

Mainstreaming Childminding in Ireland: Attitudes towards Professionalization

Introduction

Since the start of the century, the childcare sector in Ireland has undergone a rapid process of change. These developments in childcare were initially driven by labour market demands with capital investment in facilities under two EU supported, government funded programmes: the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000-2006) and the National Investment Childcare Programme (NICP, 2006-2013), which both included a childminding strand for home based childcare: the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI 2000-2010).

This was furthered by the development of national frameworks for early years learning for all types of settings, *Síolta* and *Aistear*, which focussed on quality and curriculum respectively, reflecting Ireland's split system of policy development, between the Department of Children & Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education & Skills (DES). Unfortunately, the corresponding education and training of childcare workers has trailed behind, emerging piecemeal under pressure of qualification requirements for new funding schemes for universal preschool provision and new regulations for childcare settings, without any integrated and coherent strategy to improve quality provision through training and professional development (Hayes, 2015).

However, research has highlighted the importance of the policy context in underpinning the development of integrated services for young children in a unitary system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, 2006; European Commission, 2011; Urban et al, 2012). Greater integration of services is also associated with increased professionalism, higher qualifications and better wages (OECD, 2006, 2012). Nonetheless, despite developing in a split system, there is growing consensus on professional identity among most, if not all, early years' practitioners. This can be seen in the availability of specialised education- from one year certificates to four year degrees- as well as the increased number of membership organisations and increased calls for commensurate rates of pay for the profession.

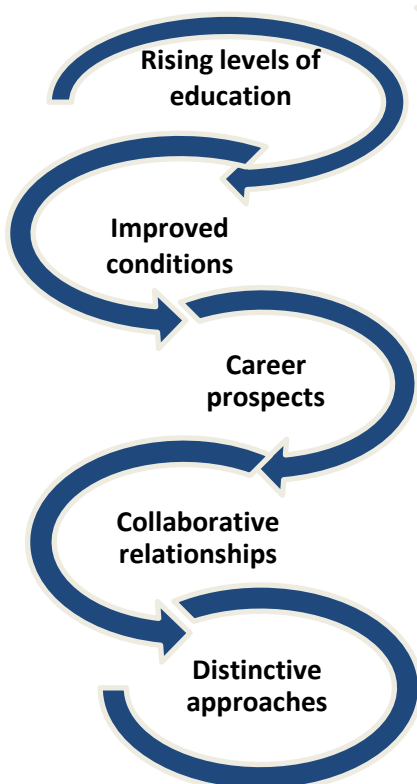
In this context, questions arise about childminders' professionalism and the quality of home based childcare for the very youngest children as well as out of school care for all ages. Research into childminding internationally has been sparse (Karlsson, 1995; Mooney & Statham, 2003) and there has been little academic research exploring its role in childcare provision nationally, or indeed the effects of its inclusion in the sectoral programmes through NCMI (Daly, 2010).

Yet childminding remains the most common form of paid childcare, with an estimated 19,000 childminders (Goodbody, 2011:50), and 31% of preschool children in professional childcare with childminders (McGinnity et al, 2013) even though the majority are not subject

to regulation. On the assumption that informal childminders will not care for more than 3 pre-school children, the legally exempt number (Start Strong, 2012; Goodbody Report, 2011), this means that as many as 57,000 pre-school children may attend a 'hidden' childminding setting in Ireland, one without any regulation or support.

Childminding still remains almost completely absent from the most recent Early Years Services Regulations (DCYA, 2016) despite recommendations and calls for its inclusion (Expert Advisory Group, 2013; Start Strong, 2012). Since the introduction of universal free preschool for children over three years of age in 2010, it seems childminding has been systemically neglected, perhaps because it is even further from the 'school gate' than centre based early years' practitioners (OECD, 2006:158), confirming Baker & Lynch's observation: *In policy-making, employment and formal politics, carers and care recipients are not highly valued except at a rhetorical level.* (2012:12)

The purpose and aims of the research



The process of professionalization
(Based on Peter Moss, 2003)

The focus of this study has been to examine the ongoing process of professionalization in Irish childminding since 2000, using the paradigm of professionalization of care workers, which Peter Moss has delineated (2003). As can be seen from the graphic, Moss posits that rising levels of education and improved conditions grow alongside better career prospects and collaborative relationships, culminating in distinctive professional approaches to work.

To assess the progress of Irish childminding, childminders' and parents' views were sought on the impact of childcare regulations and the effects of the support systems developed for childminders under the National Childminding Initiative (NCMI, 2000-2010). Secondly, the study investigated stakeholders' views as to how any future regulatory and support system could be developed that would be proportionate to both the childminders' home environment and the needs of the children in their care.

The central research question was: What constitutes a high quality, professional childminder? More concretely, the study interrogated:

- What childminders understand by professionalism and high quality home based childcare;
- What parents of young children expect of professional childminding settings;
- What impact the Health Service Executive [HSE] Voluntary Notification and Support scheme rolled out under NCMI (2001-2010) has had on ECEC quality and professionalization of childminders;

- What type of regulations, training and supports will sustain high quality, professional childminding settings for children in the future.

Rationale for methodological approach

It is important to choose a research design that is fit for purpose, providing a 'framework for the generation of evidence' suited to the research questions under investigation (Bryman 2004:26). To investigate the professionalization of Irish childminding, a cross-sectional study was designed using a mixed method approach with both quantitative and qualitative components (Creswell, 2003).

Quantitative data were generated on attitudes towards professionalization using an anonymous, self-completion survey, conducted online – an innovation necessitated by the nature of the population to be reached. To supplement the online survey, a qualitative approach using a World Café forum (Brown, 2005) was also undertaken in order to provide triangulation and gain a deeper understanding of childminders' perspectives. Again, this innovative variation on the classic focus group was warranted by the nature of the questions under discussion.

The Online Survey

One of the challenges in conducting this research was the 'hidden' population involved (Higgins, 1998). The use of an online method of survey completion allowed for as large a response rate as possible from the hidden population of childminders. Childminders' unregulated status means that the vast majority are *unknown to formal agencies* – only approximately 1% of childminders are inspected under current childcare regulations. Childminders are also *private* due to threat of enforcement of tax laws for the self-employed and have historically worked in the black economy as a result.

Sampling a hidden population is fraught with challenges. Generally, some form of Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) is used, with initial respondents generating the next wave of respondents via personal recommendation. An online version, in which respondents recruit their contacts through e-mail to do surveys online, proved efficient at recruiting large numbers of students in a short time frame (Wejnert & Heckathorn 2007). Since recent research showed that 38% of mothers with children under 5 years old were online all day (Amárach, 2013), this was one obvious method to distribute anonymous, self-completion survey links. Secondly, with 90% of these mothers on Facebook, the survey was also widely disseminated on parenting and childminding Facebook groups and pages.

To access the different viewpoints on childminding, two questionnaires on professionalism and quality in childminding were developed: one for childminders and another for parents. These two surveys were presented as one, with 105 questions in total to allow for ease of presentation on social media. However, skip logic was applied so that parents or childminders were directed only to the questions relevant to them. A wide range of question types were used including rating scales, ranking and open-ended questions allowing for textual responses.

This strategy was successful in reaching a large number of stakeholders. In total, 450 respondents from twenty-three of the twenty-six counties took the online survey: 63% childminders and 37% parents, with a completion rate of 72%. Just under half of the responses came via email links, and the rest from Facebook links. On the whole, this online strategy was effective in reaching hidden childminders outside the official channels.

A World Café: The Childminding Community Café Forum

The World Café method of community discussion originated from a fresh approach to organisational change first proposed by Cooperrider and Srivasta (1987). Decrying the lack of new ideas generated by conventional problem solving action research, they proposed Appreciative Inquiry instead, which:

....refers to a research perspective that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding, and fostering innovations in social-organizational arrangements and processes. (1987:153).

It is usually 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; and 4) Delivery: collective experimentation to discover what can be.

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. It is 'a simple yet powerful conversational process for fostering constructive dialogue, accessing collective intelligence, and creating innovative possibilities for action, particularly in groups that are larger than most traditional dialogue approaches are designed to accommodate' (Brown & Issacs, 2005:17).

Unlike a focus group, which is researcher directed, a World Café allows research participants to explore questions relevant to them in a series of conversations with three or more revolving small groups, carrying the learning from each table forward to the next, with only the host staying in place. At the Childminding Community Café conducted with members of the national professional association, Childminding Ireland, participants were invited to dream about what might be in collaborative discussion on the Future of Childminding. This was based on a discovery phase, which a short presentation of the results of the online survey helped to provide.

Randomly assigned to their initial group of four or five, with A2 sheets and markers to record their thoughts, childminders discussed questions which are vital to their lives and practice: what type of regulations, training and supports would best sustain and develop childminding? After each question, childminders moved to a new group to discuss the next question, actively contributing to thinking, and linking the essence of discoveries to ever-widening circles of thought, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of a World Café.

This approach was effective in generating engaged conversation, and it produced some innovative suggestions that had not been mentioned in the open ended questions of the

online survey. At the same time, the conversations corroborated the findings of the survey and provided the desired triangulation to obviate the limits or bias inherent in the survey.

Research Ethics

This research will make a positive contribution to the welfare of those affected by it and bring no harm to any participants, whose rights have been respected in both the online survey and World Café by being given full and accurate information regarding the nature, purpose, and outputs of the research so as to allow them to give informed consent.

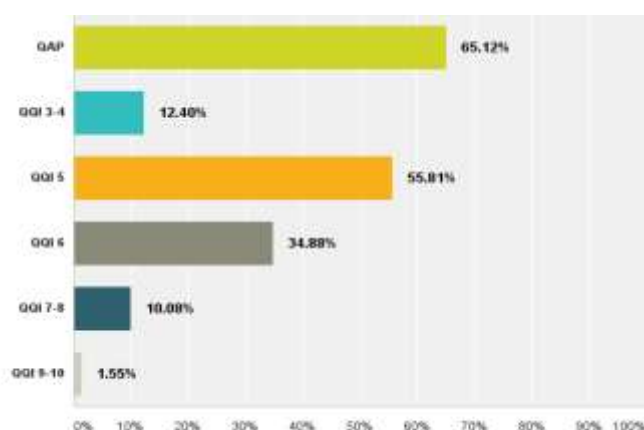
Participants had the right not only to agree to participate in the research but also to decide on which information to provide as part of the research and to withdraw from the research at any time. Information provided is treated as confidential and used for research purposes only. No personal information will be disclosed without participants' prior consent.

This research is fully compliant with all legal requirements regarding the collection, storage, processing and analysis of data. Any results will be put into the public domain on an anonymised basis with a view to transparency, scrutiny and peer review.

Some Key Findings

1. Many Childminders hold national childcare qualifications

As can be seen in the figure below, a surprisingly high percentage held awards at QQI¹ level 5 or higher. Over 65% had completed the free government sponsored training for childminders, the Quality Awareness Programme, rolled out nationwide under NCMI. However, in addition, over 55% held QQI level 5, over 34% held QQI level 6, and over 10% held degrees in childcare, any of which would qualify them to work in a centre based childcare setting. This demonstrates that childminders' educational level is apparently rising in line with other practitioners in the sector, despite the lack of official incentive or recognition since 2010.



Childminders & Childcare Qualifications

¹ Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the state agency responsible for maintaining the ten-level NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). It validates education and training programmes and makes extensive awards in the Further Education and Training sector as well as awards in Higher Education mainly to learners in private colleges. <http://www.qqi.ie/>

2. *Childminders identify as professional service providers*

Over 13% of those surveyed were or had been notified to the HSE, 38% had been voluntarily notified to Childcare Committees and over 53% held Garda Vetting – one of the few avenues of recognition now open to all childminders, even though it is not mandatory. They understand their role as self-employed business owners, who have chosen this self-directed career in childcare. (Hakim, 2006) Over 29% received the Childminder Development Grant, and 26% also used the Childcare Services Tax Relief, as part of the formal economy.

3. *Childminders engage with national childcare organisations and frameworks*

Over 47% of respondents were members of Childminding Ireland, while a further 15% were members of other childcare organisations such as Early Childhood Ireland, the Association of Childcare Professionals, and Start Strong. They are also aware of Síolta and Aistear, the national childcare frameworks and 35% of respondents found them helpful or very helpful for their practice.

4. *Both Childminders and Parents value the distinctive qualities of home based childcare*

When asked to rank the characteristics that contribute to a high quality childminding service, childminders and parents agreed unanimously: 1) The relationships and interactions between childminder, children and parents; 2) the one to one care and nurture each child individually received 3) a rich home learning environment. This reflects research on the benefits of homebased childcare (Ahnert et al, 2006; Groeneveld et al 2010), stakeholders' desire for a nurturing pedagogy (Hayes & Kernan, 2008), and awareness of secondary carer attachment (Bretherton, 1992; Bowlby, 2007).

5. *Childminders now seek a distinctive approach to support home based childcare*

In the course of this study, the following views were repeatedly articulated by respondents in the both the survey and the Café session:

1. Apart from relative childcare, ALL homebased childminders should be regulated under proportionate childminding regulations.
2. National accredited awards at QQI level 5 and 6 should be created for home based ECEC.
3. Training should be funded, local and flexible, with incentives to progress to higher levels.
4. A local support worker should be dedicated to the development of homebased childcare.
5. Local networks for childminders need to be created, supported and empowered.
6. A national register for childminders should be made available in a database accessible to the general public to provide transparency to the childminding system.
7. Trained registered childminders should be allowed provide whatever government funded childcare schemes are in place.

Implications for Policy Development

In a significant shift in attitude since the first Childcare Strategy (2000), both childminders and parents favour the professionalization of childminding, once it does not compromise the essential nature of homebased childcare. Though neglected since the end of NCMI, in accordance with Moss' paradigm (2003, 2009), childminders are better qualified, embracing the career of homebased childcare provider, while developing collaborative relationships and an awareness of the value of the distinctives of professional childminding. In fact, after a decade of investment under NCMI, childminders now expect continued mainstreaming of childminding in Ireland, seeking visibility in a transparent system as part of national childcare infrastructure.

Increasingly confident of their professional worth, childminder respondents advocated the development of specific childminding regulations and training apart from the current centre based childcare regulations, which many criticised as ill-adapted to the practical reality of homebased childcare (Osgood, 2006, 2010). In the Childminding Community Café, an innovative approach to regulation and inspection was proposed, one that would be more child-centred, more sensitive to the homebased family environment, and more supportive to single-handed childminders at work.

Many respondents expressed confidence in the benefits and value of childminding at its best not just to children and parents, but to society as a whole (Belsky et al, 2006). They wished to see childminding included in the political discourse on childcare, especially since it remains high in parental preference despite the lack of political and media attention. In the Café session, this desire to be visible was expressed in ideas such as a national register and database, and a national promotional campaign to publicise the benefits of professional childminding.

Many lamented the dismantling of the Childminder Advisory Services across the country since 2010, which had allowed respondents to access such supports as the Childminding Development Grants and the Childcare Tax Relief, not to mention providing encouragement to pursue training and high quality standards. At the Café, the reinstatement of such a role was given top priority among the supports needed in the future. (Daly, 2010)

However, one of the recurring themes was the high cost of childcare for parents, and the relatively low earnings of childminders, despite how well qualified many of them were. Acknowledged as a problem for the childcare sector as a whole, (ICTU, 2016) respondents highlighted the issue of sustainability: childminders favoured self-employment above direct employment by the State, while parents favoured a tax break for parents that would be linked to the use of State recognised childminders. In the Café, this was expressed as the need for childminders to be included in all government funded childcare schemes.

Finally, even though childminders were omitted from the sectoral Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2010) the desire for, and commitment to upskilling, training and education was clear from the survey – with over half sufficiently well qualified to work in centre based

services. Furthermore, in the Café session childminders specified the additional training and education needed for childminding as well as their aspirations to higher degrees.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, it is imperative that an integrated and coherent strategy is adopted to include home based childminding within the larger infrastructure of Ireland's early years' provision. This will require further research to:

1. Interrogate further the concept of professionalization from the perspective of childminders themselves in their homebased culture;
2. Create an indigenous professional framework of registration and regulation for childminding which is qualitatively different and proportionate relative to centre-based care;
3. Guide the development of curricula for initial and continued professional development appropriate to high quality childminding provision;
4. Develop a well calibrated support system for childminding with dedicated workers providing graduate leadership.

These progressive reforms will be required to complete mainstreaming childminding in Ireland.

References

- Ahnert, L.; Pinquart, M.; Lamb, M.E.; (2006) Security of Children's Relationship with Nonparental Care Providers: a Meta-Analysis *Child Development* 74(3): 664-679
- Amarach Research (2013) *Marketing to Moms* - eumom & Amarach
- Aistear: *The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, (2009) Department of Education and Skills, Dublin
- Baker, J & Lynch K. 2012. "Inequalities of Love and Care and their Theoretical Implications". *Social Justice Series*. School of Social Justice, University College Dublin. Vol. 12(1):1-22
- Belsky, J. (2006) Early child care and early child development: Major findings of the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY* 3 (1), 95–110
- Boddy, J., Cameron, C., Moss, P.(eds) (2005) *Care Work: Present and Future*, Routledge, Francis & Taylor, London & New York
- Bowlby, R. (2007), 'The Secondary Attachment: a look at Bowlby's Theory', *Journal of Attachment of Parenting International*, Vol.10:3
- Brannen, J. & Moss P. (2003) *Rethinking Children's Care*, Open University.
- Bretherton, I., (1992) *The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth*
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994) Ecological models of human development. In *International Encyclopaedia of Education Vol 3, 2nd edition*, Oxford: Elsevier
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2006). *The Bioecological Model of Human Development*. In R. M. Lerner and W. Damon (Ed.), *Theoretical Models of Human Development, Handbook of Child Psychology* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.) 1: 793–828.
- Brown, J., Isaacs, D. & the World Café Community (2005) *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*, Bennet-Koehler, San Francisco
- Bryman, A, (2004) *Social Research Methods*, (2nd edition) Oxford University Press.
- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006), *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, Dublin, CECDE.
- Cooperrider, D.L. & Srivasta, S. (1987) APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE, *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol.1, pages 129-169.
- Creswell, J.W. (2003) *RESEARCH DESIGN: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*, (2nd edition), Sage Publications, USA
- Daly, M. (2010) *An evaluation of the impact of the National Childminding Initiative on the Quality of Childminding in Waterford City and County*, HSE South.
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014), *The National Childminding Initiative*
<http://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2Fchildcare%2Fchildminders.htm>
<http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/childminder-advisory-service> (online: accessed 2/4/2014)
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2013), *Right from the Start: the report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*, Dublin.
- Department of Education, (2010) *A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland*

Goodbody Economic Consultants, (2011), *Children 2020: Cost-Benefit Analysis*: a report prepared for Start Strong, Dublin

European Commission, (2011) *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*: Final report, issued by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

Government of Ireland. (2000) *National Childcare Strategy*. Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Groeneveld M.G.; Vermeer, H.J.; van Ijzendoorn, M.H.; Linting M. (2010) Children's wellbeing and cortisol levels in home-based and center-based childcare,. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 25: 502-514

Hakim, C. (2006) 'Women, careers, and work-life preferences', *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 34:219-294

Hayes, N. & Kernan M. (2008) *Engaging Young Children: A Nurturing Pedagogy*; Gill & Macmillan

Hayes, N. (2015) 'Fit for purpose? Professionalising early childhood education in Ireland', *Children's Research Digest*, Volume 2, Issue 1: 51-55

Higgins, K. (1998) 'Researching Hidden Populations' *Making research work: promoting child care policy and practice*, eds. Iwaniec. D, & Pinkerton J., Wiley , 141-162

Irish Congress of Trade Unions, (2016) *Who Cares? Report on Childcare Costs & Practices in Ireland*, Spring 2016, Trade Union Labour

Karlsson, M. (1995) *Family Day Care in Europe*, European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile Employment and Family Responsibilities.

McGinnity, F., Murray, A. & McNally, S. (2013) *Mothers' return to work and childcare choices for infants in Ireland*. Growing up in Ireland: national longitudinal study of children, Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Kaga, Y., Bennett, J. Moss P. (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childhood care and education within education*, UNESCO, Paris, France

Mooney A. & Statham J. eds. (2003) *Family Day Care: International Perspectives on Policy, Practice and Quality*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London

OECD (2006), *Live Longer, Work Longer*, OECD Publishing, Paris

OECD (2012), *Closing the Gender Gap: Act Now*, OECD Publishing.

Osgood, J. (2006) 'Deconstructing Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: resisting the regulatory gaze' *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Volume 7, Number 1, 2006

Osgood J. (2010) Reconstructing professionalism in ECEC: the case for the 'critically reflective emotional professional', *Early Years*, 30:2, 119-133

Urban, M. (2008) *Dealing with uncertainty: challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession*, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Urban, M. (2012) 'Researching Early Childhood Policy and Practice: A Critical Ecology', *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 47, No. 4: 494-507

Urban M., Vandebroek M., Van Laere K., Lazzari A. & Peeters J. (2012) 'Towards Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care. Implications for Policy and Practice' *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 47, No. 4: 508-526

