding

A noteworthy finding was the demand for specific childminding modules at QQI level 5 and above, taught in network settings in the style of community education, with subsidisation to encourage participation and further engagement in higher levels of ECEC education. Given the unique nature of childminding, it is hardly surprising that specific training and modules would be necessary to prepare for childminding work in practice. While many had completed QQI levels 5/6 in ECEC, they felt that these courses were not best suited to childminders' educational needs, as home-based practitioners with a small number of children. Suggestions for alternatives included the following:

I'd say if people wanted to be childminders, just alone, then there needs to be a course, if it's going down the qualification route, there has to be a course geared for childminding, or even just individual modules that have to be completed. – Chloe.

Indeed, suggestions for other modules more relevant to childminding practice included, for example, a business module to equip childminders for the operation of a small service in a financially sound manner. Another area of

desirable education was family psychology, as the following suggestion shows: “I think probably ...definitely, psychology of children. And dealing with children, and dealing with families and relationships, just training around relationships and dealing with children's issues.” – Jill.

Furthermore, practical considerations on how best to draw childminders into these courses included organising relevant QQI level 5 modules within local networks, to make the course as approachable and user-friendly as possible. This proposal was reminiscent of the style of community education, involving dynamic, group-based learning rather than learning as a lone individual (Connolly, 2003), as the following description suggests:

It doesn't even have to be a stringent, you know, QQI level 5, but that you'd be given, let's say, your folder on, you know, 1-2. You'd go away and you'd read it, and then you come into a discussion with other childminders and you know, where you've questions with that, you'd learn from others, with you've been given this pack... People don't want to, people are very daunted by... ‘Oh I can't do that. I'm a childminder, I can't...’ -Paula

In addition, progression to higher levels of education in ECEC or special education was also mentioned, as a means of career progression. However, the current cost of degree courses poses a barrier to such ambitions as the following quotation illustrates:

I would do the degree in early childhood education. But right now, I just don't have the time, and I would like it to be subsidised. Because it's expensive. I've looked into it. Like I worked full time when I did my level six. And it was hard going, and I'd only one child. Now I have two children, or three children. But I would, I would, like to do it. I think it's something that I will do eventually. – Nicky

In summary, study participants envisaged specific childminding modules at QQI level 5, in the style of community education, with subsidisation to encourage participation and further engagement in higher levels of ECEC education.

8.3.2.4 Childminding regulations and registration with Tusla

Despite negative attitudes to current early years regulations, proportionate, supportive childminding regulations were widely called for by study participants. Significantly, most participants openly shared the view that any regulations would have to be proportionate to the childminding home, and a supportive approach would be essential, if any new system were to be effective.

If they told me they came out with two inspector checklists, and this is for crèche, and this is for childminder, fine. Come out, come out whenever you want, no problem. If it was in a home, and they took in the practicalities, that it is your home, and you have other people living in your house, and you know, set up. No problem. – Paula.

However, fear of excessive paperwork was highlighted as a disincentive to registration, putting an undue burden on childminders, given their role as lone workers with groups of children in the home. To be successful, a neat, simple, straightforward system would be necessary, as the following participant observed succinctly: “And make it easy. Don't have us jumping through hoops, looking for this bit of paper and that bit of paper. ...Yeah, keep it simple, Sam.” – Áine.

The cost of registration under current regulations was highlighted as excessive for lone childminders. This was particularly obvious in the case of the childminder who was trying to set up her service and register with Tusla at the

same time: she had no consistent wage at all. Unsurprisingly, these participants called for subsidisation of the costs of regulation, as the following excerpt shows:

...support for maybe new Tusla regulations for childminders... that's the thing, many people don't have the money to be registered. So, I think if they would provide that, let's say they want you to have your radiator thermostatically regulated. The man will come out, and that will cost you €300, and that means that they will pay for €300...That's what I think [that any required changes should be funded?] They should be funded, yeah. –Katriina

In conclusion, the participating childminders favoured specific childminding regulations, which were simple and reasonable, with costs funded where necessary, in order to promote registration with Tusla for childminders.

8.3.2.5 Taxation and childminding

A final point of advocacy concerned income taxation for childminders, which needs to be reviewed in light of childminders' contribution to the economy as a whole. Even though some availed of the existing Childcare Tax Relief, several participants highlighted its limitations and inflexibility in terms of income and child numbers: as it stands it is only beneficial to exempt childminders, who are earning less than €15,000 gross per annum, and minding three or fewer unrelated children. This is undoubtedly the reason behind childminders' reluctance to engage with it; in 2019, only 610 voluntary notified childminders out of an estimated 35,000 childminders could claim it (DCYA, 2019a). There were calls for greater flexibility in the scheme, as the following extract illustrates:

I'd like to be able to see a change in the tax, the taxing system.... And so again, I'm not fully sure how the tax works on that but I would like to see a

more, a fairer way of taxing, or if taxing at all, on the type of hours and income that a childminder earns. I'd like to see that looked at because I certainly know any childminders that I've spoken to about have turned around and said, well, that's why we only mind two children.... Yes, you know, so it's not very flexible. The way it's taxed, it's not very flexible for childminders to be able to what they, what suits their family best as well. – Jill.

Nonetheless, since so many childminders operate in the informal economy, earning a fairly meagre income, it is worth considering whether the costs of tax collection would outweigh the benefits of exemption, given the support childminders provide to tax paying families, as in France, where all independent childminders are exempt from income tax (Letablier & Fagnani, 2009).

8.4 PROFESSIONAL AGENCY, CONNECTION, AND ADVOCACY

Ecocultural Theory offers an approach, a way in which to consider childminders' levels of agency, and how this interacts with their levels of connection and advocacy as it relates to their professional role. Study findings indicate that most of these intentional childminders experienced high levels of agency in general, which allowed them to navigate the challenges of managing a small childcare service in the home, balance conflicting needs, and create a stable, predictable routine supporting secure, meaningful relationships. Narratives in the study revealed a professional pride in building and maintaining secure, long term, childminding relationships with families; being trustworthy, reliable and flexible were important to their role. This was a vital component of their professional reputation in the community. Even those who expressed negative views of the current status of childminding, and were experiencing

significant constraints, were still capable of managing their service currently, while planning a different future.

However, the contrast between high levels of agency on the one hand, and low levels of connection on the other bespeaks the dysfunctionality of the current system for childminding in Ireland. In general, levels of connection were more poorly rated for all participants. Despite enthusiastic engagement in ECEC education, most were in contact with Childminding Ireland only sporadically, much fewer received support from Childcare Committees, and only two were currently registered with Tusla and in receipt of childcare funding. Study findings also highlight how levels of agency are often reflected in levels of advocacy. Almost all were confident enough to wish to promote childminding as a form of childcare, and as a profession; only those with lower levels of agency were reluctant to advocate for childminding, since they were considering closing their own services in the coming years.

Nonetheless, all offered suggestions for policy which aligned with the deeply held cultural models of Close Relationships and Real Life Learning identified in this study. Their sense of autonomy and agentic professionalism from within is something they are reluctant to relinquish to an external authority; rather they seek a competent system (Urban et al., 2011), one which is ecoculturally aligned to support childminding as it currently exists.

9 DISCUSSION

The primary problems addressed by the present research were the lack of research into childminding in Ireland and the concomitant absence of evidence with which to drive the development of social policy in relation to childminding, despite its prevalence as a form of childcare nationally. The overarching aims of this research were twofold: firstly, to interrogate the concept of professionalism from the perspective of childminders and parents using childminders in Ireland; and secondly, to explore the cultural models and praxis among Irish childminders, in order to inform the development of new childminding regulations and supports.

A key finding from the initial phase of research was the identification of professionalised childminders in Ireland, who held national ECEC qualifications, identified as independent service providers, valued the distinctive characteristics of childminding, and enjoyed professional collaborative relationships within Childminding Ireland. Poor pay and working conditions notwithstanding, this provided evidence of progress on four of the five components in the process of professionalisation described by Brannen and Moss (Brannen & Moss, 2003) and promoted under the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI). Both parent and childminder respondents in this initial phase demonstrated positive attitudes towards professionalism in childminding as necessary for high-quality home-based childcare and future development of childminding in Ireland.

A further significant finding was that professionalised childminders sought a distinctive, family-friendly approach to the regulation of professional childminding, advocating for specific childminding qualifications in ECEC, staffed

local networks; and childminding regulations, proportionate to the home environment, once accompanied by supports. Participants articulated an approach to professionalism that was more aligned to an autonomous, agentic model of professionalism from within, rather than an imposed, overly prescriptive, technocratic model (Jones & Osgood, 2007; O'Connell, 2008; Osgood, 2006). After a decade of investment under the National Childminding Initiative, professionalised childminders clearly sought visibility within a transparent system as part of a national ECEC infrastructure, such as in France, the Netherlands or Belgium (Boogaard et al., 2013; Laevers et al., 2016; Letablier & Fagnani, 2009).

However, paradoxically, key learning from this phase of research involved recognising that study respondents viewed childminding as fundamentally different from other forms of early years' provision, with participants prioritising close relationships, individual attention for the child, the home environment and real life learning, ahead of markers of professionalism such as qualifications and policies. Noteworthy was the call to develop specific, family-friendly childminding regulations, tailored to meet the needs and values of childminders, in contrast to current centre-based childcare regulations, which many criticised as ill-adapted to the practical reality of childminding in the home, similar to findings in prior research in the international context (Brooker, 2016; Ofsted, 2017; Simon et al., 2015). This perception of childminding as a distinct form of childcare necessitated a different model of research which could document the praxis of childminders, describe their values and beliefs in the Irish context, and propose a proportionate approach to the regulation and support of childminders in Ireland.

The major contribution of the second phase of research was the documentation of everyday childminding practice in Ireland for the first time on

the ground, from the perspective of childminders, using the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh) protocol. Significant findings included the documentation of two cultural models, the Close Relationship Model, and the Real Life Learning Model, prevalent among this group of participants in Ireland. These cultural models can be described as the “connected, schematized, shared knowledge of this everyday cultural world [used] to adapt and make complex decisions to survive in their local community” (Weisner, 2002, p. 377). The shared cultural models described in this study, can be understood to specify those scripts, routines, and rituals which Irish families using childminders negotiate to realise cultural goals and values for their children (Rogoff, 2003).

The identification of specific models in this way facilitates the transformation of theoretical constructs into “usable tools (Pickett et al., 1994) so that the parts, interactions, activities and scope of the system of interest can be specified and understood” (Barnett, Jackson, & Jackson, 2019, p. 11). In addition, findings also highlighted childminders’ advocacy for ecocultural understandings of childminder professionalism and quality to promote positive models of childminding in the future within an ecoculturally aligned system.

9.1 THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP MODEL

A key finding in this study was the strength and prevalence of a Close Relationship Model among Irish childminders, which matched the ecocultural definition of childminding more closely in some ways than in California (Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). The Close Relationship Model described here also extends the one specified by Tonyan and Nuttall, in particular regarding the enduring nature of the relationships, and the conceptualisation of the service in terms of extended family. These differences are particularly noteworthy in terms

of their importance to young children and families, in a changed society with smaller family size and increasing family mobility due to employment, which can leave young families isolated and far from traditional familial and community networks (Canavan, 2012; Garrity & Canavan, 2017; Lunn & Fahey, 2011; Russell et al., 2018). It suggests that childminding homes have the potential to provide not only continuity of care between home, school, and community (Administration for Children & Families, 2017; Ang et al., 2016; Ruprecht et al., 2016), but also a web of supportive relationships for migrating families in Ireland, as shown by Garrity et al. in relation to both childminding and community childcare centres (Garrity & Canavan, 2017; Garrity & McGrath, 2011).

9.1.1 The ecology of Irish childminding

Meaningful, congruent and sustainable adaptations within an ecological niche are the focus of the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders (EFICh) protocol, using daily routine activities as units of analysis to identify the “taken-for-granted” (Mead, 1970, p.3; cited in Paradise & Rogoff, 2009) cultural models underlying childminding praxis in this study. In this regard, it is vital to understand the distinctive praxis of childminders in Ireland in light of structural parameters in the ecological context: smaller childminder settings with higher adult-child ratios. Irish childminders work with fewer children than in California: three or fewer preschool children as exempt childminders (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1991; DCYA, 2016a), never more than six children of any age at any one time by

law⁷ (Dept. of the Environment, 2015), similar to group sizes found at childminders across Europe (Boogaard et al., 2013). As a result of their smaller group size, these settings can more easily form a closely knit “home-based ecological niche of multiple families...(who) negotiate the project of raising children” (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 119), than the larger groups in California, where a small-scale family childcare licence allows for up to eight children, and large-scale licence allows up to 14 children with an assistant (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Tonyan and Nuttall (2014) explicitly link large-scale licence holders to more bureaucratic models of preschool care, which could be seen to detract from the family-centred definition of the childminding ecological niche.

In this ecological context, a significant finding in the present study was the extent to which the concepts and language of attachment theory, such as attunement and sensitivity, informed childminders’ conceptualisation of the childminder-child relationships, becoming a feature of the Close Relationship Model identified. Narratives in the present study confirmed previous findings on attunement and intersubjectivity growing with daily interactions in intimate care, in play, and other routines. Specifically, neuroscientific research on child development consistently indicates that responsive interactions and intersubjective attunement are the foundations for children’s emotional, cognitive and overall developmental well-being (Dalli et al., 2011). Attunement and

⁷ The register of school age services introduced in 2018, quite unexpectedly allowed a “childminder” to care for up to 12 school age children (DCYA, 2018b). However, this type of service contravenes the definition of childminding in local planning laws.

sensitivity are linked to children's outcomes: a meta-analysis of 40 investigations by the NICHD (Ahnert et al., 2006) found that caregivers' sensitivity to individual children in home-based settings predicted attachment security, while Groeneveld et al. (2012; 2010) found that higher caregiver sensitivity among childminders was positively associated with children's wellbeing. Such attunement is facilitated by time in relaxed, unhurried home environments, free of stress as a result small group size and high adult-child ratio, and ongoing, consistent and stable relationships between childminders and infants, as well as with their families (Ang et al., 2016; Page, 2011).

A further striking finding in the present study was the depth and longevity of these childminding relationships, both outside of childcare hours, and long after the childcare arrangement had ceased in some cases; a finding which has not been previously identified in prior research. Narratives revealed that the emotional bonds developed in childminding homes were not experienced as temporary or passing attachments, but rather as lasting and enduring, evidence of a close bond developed over a long period of time (Bowlby, 2007). Cousins (2015) argues that 'enduring attachments ... to particular others' (Bowlby, 1969, p. 32) more closely resemble and involve a form of love. While maternal experience was drawn upon in the formation of these enduring bonds with children, childminding love was carefully differentiated to support and not replace the mother in a child's life (Page, 2011, 2018), also in the awareness of childminders' own vulnerability to grief and loss when the child departed from the service (Nelson, 1990). Many took pride in caring for the children in a home away from home as if they were one of their own, demonstrating the willingness to make a significant emotional commitment to a particular child over a period of years. Bowlby (1969) emphasised that children form enduring attachment bonds

with very few people, who should be regular and consistent for the child to develop securely (Cousins, 2015). Richard Bowlby (2007) highlighted how childminders develop a type of secondary attachment relationship with children, resembling the relationship a child might have with grandparents. That such love is foundational to a child's well-being and development has been well established in ethics of care literature (Lynch et al., 2009; Lynch, 2007; Noddings, 2013). In the past, it has been suggested that some parents have concerns about one-on-one care operating as substitute mothering, and the perceived threat that it might displace them in their child's affections (Sylva et al., 2000). However, this was never mentioned as an issue by any childminder in the present research, suggesting that the study group had learned to negotiate interpersonal boundaries, respecting the primacy of parents in relationship to the children, with mutual agreement in the form of an unwritten "permission" to love the minded child as Page (2011, p. 312) has described.

Theorizing professional love in ECEC, Page (2011) maintains this love is essential: "Deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships between adults and children are vital for children's holistic development." (p. 312). In recent years however, discussion of love, affection and care in early years has tended to be displaced by discourses of dispassionate professionalism, underpinned by rationalist, scientific knowledge of child development and pedagogy, separated from caring roles (Brock, 2013; Strauss & Cooper, 2012; Van Laere et al., 2012). This construction of an area of expertise was seen as necessary to attain professional status and working conditions, freed from "the image that only 'maternal' skills and competencies are important for a job in childcare (Peeters, 2007, p. 7). This is a challenge for those working in centres also as, irrespective of setting, it could be argued that research into positive child

development and learning supports the need for adults in caring role to be anything but dispassionate.

Such attempts to valorise childcare work through professionalisation can prove counterproductive, when the motivations and experiential knowledge of early years practitioners are ignored (Campbell-Barr et al., 2015), creating a culture of fear among young practitioners, to the point of limiting physical touch with children in the UK (Campbell-Barr, 2017). As Campbell-Barr (2018) has argued, while this type of experiential knowledge has often been silenced, awareness of such emotional skills needs to be reintegrated into a fresh understanding of the knowledge base of early years practitioners.

Narratives in the current study highlight the practice of love and affection by childminders, which have the potential to contribute to the renewed discussion of professional love, its praxis and challenges. Page (2018) characterises the principles of professional love as “emotional intimacy” and “gradual, authentic, reciprocal” relationship, building mutual understanding. Garrity & Canavan (2017) describe the development of a relationship of trust between caregiver and mother based on open communication and awareness of vulnerability in ECEC settings in the West of Ireland. This trust was founded on a parent’s intuitive recognition of a trustworthy caregiver and grew through the experience of support in the vulnerable, initial transition period, as parents entrusted the child to the caregiver. Caregivers in community childcare centres were conscious of the trust placed in them, recognised the parents’ primary role in the child’s life, consolidating trust through reliable caregiving, and periodic renegotiations of the relationship. As previous research has shown, many parents choose a childminder recognising the value of such love and affection for the child (DCYA, 2018a; Fauth et al., 2013), trusting in the childminder’s

capacity to care for the child, even if, for some parents, such a close relationship between their child and another adult can be challenging (Page, 2011).

The ambiguities posed by professional love relationships, balancing close relationships and financial constraints, can be difficult to negotiate. While some childminders can practice a finely balanced form of professional love (Page, 2011, 2018), others find it difficult to maintain the necessary “detached attachment” (Nelson, 1990, p. 598), instead finding that they are too attached, “over involved” (Page, 2018, p. 135) rendering them vulnerable to altruistic self-sacrifice at times when the minded child or family are in crisis due to illness, divorce, or redundancy, even to the detriment of their own family’s well-being. Psychological burnout has been mentioned in previous studies as a factor among those who stop working in childcare or childminding (Andrew, 2015; Bromer et al., 2009; Corr et al., 2014).

In this context, childminders in the present study advocated firstly, for training focussing on child and family psychology, and secondly, for supportive supervision of their emotional well-being rather than inspection of settings. This parallels calls by Page (2018) to include professional love in the curriculum of education for early years workers, and additional training for service managers to support educators in the praxis of professional love. Similarly, Garrity & Canavan (2017) call for a more nuanced understanding of partnership with parents to include the important role which trust and responsiveness play in creating communities of care in ECEC settings.

9.1.2 The childminding extended family

A particularly noteworthy finding identified through the present study was the conceptualisation of the childminding niche in terms of extended family

within the Close Relationship model. This involved viewing the minded children as if they were relatives, such as cousins, nephews and nieces or grandchildren; valuing the capacity to keep siblings together in the same childminding home; welcoming intergenerational interactions with the older generation; and participating in the milestone celebrations of minded children's families in the broader community.

The concept of the extended childminding family maps well with the childminding niche as defined by Tonyan et al. "a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family, children's families and assistants) negotiate the project of raising children (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 3). The family-like nature of childminding, embedded in a home-from-home learning environment within the local community aligns closely with the cultural model for children's care and education desired by many Irish families and children, as previous surveys have shown (DCYA, 2018b, 2018a).

A notable finding in the present research concerned the importance ascribed to keeping siblings together in the same group for both childminders and families, consistent with previous research identifying sibling grouping as one of the perceived benefits of childminding for client families (Davis, Freeman, et al., 2012; Karlsson, 1995; Mooney & Statham, 2003). O'Connell (2010) highlights how childminders in England intentionally extend the table to eat together at mealtimes and exchange family stories so that newcomers feel their family is respected, and they can be integrated into the larger childminding family. Integrating siblings into the childminding family forms a key feature in the Irish childminding niche, which may include the childminder's own young children, particularly for newer childminders.

Noteworthy also is the role of the extended childminding family in creating a web of relationships and connections in a local community for migrating and lone child families. With rising numbers of one-child families using childcare in Ireland and elsewhere (Central Statistics Office, 2017; Office of National Statistics, 2018), the childminding home offers unique opportunities for socialising with a small, mixed age group of children, which facilitates peer to peer scaffolding, stimulating the development of younger children and promoting empathy and responsibility in older ones. Not unlike cousins within an extended Irish family, who are connected through a family network within a community (Ni Laoire, 2011, 2014), the children develop close relationships with each other, with deep bonds of mutual affection between older and younger children, despite occasional personality clashes. Participants in the study revealed keen understanding and some innovative praxis in relation to managing the dynamic of such mixed age groups to maximise its opportunities for maturation and relational development for the individual children involved; this is an example of silenced experiential knowledge which ought to be reintegrated into our understandings the knowledge base of early years' practitioners (Campbell-Barr, 2018).

A further familial aspect of the extended childminding family is intergenerational: interactions between young and old are especially appreciated in a country that has retained a strong sense of community (Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018). The current research shows how members of the extended family, such as parents or aunts, are sometimes involved in supporting childminding provision also, providing significant intergenerational interactions for very young children, for whom they can become surrogate grandparents. In several cases, childminders' mothers or mothers-in-law had also been

childminders previously, sometimes in the same area, which suggests an intergenerational cultural model which has remained stable across historical time in the chronosystem described in the Bio-Ecological model.

Cultural research into religion (Cohen & Hill, 2007) has found that Catholicism tends to be more collectivist than individualist, experienced in a social context, and embedded in a community carrying on centuries of inherited religious tradition (Cohen, Wu, & Miller, 2016). This suggests that intergenerational involvement in the extended childminding family in the Close Relationship model in Ireland may derive from a Catholic ethos of mutual support within families (Inglis, 2007; Ní Laoire, 2014). The enduring relationships between childminders and families, and the extended childminding family appear to reproduce the collectivist ethos of a Catholic culture. As Bromer and Henly (2004) have noted, cultures characterized by interdependent rather than individualistic orientations toward family and community reinforce connections to others; this can be reproduced in the childcare practice of that community. An ecocultural study of Latinx childminders in Los Angeles documents aspects of *familismo* (familism) and *compadrazgo* (co-parenting) related to old Catholic customs of godparenting as common beliefs among Latinx families from different countries in Central and South America (Paredes et al., 2018). Inglis (2007) proposes that Irish cultural Catholicism is focussed on belonging to a tradition and cultural heritage, which involves participating in Catholic family and community events such as weddings, holy communions, confirmations, christenings and funerals. Childminder's participation in the milestone celebrations of their client families, from birthdays to communions, underlines the extent to which parents also subscribe to this feature of the Close

Relationship in Ireland, providing further evidence of the continued resonance of childminding with a predominantly Catholic culture in Ireland.

This conceptualisation of the childminding niche as extended family, rooted in Catholic cultural models of interdependence in the community, may underlie the longevity and resilience of this type of childcare, and continuing parental and child preference for childminding (DCYA, 2017a, 2018a), despite increasing availability of crèche and afterschool care. Such cultural scripts may continue to define our understanding of what is ‘best’ for the child and for the family, underlying the unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions implicit in the Close Relationship Model. In the midst of rapid changes in Irish society, and its increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity (Garrity & Canavan, 2017; Garrity et al., 2017), present findings suggest that childminding retains its importance as a family-based form of childcare which is still valued by young families. While some childminding services have undoubtedly been displaced (Gallagher, 2012), new generations of young parents continue to become childminders and use childminders in order that young children can be cared for at home in Ireland, suggesting the continued power of a shared, recognised cultural model of close relationships within Irish childminding.

9.2 THE REAL LIFE LEARNING MODEL

This research has also documented a Real Life Learning model in Ireland, which has not previously been described as a cultural model, in ecocultural terms. This Real Life Learning model identified three key components: a relational, nurturing pedagogy with a child-led emergent curriculum; an enriched home learning environment replete with affordances; and consistent interactive connections with the local community. Many of these components – relational,

nurturing child-led pedagogy, emergent curriculum in mixed age group, enriched home learning environment – have been highlighted in previous studies as key elements of childminding practice. Findings in the present study strengthen previous descriptions of Real Life Learning in the UK, Sweden and the USA (Fauth et al., 2011, 2013; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012; Shannon et al., 2014), by characterising them as a cultural model within the framework of Ecocultural Theory. Furthermore, the emphasis on interactions in the community can be considered a unique dimension of childminding not previously highlighted in Ireland.

The Real Life Learning Model was pointedly differentiated by participants from perceptions of school readiness commonly found in centre-based preschool settings (Ring et al., 2016), and it also presents significant contrasts with the School Readiness model found among childminders described in California (Tonyan, 2017; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Significantly, as for the Close Relationship model, the linkage must be understood between childminders' choice of pedagogy and the structural parameters of group size and adult-child ratio. In California, a small-scale family childcare licence allows for up to eight children, and large-scale licence allows up to 14 children with an assistant (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Tonyan & Nuttall (2014) explicitly link the aspirations of large-scale licence holders to open a centre with bureaucratic models of preschool care (Bromer & Henly, 2004), such as the School Readiness cultural model. These large-scale licence holders closely resemble the Irish solo preschool provider, who can offer a sessional preschool service for up to 11 children under the free preschool programme, sometimes in home-based environments (DCYA, 2019a; Neylon, 2012). A recent report on perceptions of school readiness among parents, teachers and early educators confirmed the prevalence of a school

readiness system of beliefs among stakeholders, even if contested, with widely varied perceptions of its implications for preschool practice, highlighting the need for “shared understandings of school readiness that are informed by child-led and developmentally appropriate criteria” (Ring et al., 2016, p. 10). It could be argued that the large-scale family childcare providers in California offer a setting more similar to preschool provision in Ireland than a grouping of multiple families within a childminding ecological niche, with no more than six children at any one time. This key structural difference in adult-child ratio and group size helps to explain the minimal evidence of the School Readiness model as described by Tonyan et al. (2017, 2014) among the childminders in the current study. In its stead, the Real Life Learning model, which emerged from the study, seems function optimally in the more intimate settings involved in the study.

Smaller group size is a vital structural component of the Real Life Learning model. By virtue of being more intimate, these settings allow for higher levels of adult attention and more frequent interaction with each child in a nurturing pedagogy (Hayes & Kernan, 2008; Hayes, 2007, 2012, 2019). Smaller group size has been associated with higher process quality in a large study in Flanders (Laevers et al., 2016). With smaller numbers, childminders can be more flexible with regards to routine, allowing the child’s needs and interests to be prioritised more easily (Melhuish, 2016b), in a child-led, emergent curriculum (Rinaldi, 2006). Caring for small numbers of children in an enriched home environment also facilitates freedom for outings in the community, giving children access to a wider variety of affordances in the local environment (Kernan & Devine, 2010; Kernan, 2015). Regular outings also promote the development of connections with the community, grounding the child’s sense of identity and belonging as Aistear and Síolta espouse (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009).

9.2.1 An alternative pedagogy

A significant finding in relation to the development of policy on childminding in Ireland has been the first detailed documentation of an alternative, more traditional pedagogy of Real Life Learning, in which the primary goal is exploring the learning opportunities presented by real life experiences, mediated through child-led play and explorations in a relationship-driven learning environment. The concept of relationship-driven learning is central to the Real Life Learning model. The close, intimate relationship between the childminder and the child mediates bi-directional learning: in this context, seeing, knowing and understanding each child holistically was a point of professional pride, as Tonyan (2017) has also described. Intersubjectivity, most simply understood as the interchange of thoughts and feelings, between two persons, facilitated by empathy, is at the heart of this awareness of the child's being - personality, perspectives and interests - and forms the core of a child-led approach to learning (Becker-Weidman, 2005; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001; Trevarthen & Delafield-Butt, 2017). Trevarthen et al. (2017) speak of a "responsive pedagogy" (p.3) which respects the infant's meaning making initiatives, in which responding to the young child's overtures can build shared narratives of meaning, which are "cornerstones of a sensitive pedagogy that captures the imagination and interest of children" (p.15). Hayes (2007, 2012, 2019) proposes a nurturing pedagogy that focuses on shared, two-way, active engagement between child and adult in bi-directional interactions, with connotations of rich, nourishing warmth and care in the relationship. Relational pedagogy also emphasises active engagement alongside and with children at play (Hedges & Cooper, 2018).

The unique nature of each individual childminding setting in the study was a reflection of the interaction between the interests, abilities and characteristics of the minded children and the particular interests, knowledge and skills of the childminder. The Bio-Ecological Model of Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) posits, that the child's personal characteristics and dispositions interact with the personal characteristics and dispositions of the other children and adults in a process which generates new knowledge and transforms the environment in bi-directional synergy (Hayes et al., 2017). In ecocultural theory (Tonyan, 2015), this web of interactions shapes the daily routine of activities, which is the visible result of a process of adaptation of people in relationships, resources, emotions and motives, values and beliefs shaping the cultural organization of a particular niche.

Discussion of pedagogy specific to childminding is rare. In one of the few studies focussed on the pedagogy of childminding, Freeman (Freeman, 2011b) describes childminders' approach in socio-cultural terms as "authentic pedagogy" in a "warm, active environment of belonging" (p. 228) with a focus on child-led play, referencing the practice of Reggio Emilia, in describing childminders' responsiveness and reflection. Responsive, attuned interactions between child and childminder in the everyday routines of life are the pathways underlying the cultural model of Real Life Learning described in the present study. As Rogoff et al. (2009; 2007) have shown, the child's natural enthusiasm motivates the learning of conventional practices and beliefs supporting the traditions and inventions of a culture, embodied in daily routine practices of beloved adults.

Oft-mentioned terms in the study narratives were 'freedom' and 'every day skills', terms which echo how Reggio Emilia centres give children the freedom to explore the "hundred languages" (Edwards et al., 1998) of childhood in play with

multiple forms of media, to discover how they may be used in the skills of everyday life. This freedom was evidenced by the relaxed informality of childminder praxis in the present study: apart from photos, there were almost no written observations or other forms of documentation in evidence. This is similar to childminding practice in France, where the main goal is also ‘éveil’ (awakening), understood as accompanying the child’s unfolding development at all levels in the daily routine of everyday life, while enculturating the children in locally valued ideals, such as encouraging a large vocabulary, and eating multi-course meals at the table with all the family (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2018).

This is a pedagogy where freedom and flexibility are prioritised; such flexible, unstructured freedom to learn at the child’s own pace contrasts with the trend towards schoolification in early years learning in recent years (Janssen & Vandebroek, 2018), even though many ECE educators contest the emphasis on school readiness, assessment and achievement of normative goals for very young children (Ring et al., 2016). In this context, the Real Life Learning model could be considered evidence of an older, alternative approach, where care and nurture are prioritised in practice, and where learning to be, learning to learn, and learning to live together (OECD, 2006) are deeply rooted values underpinning the daily routine of activities in childminding homes.

9.2.2 The enriched home learning environment

A noteworthy component identified as part of the Real Life Learning model in Ireland was the attention paid to the provision of an enriched home learning environment in order to provide opportunities for learning, allowing children to freely exploit the affordances of enriched home environments, indoors and

outdoors (Gibson, 1977; Lindberg, 2014). The particular niche of the childminding home environment, incorporating three separate microsystems (childminder's home, childminder's workplace, childcare environment for other children) was reflected in physical environments which, in many cases, had been adapted and extended to facilitate an enriched learning environment, including accessible outdoor space for minded children. This contrasts with Lynch's (2011) finding that access to the outdoors was lacking in typical Irish homes in her study of children's home play environments as well as Kernan & Devine's (2010) finding that the outdoors was increasingly marginalised in young children's everyday experience in early childhood settings.

The environment, routines and people within the home provide many opportunities for the spontaneous learning essential to early years development (Hayes et al., 2017). Implicit in rich learning environments is the provision of opportunities for children to engage in progressively more complex reciprocal interactions with the people, objects and symbols through the affordances therein (Gibson, 1977; Lindberg, 2014). Affordances have been described as those features of the environment which children value, which invite exploration and imagination, the potential starting point of the meaning-making process between the child and the environment. This conceptualisation reinforces the importance of the environment in relation to the child's agency in his/her unfolding development; perceiving the environment from the perspective of the children can also generate shared moments of discovery (Kernan, 2015).

The potential for the home learning environment to provide natural scaffolding for rich role-play and social learning is evident, given the small number of children of mixed ages. In an increasingly age-stratified school environment, the mixed age group in itself is an affordance, opening fresh

avenues of exploration and imagination (Fagan, 2009; Gray, 2011). The active engagement of the childminder can also enrich the joint learning between younger and older children, as each develops new skills: increasing and honing vocabulary for the younger child, while growing empathy and responsibility in the older one.

In an enriched home environment, many of the activities which form the childminders' daily routine echo those of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) Index developed in the UK for the Effective Provision of Preschool Education project. Melhuish et al.(2008) theorise that a rich HLE is related to the “more motivational aspects of child development (e.g., learning to learn)... congruent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that children learn higher psychological processes through their social environment and specifically with adult guidance operating within a child's “zone of proximal development” (2008, p. 108). Evidence of the impact of such activities with guidance by childminders may also be seen in the higher than average scores in verbal ability and emotional self-regulation among three year olds with childminders in the Study of Early Education and Development study in the UK (Melhuish et al., 2017; Otero & Melhuish, 2015).

9.2.3 Connections with the community

A striking feature of the praxis of childminding in this study was the type of learning opportunities prioritised in the Real Life Learning model in Ireland in daily outings and excursions, and regular contact with schools and community groups. Particularly noteworthy was the prevalence of daily outings to schools and preschools for collections, not to mention parks, playgrounds, libraries and shops along the way, as well as special excursions to local landmarks and monuments, which gave children access to a wide range of affordances in their

local environment. Noteworthy also was the spontaneity of many of the outings recorded in photos: freedom to engage with the environment without excessive regulatory requirements, such as formal health and safety risk assessments (DCYA, 2016a), was another aspect of the freedom and flexibility prized by both parents and childminders in the present study.

Another significant finding in the present research was the extent to which childminders facilitated children's contact with the community beyond the childminding setting by bringing children out to toddler groups in addition to preschool or school collections, providing opportunities for learning to live together with the local community (OECD, 2006). In exploring children's experiences in childminding settings in the USA and Sweden, Freeman and Karlsson (2011a; 2012) also note how childminders can form part of a local community network, mediating children's relationships with the everyday world, building stable and substantive relational ties, with continuity between childminders, parents and neighbourhood schools. Routine collections from local schools and preschools have been found to give children opportunities to make connections with the broader community of children beyond the home, supporting their transitions into these settings (Ang et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Grace & Bowes, 2011).

By participating in everyday activities in the local area with their childminder, children absorb enduring messages from people, the environment and the wider community (French, 2007b) helping to create a sense of place, identity and belonging, as encouraged by Irish national early years frameworks (NCCA, 2015). Ireland is generally regarded as a country that has retained a strong sense of community, ranking consistently highly in social connections and community compared with other countries in the OECD's Better Life index

(Gallagher & Fitzpatrick, 2017, 2018). In an ethnographic study in the West of Ireland, Garrity et al. (2017) have documented how community childcare settings can help meet the need for a sense of identification and belonging, offering a natural support system for parents relocating to a new area in a community of care; it could be argued that childminders can also mediate relationships with the broader community for minded children and their families. This value for community connections, 'learning to be together' (OECD, 2006) has typified Irish culture for many generations, and is incorporated into the ecocultural Real Life Learning model among childminders. In changing times, such continuity of values across generations can contribute to a stable, substantial, relational foundation for young children's lives in communities of care.

9.3 ECOCULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDMINDER PROFESSIONALISM

Significant findings in this research argue for a new ecocultural understanding of childminder professionalism, in response to one of the original overarching aims: to interrogate the concept of professionalism from the perspective of childminders and parents using childminding. For clarity, this discussion defines professionalism in terms of behaviours and attitudes, and has referenced professionalisation up to this point in terms of the process described by Brannen and Moss (2003). However, ecocultural understandings of childminder agency in relation to professionalism and professionalisation may challenge the usefulness to childminders of a paradigm in which rising levels of education and improved conditions grow alongside better career prospects and collaborative relationships, culminating in distinctive professional approaches to work.

9.3.1 Childminders' agency

The ecocultural interrogation of professionalism in this study considered the childminder's intentionality (Doherty et al., 2006) in terms of agency, in directing her own service; connection in terms her level of engagement with external agencies; advocacy for the profession of childminding at various levels, personal, local and national, building on previous findings in phase one concerning perceptions of professionalism in childminding. Findings in the current study in relation to childminder agency and advocacy suggest that the role of the individual childminder has been understated in the existing ecocultural definition of childminding:

as a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family, children's families and assistants) negotiate the project of raising children" (Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014, p. 119).

This conveys the impression that all individuals and families involved somehow play interchangeable roles in negotiating the project of raising the children in the niche, and it fails to give sufficient emphasis to the agency of the individual childminder in initiating, organising and maintaining the niche. According to Ecocultural Theory, a family's primary objective is the creation of the stable ecological niche necessary for the family to thrive (Weisner & Bernheimer, 2004). From an ecocultural perspective, a childminding service can be understood as an adaptation in the family niche in ways that are meaningful in terms of family beliefs and values, (concerning the 'best' way to raise children); congruent with the needs and characteristics (of very young dependent children and new mothers); and sustainable for long periods of time, given the constraints and opportunities of the family (in terms of contributing to the family income)

(Paredes et al., 2018; Tonyan, 2012, 2015). To give greater emphasis to childminder's agency in this family adaptation to childminding, this research would propose the following ecocultural definition instead:

Childminding is a home-based ecological niche in which *the childminder* works together with children, their own family, children's families and assistants to negotiate the project of raising children.

Furthermore, a new ecocultural understanding of professionalism could also be meaningfully linked to Tonyan's (2017) ecocultural reconceptualization of quality as: "the alignment of children's opportunities for learning and development with locally-relevant ideals or cultural models" (p. 3). This definition implies that quality in childminding in Ireland can best be understood in terms of alignment with childminders' and parents' shared understanding of the ecocultural models of Close Relationships and Real Life Learning described in this research. Such an ecocultural definition of quality is consistent with prior research showing, for example how alignment with local ecoculture through the Te Whariki curriculum can improve the impact of children's opportunities for learning and development on outcomes in terms of positive learning dispositions (Cooper, Hedges, & Dixon, 2013). As can be seen in the Real Life Learning model, childminding can offer a pedagogical approach, distinct from other types of early years care, which has been linked to positive developmental and educational outcomes for children (Melhuish et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2016). This research therefore proposes a redefinition of childminding professionalism in ecocultural terms (building on Tonyan's ecocultural definition of quality above) as "the alignment of childminders' praxis with locally relevant ideals and cultural models of children's learning and development."

Reconceptualising childminder professionalism as the alignment of childminders' praxis with locally relevant ideals and cultural models of children's learning and development should not only be understood in relation to children, but also in light of relationships with client families. A significant finding from study narratives was the suggestion of a common code of conduct among childminders, which valued trustworthiness, reliability and flexibility. The development of trust was the cornerstone of childminder professionalism in study narratives: it was an honour to be considered trustworthy to be entrusted with the care and nurture of other parents' children. As Garrity & Canavan (2017) describe, the growth of trust is slow, built through vulnerability met with loving support, and mutual open, honest communication in negotiating evolving, very personal relationships. Such relationships of trust requires considerable emotional maturity as Page (2018) has specified: the emotional resilience and the reflective ability to become self-aware; the capacity to de-centre, thinking about and acting with the needs of the other person in mind, non-judgementally; the willingness to invest a level of emotional intimacy into the relationship; the patience to build a gradual, authentic, reciprocal relationship with the child and parent; in order to create an enduring mutual relationship of affection. This mutual understanding is the basis of unwritten "permission" (Page, 2011, p. 312) from parent to caregiver to love their child, without threatening the primacy of the parental relationship. Such trust is the foundation childminders' praxis and pedagogy as present study narratives have shown.

Corollaries of trust were reliability and flexibility according to study participants, vital attributes of a childminder's professionalism since the client family depends on the childminder to sustain their family routine. In an approach close to an ethic of care, which "foregrounds the qualities of

interdependence, responsiveness, interconnectedness and relationality in our understanding of the human condition” (Garrity & Canavan, 2017, p. 13), childminders’ sense of commitment to the minded child and family can lead to altruistic self-sacrifice for the client family’s benefit. Working through illness in order to provide a reliable service appeared to be common practice in study narratives, as did extending hours flexibly in order to support the minded family in times of crisis, consistent with findings in previous research (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011, 2013). Narratives in the study revealed a professional pride in building and maintaining secure childminding relationships with families over long periods of time through consistent love and kindness as trustworthy, reliable and flexible professional childminders; these were a vital component of their professional reputation in the community.

9.3.2 The childminding career

A significant finding in the present study, in both phases of research, was the important role that becoming a parent played in the decision to open a childminding service: most participants in this study started as parents, not practitioners or educators, however well-educated and professional they may be. Only a small minority had previously worked in other childcare settings, and views varied on childminding as a career. While this has been found in previous research (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011; Mooney et al., 2001), its impact on childminding praxis and its implications for public policy on childminding have not been fully explored or applied.

In terms of the childminder’s agency in initiating a service, two motives predominate: the desire to be able to raise her own child or children, and the need to gain a sufficient income to do so, not, primarily, the provision an ECEC

service in the community (Brooker, 2016). With the goal of creating a stable family niche in mind, childminders view their commitment to minded children and their families both as a contractual arrangement, and as a relationship within a type of extended family, as has been explored in the Close Relationship Model, with an alternative pedagogy of Real Life Learning, similar to parents in the home.

Understanding childminders are parents first helps elucidate the close parallels in responses from parents and childminders in the first phase of this research: childminders and parents seek family-friendly regulations for childminding because they are all parents seeking home care for their children. Understanding childminders are parents first helps to explain the persistence of this form of provision, and its continued attraction, despite poor pay and working conditions, the challenges of isolation, and low levels of societal esteem. Understanding childminders are parents first can also shed light on the issue of childminder attrition: childminders will continue their service for as long as it meets the needs of their own family, relationally and financially, or at least, when it does not conflict with the needs of their own family, as present study narratives have shown.

This study has highlighted two types of childminder: the novice childminder, and the career childminder, as previous research has also shown. Most childminders start when their children are very young because they want to stay home with their own children, the highest ranked reason for opening a service in the online survey. However, once the children are in school, many novice childminders will seek other, better paid or more fulfilling employment (Mooney et al., 2001). Some go on to become career childminders, embracing the role long term, for a variety of personal, family and financial reasons (Glorie,

2009; Tonyan & Nuttall, 2014). Where childminding is a stable, financially secure career path, childminders are more likely to remain in the profession, as rising numbers of childminders in France attest (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2016, 2018).

Nonetheless, as the CoRe report summarises: “In many countries, they [childminders] work in very difficult conditions, with limited educational support and low income. As a consequence, professional mobility (both horizontal and vertical) is virtually impossible for them. In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce...” (Urban et al. 2011, p. 14). For Vandebroek and Bauters (2017), this poses a dilemma of sustainability and fairness, which requires improving conditions for childminders by increasing the standard of professional qualifications for childminding, thus mitigating high attrition rates among childminders, increasing their career prospects in cognate fields as well as improving the quality of childcare for children. However, this approach to professionalisation has failed to produce the expected results to date. Despite extensive professionalisation, with rising qualifications among childminders (Nutbrown, 2012), the number of registered childminders continues on a downward trajectory in the UK, as declining numbers of young parents join the profession (Ofsted, 2017, 2019), and the number of informal childminders continues to rise (Bryson et al., 2012; Rutter & Evans, 2012; Simon et al., 2015). Similarly, in Flanders, a common framework and ECEC qualification (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019) has failed to stem the attrition of childminder numbers (Vandebroek & Van der Mespel, 2017).

Study findings suggest that failure to recognise the importance of their personal role as parents, in parallel with that of childcare professional, could be a factor in the growing problem of childminder attrition across Europe. It suggests

that top-down, imposed professionalisation of childminding is profoundly unattractive to the current generation of young parents, who will embrace childminding only if it enables the creation of a stable family niche, in ecocultural terms. For example, in the UK, a severe drop in new childminders joining the profession has coincided with the introduction of free preschool hours for two year olds, partly because qualified childminders cannot give places to related children, discouraging young parents, who want to stay home with their own children, from registering as childminders (Lepper, 2019), and reducing the recruitment of childminders who might consider continuing after the initial period, thus exacerbating natural childminder attrition.

Furthermore, neither childminders – qualified or unqualified - nor parents using childminders, appear to consider ECEC qualifications or early years frameworks of particular importance in relation to the quality of childminding provision (Brooker, 2016; Fauth et al., 2011, 2013; McKeon, 2013). In an extensive study of the impact of the Early Years’ framework on childminding provision in England, Brooker (2016) found childminders querying its usefulness for their self-described home-from-home services, chosen as such by parents: “To the extent that the EYFS framework supports and validates these [home-from-home] assumptions, it is beneficial; to the extent that it challenges or questions these assumptions, it presents them with problems” (2016, p. 7).

Of relevance at this juncture is the perspective taken in the early years’ services in Reggio Emilia, where professionalism is conceived not as the acquisition of accredited qualifications but the acquisition of a reflective stance by practitioners (Urban et al., 2011). This points to a style of professionalisation much more appropriate to childminding context, better aligned with the

development of the emotional skills needed in the context of professional love (Page, 2011, 2018; Taggart, 2011).

Childminders' views of professionalism and professionalisation vary considerably along a spectrum from demands for inclusion in the ECEC sector (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017) to calls for recognition as home-from-home, independent, childcare providers (Brooker, 2016; O'Connell, 2008, 2011). That wide range of views was reflected in both phases of the present study; however, childminders of all views tended to reject technical performative professionalism of policies, paperwork and property imposed by regulation, in favour of an autonomous agentic professionalism from within (Osgood, 2006). Official professionalising discourse for childminders in the past has involved "the rejection of what are seen as hegemonic, harmful and conservative discourses of mothering, home and family....in favour of the 'necessary language' (Dahlberg et al., 1999:2) of 'quality': 'skills', 'training', 'business' and 'professionalism'" (O'Connell, 2008, p. 13).

Findings in the present research highlight the need to incorporate the Close Relationship and Real Life Learning models, with their emphasis on love and affection, into an ecocultural understanding of childminders' professionalism, in which the emotional skills of professional love are appreciated and valued, as is increasingly understood to be necessary in all forms of ECEC (Page, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013). Evidence points to the development of a profession thinking and speaking for itself (Urban & Dalli, 2012) which seeks recognition for childminders' praxis in alignment with locally relevant ideals and cultural models of children's learning and development. It is time for a more participatory approach to professional childminding: a bottom-up, organic model

emerging from an understanding of childminding ecoculture grounded in childminders' lived experience as family-focussed childcare providers.

9.4 THE PARADOXOLOGY OF CHILDMINDING IN IRELAND

In the course of the present research, the paradox of modern Irish childminding was investigated: open to professionalisation (Brannen & Moss, 2003), yet prioritizing family-like close relationships and real life learning in unique cultural models, in contrast to standard mainstream ECEC provision. Study participants voiced perceptions of childminding as 'other' in key areas, and the resultant perception of being undervalued or excluded in certain domains. The exploration of the ecoculture of Irish childminding has heightened the awareness of childminding paradoxes: issues, contradictions and tensions which require deeper exploration. This paradoxology⁸ will examine further the tension between public and private domains: liminal conflict between home and workplace, boundaries between emotional labour and entrepreneurship, the struggle between sustainability and obsolescence. It will sketch some other possible ecocultural models found in the study and situate this research in its European context in order to elucidate the apparent paradoxes of childminding.

⁸ In praise (doxology) of paradox: absurd at first instance but has meaning on reflection. (Urban Dictionary, 2019).

9.4.1 Paradox 1: Home as Workplace

For childminders, there can be tension between private and public roles: personal identity as mothers, as parents, forms the motivation for the professional role as childminders, as already discussed. The family home is primarily for the family's use, but it is also the childminder's place of work, creating sensitivity to the liminality of private and public, and discomfort with official intrusion, however great childminders' desire for recognition, and however much the need for regulation is acknowledged, in this study and others (Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017). The juxtaposition of the private and public dimensions of childminding is accentuated in the childminding environment, which serves as both a home and a workplace for the childminder; the ecocultural examination has highlighted family adaptations, family tensions, and challenges for public policy.

An early ecocultural model of childminding identified by Tonyan & Nuttall (2014) was called Home, and emphasized flexibility, intimacy, and relationships within a substitute home. This conceptualisation of childminding as home-from-home care was widespread in the current research, also echoing findings in research in England into parents' views of quality childminding. Brooker (2016) suggests that "parents who prefer their young children to be in a 'home' rather than an institution may be basing their decision on genuine insights into differences" (p.81) in the quality of provision, such as individualised attention and continuity of care for the child in the smaller groups, which have been associated with higher process quality (Declercq et al., 2016). The unique environment of the family home used for childminding purposes was emphasised through the ecocultural lens, which allowed for deeper understanding of how this niche operates within the resources and constraints of the family ecology and according

to the beliefs and values within the family's culture, creating and sustaining an everyday routine in which children are raised (Tonyan, 2015). In order for the family and the childminding service to thrive, the family at the heart of a particular childminding niche must make specific adaptations in line with their cultural models and scripts (Holland & Quinn, 1987). According to the Bio-Ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the family home functioning as the childminding setting constitutes an overlapping mesosystem of two interacting microsystems (Hayes et al., 2017). This overlapping mesosystem, with its duality of purpose as childminder's home and workplace, gives rise to particular forms of adaptation, in the physical premises, financially, and in the daily routine.

Findings in the present study highlighted childminders' belief that the home requires special consideration in any regulatory system because it is the dwelling place of a particular family, where the kitchen, the living room, and the garden are fully functioning and purposeful, not just during childminding hours, consistent with previous research (Freeman & Karlsson, 2012; O'Connell, 2010, 2011). Adaptations according to this cultural script involved defining the boundary between home places and service places, for example, keeping certain rooms off limits for minded children and devoted to family use alone.

Furthermore, the particular niche of the childminding home environment was reflected in physical environments which, in many cases, had been adapted and extended to create an enriched learning environment that worked for the children; a common adaptation involved creating playrooms inside and play areas outside, providing affordances to meet the exploration needs and unfolding development of very young children. These adaptations are in line with the prevalent cultural script of modern parenting, which places the child's needs and

interests as central; participants' scores underlined their modern attitudes to children in the widely-used parental modernity scale (Schaefer, 1987) in the background study (See Appendix 4).

Tensions within this overlapping mesosystem of home and workplace were revealed using the ecocultural lenses which highlighted the nature of previously unexamined family adaptations within a childminding niche. In particular, findings from the background study highlighted the level of economic subsidisation of services by spouses or partners, without which these childminding services would not be economically viable. Furthermore, considerable family financial planning was recorded before a service was opened, in the form of the purchase of necessary equipment, most often from family income. A further tension was revealed using the ecocultural lens of daily routine, which uncovered diverse family adaptations in terms of the usage of the home in running the service. There was increased shared domestic labour by both partner and children, restrictions on adult children's activities in the home; as well as increased maintenance for the house and furnishings. Furthermore, unpaid assistance in the daily routine, with cooking or school runs, was usually performed by members of the extended family, such as a parent or aunt, often acting in the role of grandparent to all the children in the setting.

This significant financial and personal investment of family members across generations bespeaks commitment to a cultural script concerning the importance of raising children at home. While increasing numbers of young parents are in external employment today, current findings suggest that many couples consider the rewards of childminding for their own children in the home to outweigh the sacrifices financially and domestically. Ecocultural Theory suggests these adaptations are made, because they are meaningful in terms of

this cultural script of home rearing, congruent with the needs and characteristics of very young children and young parents; and sustainable for relatively long periods of time, given the constraints and opportunities of the family involved in a childminding niche.

In terms of public policy, it is worth noting that the link between childminding and motherhood has been perceived as something negative in past research: for example, in Swedish public records between 1970-1999, there was a belittling discourse on the role of childminders as characterised by dependence, isolation, lack of esteem and development in efforts to promote engagement in external labour markets by mothers outside the home (Jansson, 2008). Bruner (1980) described childminding in the UK as the accordion pleat in childcare provision, which expands to meet labour market demands; such rapid expansion of childminding in Flanders in the 1990s has been considered the cause of counter-professionalisation (Vandenbroeck et al., 2013) as “‘inexpensive’ mother-ersatz models gathered popularity” (Bauters & Vandenbroeck, 2017, p. 3).

This perception of childminding was not echoed in the present research; study findings indicate quite the opposite views among Irish stakeholders, who clearly value relationships above qualifications when choosing a childminder, and appreciate the home environment, consistent with recent research in Ireland revealing parents’ and children’s positive perceptions of childminding (DCYA, 2018a, 2018b). Perhaps this esteem for home-based childminding in family microsystems can be linked to the respect for the family home in the Irish Constitution at macrosystemic level, or it could be due young parents’ own experiences of being cared for at home, which was commonplace until the mid-1990s (Hayes & Bradley, 2006). It could also be the result of suspicion of institutional care historically (Murphy, Buckley, & Joyce, 2005; Ryan, 2013),

which has been bolstered by recent documentaries investigating child abuse in childcare centres (Moloney, 2014). In Ireland, there has never been a large-scale investigation of poor childminding practice, such as occurred in Europe in the late 19th century (Vandenbroeck, 2009), or in the UK in the 1970s (Bruner, 1980; Mayall & Petrie, 1977).

The invisibility of childminding in public debate about childcare was noted in narratives, as the focus of considerable political effort over the last two decades prioritized centre-based care services over the established informal childminding sector to produce a new marketised childcare infrastructure, subject to neo-liberal forms of governance (Gallagher, 2012). It must be acknowledged that this description of home as workplace positions childminding at an uncomfortable nexus between family and early childhood education in terms of public policy in modern Ireland, where government is actively pursuing dual parent labour market participation (DCYA, 2016b; Moloney, 2016), promoting early education as investment in human capital (Heckman, 2006; Heckman et al., 2010) to achieve better outcomes and a brighter future for children (DCYA, 2014; Govt. of Ireland, 2019). While Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) emphasises the right of the child to nurturing pedagogy and quality education and care, this has not been reflected in recent policy documents, which still appear to prioritise parental labour market activation and children's educational outcomes at school, (DCYA, 2014; Govt. of Ireland, 2019).

Since childminders are perceived to provide childcare, rather than education, the development of a childminding system has not been prioritised: out of annual budget for early years of approximately €100 million annually under Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) and National Childcare Investment Programme (2006-2011), less than 3% was spent to

support quality initiatives for childminders, and since 2010, funding for childminding has been progressively reduced due to budget constraints (DCYA, 2018a). The historical constitutional separation between private and public domains in Ireland (Govt. of Ireland, 1937; Hayes, 2016) makes the overlapping roles of mother and childminder, in the overlapping family microsystems of a childminding mesosystem a considerable challenge for macrosystemic public policy, where provision of childcare has been seen in competition with the family care in some way (Wolfe et al., 2013).

Study findings revealed a continued sense of exclusion, in conjunction with doubts about the possible impact of an insensitive system for Irish childminding in the future even though childminding reform had already commenced in the context of the National Childcare Scheme to support dual parent participation in labour markets (DCYA, 2018a, 2019a, 2019b.) Early childhood education and care for children below school age is still a contested issue, which childcare markets struggle to resolve (Knijn, & Lewis, 2017). It is hoped that clearer understanding of the benefits of childminding for young children combined with the ecocultural insights into the praxis of childminding will support the development of a sensitive, family-friendly, regulatory environment for professional childminders.

9.4.2 Paradox 2: Close Relationships and Entrepreneurship

As identified in the present study, there is a certain tension inherent in the Close Relationship Model between the deep bonds of affection experienced by childminder for the children and the professional detachment considered necessary to run an economically viable childminding service. Since childminders charge money for labour that women usually supply without

financial compensation, they must learn to manage the paradox of professional-emotional labour (Lynch, 2007; Page, 2011). This juxtaposition presents additional challenges to understanding what constitutes professionalism in childminding in the Irish context.

As described by Lynch (2007), love labour is a “distinct and non-commodifiable form of care labour” (p. 550). However while long-term, loving, close relationships form a significant portion of the rewards of childminding, it is always a paid form of childcare by definition (DCYA, 2016a; Dept. of the Environment, 2015). It demands a certain detachment from its practitioners in terms of negotiating boundaries to manage the business relationship, while operating also effectively as a self-employed sole trader or entrepreneur. Since 2000, entrepreneurship and professionalisation have been promoted to encourage those who wished to work with children at home to professionalise by gaining qualifications and registering (notifying) as childminders with Tusla or the local Childcare Committee, in order to run small businesses from their own homes (DCYA, 2008).

There was some evidence of a cultural model of entrepreneurship in present study narratives. Childminders in the present study typically used contracts, policies and procedures in order to set the expectations and limits of the childcare arrangement, as advised by the National Guidelines for Childminders (DCYA, 2008) and by most professional childminding organizations, such as Childminding Ireland, who provide support to self-employed childminders. In addition, competence as the owner/manager of a small childminding business included the capacity to navigate official requirements if registered with Tusla, or notified to a Childcare Committee, or applying for a childminding development grant, or registered with the Departments of Revenue and Social Welfare in

relation to taxation. Moreover, some childminders in the study were engaging with government funding schemes as a means of achieving financial viability.

However, this more recent model of entrepreneurship could conflict with the more dominant Close Relationship Model in times of crisis. Where interpersonal conflict was caused by failures in the business relationship, participants sought to maintain the relationship in most cases, unless it posed an immediate threat to the emotional, social and financial wellbeing of their own family. In ecocultural terms, these conflicts impinge on family thriving on two ecocultural dimensions: threatened disruption of the meaningful close relationships between childminder, children, minded children and their family, and the possible negative economic impact on family resources of a cessation of the childcare arrangement. Study narratives revealed two main sources of relational conflict: a failure to meet agreed financial or contractual obligations; or conflicts between parental and childminder values and practices regarding 'good childcare', as others have also found (Hohmann (formerly Gelder), 2007). The ecocultural interviews revealed the impact of these tensions on childminders' sense of self-efficacy and agency in seeking to manage sadness, anger, resentment and anxiety, or to gain the courage and confidence for a successful confrontation and resolution of the issues, in a collectivist culture known for indirect communication in business, where open, honest confrontation poses an additional layer of challenge (Barron & Schneider, 2011). As other studies of childminding in neo-liberal economies also show, the business model of childminding has limitations: sole, self-employed childminders can be vulnerable to economic mistreatment, where their close emotional bond with the child may be exploited by parents. Equally, a childminder's sense of commitment to the minded child and family can also lead

to altruistic self-sacrifice in order to support the minded family in times of crisis, to her own detriment.

This evidence suggests that building an emotionally healthy childminding niche of families and a financially sound service involves considerable relational skills and emotional maturity. However, childminders' largely intuitive approach to relationships is not particularly valued in national frameworks, where mutual love and affection receive scant attention (Cousins, 2015). The socio-emotional skills necessary to establish responsive relationships of trust with parents are also neglected in current partnership with parent paradigms. Garrity and Canavan (2017) propose a more nuanced approach to partnership with parents based on an ethic of care, which foregrounds the qualities of responsiveness and relationality (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2013), to build trust through open, honest communication between mother and caregiver, who both understand the vulnerabilities in the exchange of care. Page (2018) recommends preparation for professional love be included in the curriculum for early years educators, alongside supportive supervision for the educator in the practice of professional love (Page, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013). Similar recommendations were made by study participants regarding training in family psychology, with dedicated childminding workers in local networks, deemed all the more necessary for supervision (rather than inspection) of lone childminders, who are often working in isolation.

Ultimately, the conceptualisation of childminding in terms of economic discourses alone appears to be limiting and to run contrary to the more ingrained Close Relationship Model. Nonetheless, the challenges of being a self-employed sole trader remain part of the competency requirements of childminders in Ireland. This study indicates that the maintenance of thriving childminding

niches will require ecoculturally aligned professional development which works with the prevalent cultural models in developing such professional skills, in what Tonyan, Nuttall, et al., (2017) describes as a 'just in time' (p.2) model of professional development, responsive to childminders' needs.

9.4.3 Paradox 3: Sustainability or Obsolescence

The ecocultural description of childminding in the Irish context revealed high levels of childminder agency in terms of managing her own childminding service; however, this contrasted starkly with the low levels of engagement with the current ECEC system for childminding in Ireland. Childminders conveyed a sense of agency in their facilitation and management of their own services, though not at the level of policy and regulation. Childminder narratives advocated the need for a family-friendly, proportionate and sensitive regulatory system; however, these narratives also articulated caution that the close, personal and relational ecoculture of childminding would be difficult to align with the disempowering gaze of modernist ECEC regulation (Osgood, 2006).

Amidst debates concerning the professionalism and professionalisation of childminding, numbers of childminders are falling in many jurisdictions, such as the UK, Belgium and Sweden, leading to the view on the part of some authors that childminding may become obsolete (Bauters & Vandebroek, 2017; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). Narratives revealed childminders perceived home-based childminding to be under threat from the rapid expansion in centre-based provision in Ireland and feared for the viability of childminding services long term. The deficit perspective on childminding, articulated in the international literature, was felt to dominate national media and government

discourse despite the uniquely positive, close and enduring bonds generated in these settings, which were so valued by parents and children at local level.

In this context, childminders in Ireland remain reluctant to engage with current regulatory and quality support systems, even when eligible, as evidenced by falling numbers of registrations with Tusla, due to what most participants consider the inappropriate and disproportionate nature of existing regulations and supports (O'Regan, Halpenny, & Hayes, 2019). It is possible that current approaches to formalising childminding are not successful because they continue

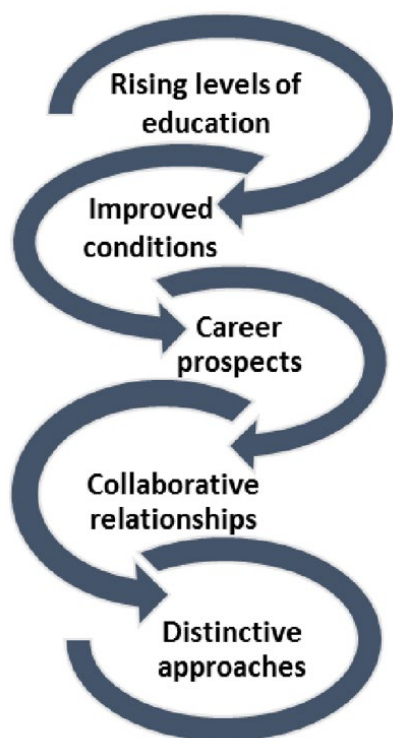


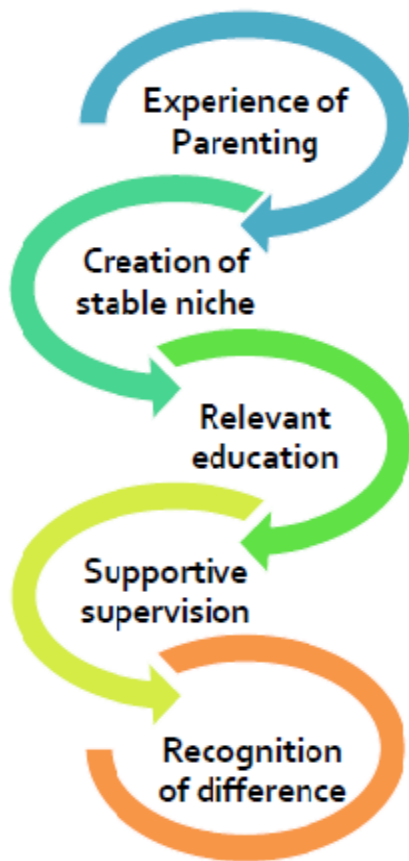
Figure 9-1 The Professionalisation of Care Workers based on Brannen & Moss (2003)

to attempt to squeeze childminding into the ECEC mould through professionalisation, despite a growing body of evidence highlighting the failure of such an approach. In the USA, as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) are designed and implemented in different states, there is a consistent pattern of low levels of participation by family childcare providers (Tonyan, 2017). Of further concern is the increasing disengagement of childminders within well-established, regulated ECEC systems in welfare states as diverse as England, Belgium and Sweden (Vandenbroeck & Bauters, 2017), even though informal childminding continues to be widely used across

Europe and the USA (Child in Mind, 2017; Tonyan, Paulsell, et al., 2017).

Despite seeming progress on the stages of Brannen and Moss' paradigm (Figure 9-1), findings in the present study have highlighted childminder demands for different, fresh approach to childminder professionalism and professionalisation.

This ecocultural research points to three key differences in childminders' professionalisation in terms of starting point, goals and needs. Firstly, a childminder's starting point is most commonly the experience of parenting, not a decision to become an ECEC professional; this means that rising to higher qualifications is not a primary concern. Indeed, in order to raise their own children, many childminders leave careers with much better conditions for which they are highly qualified. Secondly, as Ecocultural Theory proposes, their goal is



primarily the creation of a stable family niche rooted in their family values and beliefs; organising a childminding service needs to be understood as a meaningful, congruent and sustainable adaptation in the service of that goal. Therefore, professional needs of childminders are more concerned with relevant or 'just-in-time' education and training specific to childminding (Tonyan, Nuttall, et al., 2017), supportive supervision (rather than inspection) in the context of professional love and relationships (Page, 2011, 2018). Childminders in Ireland require public recognition and respect for the difference in provision that childminding offers rather than pressure to conform to centre-based standards.

Figure 9-2 An Ecocultural View of Professionalisation for Childminders

Furthermore, by characterising childminding praxis and pedagogy in Ireland in terms of cultural models within the framework of Ecocultural Theory, findings in the present study both strengthen and are strengthened by previous descriptions of Close Relationships and Real Life Learning in childminding

settings in the UK, France, Sweden and the USA (Fauth, Jelcic, Leo, Wilmott, & Owen, 2011; Fauth et al., 2013; Freeman & Karlsson, 2012; Shannon, Geraghty, & Molyneaux, 2014). This fresh, eco-cultural conceptualisation of the Brannen and Moss' model of professionalisation for childminders has the potential to make a significant contribution to understanding the particular ecocultural niche of childminding in Ireland, as well as offering a guide to supporting professional childminding in sustainable system. It could also contribute to understanding childminding in other jurisdictions where informal childminding remains outside the ECEC system, or where childminders are disengaging with the existing system, such as in the UK and Belgium.

9.5 AN ECOCULTURALLY ALIGNED SYSTEM

While professionalised childminders in Ireland and elsewhere do seek inclusion in a competent ECEC system, the present ecocultural research revealed that recognition is sought for the unique, prevalent cultural models of childminding, within a sensitive regulatory regime. Such a competent system could support and develop their distinctive professional praxis in alignment with locally relevant ideals or cultural models of children's learning and development. As Tonyan et al. (2017) note, "Perhaps the most critical (issue) is that the field lacks rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of strategies for supporting quality in home-based child care settings" (p. 633).

Ecocultural Theory can provide a useful lens with which to compare the effectiveness of strategies for supporting childminding in various European systems. Some striking differences in approach and outcomes can be observed, which the present research suggests could possibly be related to their degree of ecocultural alignment or misalignment with local cultural models.

In England, many different strategies have been attempted to recruit and retain professional childminders, including childminder networks (Owen & Roby, 2006), childminders as entrepreneurs (Greener, 2009), and childminders as qualified early years professionals (Nutbrown, 2012) inspected by Ofsted under the Early Years Framework: none of these strategies have stemmed the attrition rate among English childminders (Ofsted, 2017, 2019). Paradoxically, rising numbers of government funded childcare places for increasingly younger cohorts of children in the UK have coincided with falling numbers of new childminders joining the profession, in part because qualified childminders cannot give funded places to related children (Lepper, 2019). This may point to the misalignment of subsidy design with the local childminding ecoculture, a strategy which is unlikely to prove sustainable (Tonyan, 2012).

The introduction of Dutch style childminding agencies in the UK provides a telling illustration of the principle ecocultural alignment: since cultural models express locally valued ideals and scripts, the importation of any model of childminding would require a reflective implementation process to align it with local ecoculture. One of the causes of childminder attrition in the UK was thought to be the demise of local authority childminding networks due to insufficient funding (Truss, 2012). It was hoped that introducing the commercial, Dutch-style childminding agencies would provide the same benefits as supportive networks, while reducing inspection and support costs, making childminding more affordable for parents (Department for Education, 2014). In the Netherlands, commercial childminding agencies had emerged organically in the 1990s in response to increased childcare demand, providing parents with access, for a fee, to a matched selection of trusted, local childminders, who also paid membership fees to the agency (Boogaard et al., 2013). In efforts to increase the

supply of childcare through deregulation in the Netherlands, these agencies proliferated, since generous parental subsidies for childminding care were contingent on childminder's membership of such an agency for training, support and supervision. Despite the impact of tightening regulations since 2010, childminding agencies in the Netherlands continue to function well, undergoing inspection on behalf of their childminders, as mandated by law; only 5% of childminders receive individual inspections annually. In 2018, there were 31,350 registered childminders, with 654 childminding agencies (Recht in Kinderopvang, 2019) from a population of nearly 17.2 million. By contrast, since their introduction in 2014, it appears that childminders in England are unwilling to engage with commercial, fee-charging childminding agencies, as a replacement for supportive, local authority funded, peer networks. In March 2019, there were 39,000 childminders in England from a population of 56 million; there were 11 childminder agencies registered with Ofsted, of which only six had childminders enrolled (Ofsted, 2019). Ecocultural Theory would suggest that the relative success of this approach to supporting quality childminding in the Netherlands is related to the organic nature of its origins, rooted in the strength of Dutch entrepreneurial culture historically. On the other hand, the lack of engagement with the childminding agency model in the UK may be due to its misalignment with the existing, widely promoted English model of self-employed, registered childminders, who are proud to be directly inspected by Ofsted as early years professionals in their own right, without the intermediary of an agency.

By contrast, France has implemented a variety of government schemes, whose success suggests that they have been designed in alignment with locally valued childminding ideals and models, as Ecocultural Theory proposes. In the early 1990s, as part of female labour market activation, a national registration

scheme was introduced with a tailored qualification for registered childminders, a networking and buddy system, access to resources as well as supportive supervision (Daly & Clavero, 2003). In 2004, a special tax exempt employment status for independent childminders was created in response to trade union pressure resulting in improved working conditions for childminders. In addition, various hybrid forms of childminding were also created, where childminders could co-operate in small groups or as paid employees in conjunction with a local municipal crèche (Letablier & Fagnani, 2009; Vandebroek & Bauters, 2017). Combined with income-related subsidies for parents using childminders, and full welfare coverage for childminders under employment law, this supportive system has facilitated the growth of registered childminding in France: from 166,700 in 1995 (Algava & Ruault, 2003) to 327,775 in 2016 (Observatoire National de la Petite Enfance, 2016), providing most childcare places for children up to three years of age.

France is the only state to have experienced such an increase in the numbers of registered childminders of all the states with regulated childminding systems in Europe, despite operating a split system. Contrary to expectations, not even the inclusion of childminders in unitary systems and common frameworks appears to be conducive to a thriving childminding sector in Sweden or Belgium (Jansson, 2008; Vandebroek & Van der Mespel, 2017). In Denmark, the number of registered childminders is also declining, although childminders there operate under supportive supervision within a unitary system and receive some of the highest wages and most secure working conditions in Europe (Department for Education, 2013).

Paradoxically, the rude health of French childminding may be attributed partially to the split system under which it operates. An ecocultural perspective

suggests that the foundation of the sustainable French regulatory and support system could lie not only in its responsiveness to the felt needs and real requirements of childminders on the ground, but also to its design in alignment with a French cultural model of child-rearing in the home. This reflects the findings of the present study, in which participants advocate for recognition of their role in the lives of children and families in negotiating the common cultural project of raising children at home (Gallimore & Lopez, 2002; Page, 2011, 2018; Tonyan, 2015; Weisner, 2002).

These brief vignettes of sustainability from various jurisdictions indicate that the relative success or failure of any given regulatory regime for childminding appears to be linked, to some extent, to its level of alignment with locally valued ideals and cultural models; this hypothesis would require in-depth ecocultural research in different jurisdictions to be fully validated. It is possible that the inclusion of childminding in existing ECEC systems has been counter-productive, because it fails to recognise that childminding, as a childcare service within a family home, contains overlapping microsystems in a hybrid mesosystem, in terms of Bronfenbrenner's contexts (Hayes et al., 2017; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). From the macrosystemic perspective, childminding may well require "systems of supports that nurture the development of caregivers who are able to successfully protect and socialize their children" (Carlson & Harwood, 2003, p. 297)(Otto & Keller, 2014, p. 297).

Ecocultural analysis suggests childminding, as family childcare, could be considered a unique system in its own right; not just a family setting, not just an early years setting, but more than the sum of its parts. Considered as an organic, ecological network, a unique family based, and family focussed system, it may well require its own separate regulatory framework to successfully thrive in

the 21st century. The research suggests that ecocultural alignment with the Irish Close Relationships and Real Life Learning models may facilitate the development of a sustainable, family-friendly framework within which childminding can thrive and deliver its considerable benefits to the next generation of young children in Ireland.

9.6 CONCLUSIONS

The present has addressed gaps in the research by identifying attitudes towards professionalism in childminding in Ireland as well as documenting the praxis of Irish childminders on the ground for the first time, using the lens of Ecocultural Theory. To give due emphasis to the agentic role of the childminder, this research has offered a refinement of the ecocultural definition of the childminding niche as a home-based ecological niche in which the childminder works together with children, their own family, children's families and assistants to negotiate the project of raising children.

The research has also interrogated the concept of professionalism in childminding, proposing a new ecocultural definition of professionalism as the alignment of childminders' praxis with locally relevant ideals or cultural models of children's learning and development. Furthermore, an alternative paradigm has been developed to describe professionalism and the professionalisation of childminding from an ecocultural perspective.

Two cultural models, the Close Relationship Model and the Real Life Learning model, have been identified among childminders in this study, using the EFICh protocol, which has allowed a rich, multi-faceted description of childminding in Ireland to emerge for the first time. The Close Relationship model describes an approach to professional love, in which the childminder prioritises showing love and affection to children, interacting with the children through play and conversation, and building relationships through these interactions, referencing concepts of Attachment Theory. The Real Life Learning model describes a pedagogy of childminding in Ireland, in which the primary goal is exploring the learning opportunities presented by real life experiences,

mediated through child-led play and explorations in a relationship-driven learning environment.

In addition, the research indicates the need for an ecoculturally aligned system to sustain childminding and maximise its benefits for children in the future. Considered as an organic, ecological network, a unique family bas system, childminding may well require its own separate regulatory and support framework to successfully thrive in the 21st century.

9.6.1 Implications for policy and practice

Ecocultural alignment in the development of social policy on childminding is a key principle identified in the current study. To be sustainable, any proposed new national system of regulation, support, and education for childminders should be aligned with childminders' and parents' values and cultural models if it is to prove meaningful, congruent and sustainable for childminders and parents, and maximise the benefits of childminding for children. Any new system must be family-friendly and recognise the dual roles of the professional childminder as a parent working in the family home as well as the impact of regulations on all members of the household.

To engage childminders effectively, regulations will need to be aligned with childminding ecoculture, in terms of the homeliness of the family home and flexibility and freedom for outings in the community. Restrictive regulations which compromise these essential aspects of childminding in Ireland need to be avoided at all costs if childminders are to engage in significant numbers.

Supportive supervision should be aligned with childminders' own articulated needs, with regards to staffed networks, as well as economic supports via taxation and welfare benefits. In particular, supervision of childminders

should implement the principles of professional love (Page, 2018) in keeping with the cultural model of Close Relationships in Ireland.

Education relevant to childminding should be developed that facilitates professional childminding praxis, aligned with occupational standards derived from Irish cultural models in terms of content, with accessible modes of delivery including face-to-face community networks.

9.6.2 Limitations of Study

This research was conducted with a small, self-selecting sample of professionalised childminders. Therefore, one limitation of the present study is that it may be reflecting primarily the views of childminders who are better qualified and more confident about coming forward to participate. Descriptive statistical analysis was limited; therefore, there is scope for a more nationally representative study to be carried out which can identify more detailed, nuanced understanding. Caution should be exercised in applying the findings to Irish childminders in general.

Unlike the team-based project in California, on which the current research is based, this investigation is the work of a sole researcher, the possibility of interpretation bias must be acknowledged, although every effort has been made to avoid it through substantial training in the use of a rigorous protocol, the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders, helped to ensure that such potential bias is minimised. The eco-cultural approach focused on perspectives of childminders alone, and it would be interesting to carry out further research to include both parents' and children's views of childminding in Ireland.

9.6.3 Recommendations

1. To be sustainable, any proposed national system of regulation, support, and education for childminders should be aligned with childminder beliefs, values and cultural models.
2. To engage childminders effectively, regulations should be aligned with childminding values, specifically, with respect for the homeliness of the family home, and flexibility and freedom for outings in the community.
3. Supervision and supports should be aligned with childminders' own articulated needs, with regards to staffed networks, taxation and welfare benefits.
4. Childminder education and timely training should be developed that facilitates professional childminding praxis, with accessible modes of delivery.
5. Further ecocultural research could investigate both parents' and children's views of childminding in Ireland.
6. Ecocultural Theory could provide an informative research framework to document childminding praxis in other jurisdictions and cultures.