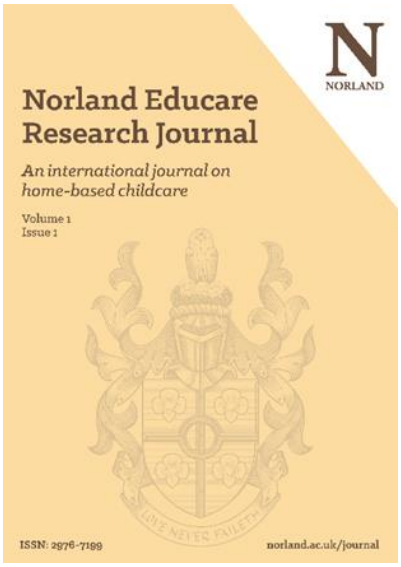
Norland Educare Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1
ISSN: 2976-7199

A childminder approach: recognising a distinctive home-based pedagogy

Kay Aaronricks, ARU



Cite this paper:
Aaronricks, K. (2023) 'A childminder approach: recognising a distinctive home-based pedagogy', *Norland Educare Research Journal*, 1(1), article number 7. Available at: https://doi.org/10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

Publication date: May 2023

Abstract

Although the longest-practised form of paid childcare in England, childminding is an underdeveloped area within research. Childminders employ a distinctive home-based pedagogical approach to the provision of childcare and education, and this research provided an opportunity to work more closely with childminders to better understand how they perceive themselves. The insights presented in this paper are in response to the question: what is a childminder? The data was collected as part of a collaborative action research study with a local group of childminders in England. Narrative writings and reflective discussion were thematically analysed, providing insights into the distinctive elements of a home-based childminding approach to childcare and education, based on the themes of family values, home and community environment, and care and education. These insights are underpinned by the notion that childminding offers a different approach to the provision of childcare and education than group-based provision. This research suggests that childminders should be supported to create a shared understanding of their distinctive pedagogical approach, through opportunities for shared learning experiences and with a focus on building communities of practice.

Keywords: childminding, childminder, professional development, action research, professional identity, family day care

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

Introduction

The provision of childcare is a vital service to working families in England, with roots that derive from the Industrial Revolution. Over time, the childminding role has developed and altered as a result of societal and political influences, shifting into varying constructs of home-based and group-based childcare services, to meet the evolving needs of working parents. While this variety has created an early years sector that flexes to accommodate political and social change, it has also created a "multiplicity of roles" for practitioners (McGillivray, 2008, p. 244), the definition of which, Basford (2019) argued, is complex. Childminders are required to register with Ofsted or a childminding agency (which is itself registered with Ofsted) and are guided by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (Department for Education, 2021a) to provide childcare and education for children aged from birth to eight and beyond, within the childminder's own home. They are just one of four types of childcare provision available to parents in England, the others being childcare on non-domestic premises (nurseries, preschools, holiday clubs and other group-based settings), home child carers (nannies) and childcare on domestic premises (four or more people caring for children in a domestic home that is not the child's) (Ofsted, 2021).

Childminders have a critical role in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and yet, based on current trends of decline, are predicted to have disappeared from the sector by 2034 (PACEY, 2019). At their peak in 1992, childminders were the largest provider of childcare in England, totalling 109,000 (Mooney *et al.*, 2001). However, they now account for under half of the total childcare provision in England, at just 33,700 registered childminders (Ofsted, 2021). Statistically, the decline is attributed by Ofsted (2021) to the fact that more childminders are leaving the role than are choosing to register. Russell (2021) reported that further decline is predicted, as a result of the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a particularly damaging effect on childminders and their childcare businesses. Because of the self-employed nature of the role, childminders had limited access to furlough or income support during this period. Moreover, they continued to experience inadequate consideration and awareness of their unique needs within government-issued guidance for the early years sector at this critical time and beyond (Lawler, 2022).

For over 40 years, childminders in England have been described as invisible and isolated providers of childcare (Community Relations Commission, 1975; Jackson and Jackson, 1979; Statham and Mooney, 2003; Owen, 2007; Brooker, 2016; Ang *et al.*, 2017), subject to a political gaze (O'Connell, 2011) that has resulted in a complex evolution of identity within the broader early childhood sector. Childminders are broadly understood to offer a distinctive service (Ang *et al.*, 2017). They employ a home-based pedagogical approach to ECEC, each building their self-employed childcare business on a foundation of diverse family values and parenting experience, framed by the standards and requirements of the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021a). Yet, the features that distinguish and characterise their approach to ECEC are not widely visible, and more opportunities are needed for childminders to work together to build a collective understanding of their lived experiences, values and knowledge base.

Hordern (2012, p. 109) argued that the early years workforce needs to take "responsibility for processes of knowledge re-contextualisation … [and] participate more fully in … ongoing reform", suggesting a need for a shared knowledge base that is reflective of the distinctive pedagogical approach to care and education employed by childminders, alongside other types of early childhood settings. The need to consider multiple knowledges that inform practice was also recognised by Campbell-Barr (2018), who proposed a focus, in future research, on the social production of knowledge. This presents a dilemma for childminders. They are being driven to develop as professional carers and educators from within their workforce, which, as Evetts (2003) suggested, is central to developing a professional identity. Yet they work in isolation, receive minimal support to forge networks and do not share a collective identity. Furthermore, resources that could support childminders in this task, such as local authority advisers or children's centres, are experiencing an

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

ever-diminishing capacity and resource allocation, as a result of the continual decrease in government funding for early childhood support (Lepper, 2022).

Home-based and group-based comparisons

Childminders remain an under-researched part of the early years sector in comparison to other forms of childcare, such as non-domestic or group-based provision. Much of the existing research has been "done on them" (Otero and Melhuish, 2015, p. 7) rather than with them, and gaps in knowledge, particularly around insights into childminding practice and children's experiences in a home-based childcare setting, persist (Ang *et al.*, 2017; O'Regan *et al.*, 2021). Mayall and Petrie (1983) identified and compared characteristics of home-based and group-based provision, which were later considered by Owen (2000) to be inappropriate, suggesting the need to generate a better understanding of childminding in its own right. These comparisons have been identified within more recent studies, such as those of Brooker (2016) and O'Regan *et al.* (2021), as an ongoing challenge and one that continues to highlight the complexities involved in defining childminders' identity and professionalisation within the broader early childhood sector. Terms such as 'domestic' and 'implicit pedagogy' (Jones and Osgood, 2007), and being defined as "distinct from any other type of provision" (Ang *et al.*, 2017, p. 263), as well as being deemed to offer a "unique pedagogical approach" (O'Regan *et al.*, 2019, p. 760), substantiate O'Connell's (2011) proposal for childminding to be reconceptualised as a distinctive form of childcare – one that is different from group-based settings, and one that warrants further exploration in terms of pedagogical values and distinctive characteristics.

Development of the childminding role

Early studies, such as that of Jackson and Jackson (1979), provide a clear view of childminding as a caring role, and training at that time mirrored this view. For example, the group of childminders in the study by Ferri (1992, p. 192) were "strongly resistant to the notion that as mothers, they have anything to learn about how to provide for children". Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, the importance of the early years, in terms of children's learning, development and life chances, was beginning to be recognised through government policy (OECD, 2011). From 1997, the New Labour government introduced "the most wide ranging and comprehensive changes to early years policy ever to take place" (Fitzgerald and Kay, 2016, pp. 20–21), and in a direction-of-travel paper, the Department for Education and Skills (2005) outlined its vision to create the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). The development of early childhood policy at this time indicated a growing recognition of the importance of care within an early childhood educational context, and yet, on a provisory basis, the belief was that "for young children, care and learning are indistinguishable. Care cannot be considered to be of good quality unless it provides opportunities for children to learn and develop" (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 2). Lightfoot and Frost (2015) found that care qualities were often depreciated and yet were valued aspects of practice that contributed to early childhood practitioners' professional identity. A general acceptance of education and care as inseparable concepts in early childhood provision is since thought to have developed (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck, 2018). Nonetheless, the care element of practice is not as visible or valued as the practice of educating children – for example, in formal early childhood qualifications, and particularly in preschool contexts, where "caring is subordinate to learning and may – at most – be a precondition to what really matters: learning" (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck, 2018, p. 12).

The introduction of the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) generated a further layer of complexity to the role of a childminder, as it made it compulsory for all childminders to abide by the statutory requirements and provide their childcare service in line with four core

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

principles: providing an enabling environment; promoting positive relationships; valuing each child as unique; and holding a responsibility to plan, observe and assess children's learning and development. At this time, McGillivray (2008) and Nutbrown (2012) acknowledged the historical separation of education and care in the early childhood sector, of which the care aspect epitomised the lower identity status of childminders, and they questioned what it meant to be qualified to work in any early years role. Nutbrown (2012, p. 19) suggested that all who work "in the early years – whatever their job title and role – must be carers as well as educators, providing the warmth and love children need to develop emotionally, alongside and as part of planned and spontaneous learning opportunities". However, for childminders, these policy developments were fraught with complications, which included a perceived lack of understanding of their home-based approach to childcare and education.

Childminders began to express concern that they were required to "become something else" (O'Connell, 2011, p. 796) and reported a sense of having to "perform their professionalism" (O'Connell, 2011, p. 786) to meet standardised conceptions of quality, such as rating scales, which are not wholly reflective of home environments and do not extend to include local community environments. In addition, O'Connell (2011, p. 790) identified childminders' perception that "[Ofsted] are trying to turn us into nurseries", echoed in Brooker's (2016) study, in which childminders felt the home environment was misjudged, and reported a sense that they were being encouraged to operate more like a group-based setting. Understandings of quality, particularly in a home-based childcare environment, were determined by Ang *et al.* (2017) to be difficult to judge and, as such, suggested a need for deeper insight into the features of domestic childcare environments and how these are utilised to support high-quality practice.

Childminder profile

Some studies have worked to build a profile of childminders (Mooney *et al.*, 2001; Dawson *et al.*, 2003) and have identified childminding as a business opportunity for mothers (Bond and Kersey, 2002), while emphasising the value of childminding as being positioned "at the heart of the government's regeneration and welfare to work programmes" (Bond and Kersey, 2002, p. 303). Internationally, studies such as Bauters and Vandenbroeck (2017) and Gromada *et al.* (2020) have reported that both formal and informal childcare is predominantly a female occupation, undervalued and underfunded. Internationally and in England, childminding has long been characterised as "the domain of working class women" (Osgood, 2005, p. 296), typified by low pay, low status and poor working conditions.

Brooker (2016) suggested that a more positive public image of childminding has been achieved through policy development such as registration, yet disparaging views persist (Russell, 2021). More recent attempts have been made to address the childminding image. For example, in 2018, four childminding associations across the UK and Ireland launched the 'Not a Babysitter' campaign across social media (PACEY, 2018), in an attempt to dispel myths around the professional identity of childminders, in particular the idea that they were unqualified babysitters. Currently, 99% of childminders are female, and they are not required to hold a specific early childhood qualification; instead, they "must have completed training which helps them to understand and implement the EYFS" (Department for Education, 2021a, p. 26). Despite this, 74% are qualified to level 3 (the minimum qualification level to be counted in ratios for group-based settings), while a further 9% are degree qualified (level 6) (Department for Education, 2021b). Information around pay is less well known. However, the 2021 survey indicated that 85% of childminders offer the 30-hour government-funded childcare entitlement, and 87% support the use of tax-free childcare schemes as a financial initiative to aid parents with the rising cost of childcare.

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

Principally, childminders are mothers, aged over 25, qualified in early childhood, and they provide childcare and education from their own home, through a self-employed business model (Mooney *et al.*, 2001; Department for Education, 2021b). Significantly, in the most recent Ofsted inspection report, 96% of registered childminders were judged, according to the Ofsted (2022) inspectorate framework, to provide a good or outstanding quality of care and education.

Theoretical framework

This research was influenced by the early studies of Jackson and Jackson (1979), Mayall and Petrie (1983) and Ferri (1992), which, although undertaken within a very different policy context, worked directly with childminders, to explore their distinctive characteristics and needs through collaborative research approaches such as action research. This study is based on the premise that the ability to negotiate identity within policy and regulatory contexts is an important aspect of professionalism (Osgood, 2005; Chalke, 2013). The knowledge base of the ECEC sector is complex. Campbell-Barr (2019, p. 136) recognised the need to focus on and develop existing knowledge and understanding through greater consideration of the multiple knowledges that inform the distinctive pedagogical practice of those working in the sector. Thus, by using a social constructivist framework, this research enabled a group of childminders and me to bring our knowledge and practice together, to begin to construct a deeper understanding of childminders' distinctive approach to the provision of childcare and education. Cotton (2013) described a similar focus on the co-construction of meaning, in recognition of the localised and diverse roles of the practitioners involved in her research on individual settings. A collaborative approach enabled knowledge to be created through shared practice and shared opportunities for discussion and reflection, supported by the building of professional relationships. By adopting this premise, the research can explore, define and make visible greater insights into the pedagogical approach employed by childminders (Basford, 2019).

To this end, the research was carried out with childminders through a collaborative action research study in a local context. We moved away from dominant research approaches, which primarily comprise interviews and surveys collecting data on childminders rather than with them, and this allowed us to work together to question the ways in which continuing professional development (CPD) could be developed to be more appropriate for childminders.

Methodology

Action research

Action research fits within a social constructivist paradigm (Carter and Fewster, 2013) and allowed for my understanding of the data to be co-constructed with the childminders through a collaborative approach to the research. I held an understanding that "the most persuasive data comes from practitioners" (Basford, 2019, p. 782) and that it needs to "articulate both what is understood by attitudes, morals and beliefs and question the meaning of theoretical knowledge" (Campbell-Barr, 2018, p. 85). Moreover, Somekh and Zeichner (2009) recognised the development and increased use of action research as a practical means for those in education to reflect on their everyday practices. It was further defined by Brydon-Miller *et al.* (2017, p. 435) as a "powerful framework for drawing upon the knowledge and experience" of those working within education. This framework gave the childminders the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning and participate in this process.

The collaborative action research group (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry, 2002) comprised 16 childminders from one local region in Essex, recruited to the study via a local childminder Facebook page

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

(comprising 116 members at that time). The study was undertaken over a period of 10 months, with the overarching aim of exploring the professional development of childminders. The childminders continued to work independently in their own home-based settings; we came together at the author's university during the evening, for seven workshops over the 10-month period. During these workshops, we engaged as a community of practice, negotiating our understandings and meanings through discussion and reflection on a number of topics (Wenger, 1998). As a result, each individual was able to "build an idiosyncratic version of reality based partly on identical experiences but shaped by individual experience … prior knowledge, [and] understanding" (Pritchard and Woollard, 2010, p. 5).

It was during these reflective discussions that the importance of exploring and making visible the childminder approach was recognised as being integral to the provision of relevant, contextualised and purposeful professional development opportunities for childminders. During the course of our enquiry, we identified that exploration of professional development necessitated a deeper understanding of childminding to be held by those involved in facilitating CPD opportunities. This prompted another, more fundamental question: what is a childminder? While our primary focus was to explore the ways in which CPD could be developed, as McNiff (2017) noted, questions can alter through the action research process. In this instance, we identified that a deeper understanding of the distinctive pedagogical approach to childcare and education employed by childminders is needed, including by other professionals within the sector, such as those in childminding support and training roles, policymakers, local authorities, and the wider early years sector.

Throughout the study, a three-stage cycle of professional development emerged, comprising a themed workshop session, time to implement learning and ideas into practice and observe changes, and then a return session together to reflect and consolidate ideas (Aaronricks, 2020). It was during our second workshop, in which we explored international approaches to early childhood (Georgeson and Payler, 2013), that we began to discuss the distinctiveness of childminders' own home-based approach to childcare and education. Within the workshop, I shared online video examples that illustrated key pedagogical elements of distinctive approaches to ECEC, such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori and the Swedish approach to childcare. A discussion of the confidence, pride and conviction that the individuals in the videos had towards their particular pedagogical approach occurred naturally between us all at the end of this session. One of the childminders acknowledged that, across the examples of practice in the videos, each practitioner demonstrated confidence in their practice and a strong belief in their approach to ECEC. The high regard held for these approaches (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004) is at odds with the low professional status experienced by the early childhood sector in England (McGillivray, 2008), and even more so with that of childminders, who are "often disregarded or overlooked" (Statham and Mooney, 2003, p. 12). The focus in this session, on different approaches to childcare and education, inspired a passionate, collective articulation of identity within our group, through which the childminders began to define what was distinctive and unique about their approach to early years care and education in England.

Our conversation exhibited an increasing shift "from an individualist to a collectivist orientation to research" (Gergen and Gergen, 2015, p. 405), as the childminders mutually voiced their questions and immediate responses to what they themselves termed, in this moment, as the 'childminder approach'. Through the workshop discussion, the childminders identified with broader elements of practice, particularly from the Swedish example, which mirrored many aspects of a home-based approach to childcare. The Swedish setting, for example, had been created to emulate elements of a home environment, such as by the use of adult-sized dining tables and sofas, and this facilitated the multi-aged grouping of children. Our discussions exemplified the notion that the current awareness of childminding within research is limited to profiling characteristics of childminders – such as age, status as mothers, qualification requirements and the length of experience they hold in the role (Jones and

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

Osgood, 2007; Brooker, 2016; Ang *et al.*, 2017) – whereas, at this stage of the action research, the childminders and I discussed the distinctive and practical elements of a home-based approach, thereby illustrating that what might be considered as innovative practices in group settings, such as going for a walk, engaging in the wider community or caring for groups of children across differing age ranges, are, for childminders, everyday practices, long established within home-based provision.

Ethics

I gained ethical approval for the research through the university's ethics process and shared a summary of the research aim, and an overview of the ethical considerations involved in taking part in the research, with the childminders, gaining their informed consent to participate. In addition, suggestions by Early Education (2011) in relation to colleagues were particularly useful to underpin this collaborative research. For example, to "build collaborative relationships based on trust, respect and honesty … acknowledge the personal strengths, professional experience and diversity which other colleagues bring to work; share knowledge, experiences and resources with colleagues; use constructive methods to manage differences of opinion" (Early Education, 2011, p. 6). As such, I undertook an additional step in the action research process, of organising an introductory meeting with the childminders. This provided the opportunity to address some of the additional ethical issues associated with action research (British Educational Research Association, 2018) – for example, by discussing the purpose and aims of the research with the childminder participants; negotiating how they might be involved; exploring issues of confidentiality, anonymity and GDPR; and answering any questions.

Data collection methods

Commonly, studies of childminders have employed research methods such as surveys and interviews (Mayall and Petrie, 1983; Otero and Melhuish, 2015), utilising traditional forms of data reporting – for instance, quantitative charts and tables, or qualitative examples of written text. Action research was described by Somekh and Zeichner (2009, p. 6) as "a methodology grounded in the values and culture of its participant-researchers", and I was thus able to promote the childminders' involvement in how the research was designed, carried out, evaluated and documented. Appropriate methods of creating and documenting our experiences were identified throughout the action research cycles, including photos, observations in practice, session activities, anecdotal notes, reflective journalling, reflective writing and evaluations (Aaronricks, 2020). In this particular reflection session (which was the fifth of seven), data was gathered in the form of written notes and group discussion. Of the nine childminders present, seven consented, at the end of the session, to their written Post-it note reflections being included for analysis. Their contributions are identified in this article as cm1 through cm7.

Approach to data analysis

The methods of data collection were designed to capture the voices of the childminders and my own; therefore, I utilised crystallisation as an approach to data analysis that observes five principles – to "celebrate knowledge as inevitably situated, partial, constructed, multiple and embodied" (Ellingson, 2013, p. 432). Ellingson (2009) conceptualised this process as being akin to the multidimensionality of a crystal, which involves making meaning from data through "multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation" (Ellingson, 2009, p. 15). In this paper, I draw insights from our collaborative reflections on the question 'what is a childminder?', to provide an initial insight into the features that define the childminding role within a localised context. From a total of 16 childminders, 12 were present at the session in which we explored international approaches to early childhood practice and raised the question: what is a childminder? Subsequently, nine childminders participated in the following reflection session, in which the characteristics that define childminding began to be shared and reflected upon. I categorise the insights gained from the latter session by way of three areas of

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

practice: family values, the home and community environment, and the childminders' approach to care and education. The discussion is underpinned by a recognition that childminding is different from group-based provision, and the words of the childminders themselves have been italicised for clear identification.

Findings and discussion

Childminding is specifically undertaken in the childminder's home, which, by its very nature, is different from group-based provision and differs vastly in terms of the type of home environment in which the childminder lives. Generic safety and suitability requirements for childcare premises are stipulated through the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021a), such as access to an outdoor area and appropriate space requirements. While the childminders who engaged in this research understood their statutory responsibility to ensure a safe environment, they also highlighted key features that distinguish a home-based setting from that of group-based provision. They explained how it is representative of family values, exemplified by one childminder who stated the home is formed from "*their own experiences to create a place where children can come and feel secure and safe with the added benefit of learning*" (cm5). Another extended the idea of the home environment to be the base from which the childminding service operates, with both the childminder and the children being described as "*free to explore anywhere, anytime*" (cm6). In addition, distinctions were identified in terms of the childminding approach towards care and education. Phrasings such as "*looks after*" (cm1), "*cares for*" (cm3), "*care and educate*" (cm5), "*provides childcare*" (cm7) and "*follow the EYFS curriculum*" (cm3) exemplify the differences between these notions throughout the childminders' reflections.

Family values

Descriptions of childminding environments within research are made up of generic statements – such as providing a "home away from home" (Mooney, 2003, p. 117) or a "loving, caring, nurturing environment" (Callanan, 2014, p. 34) – that are difficult to define. The childminders in this study understood that it is their responsibility to "*ensure the environment they provide is safe*" (cm3), but they added a focus on the importance of working in partnership with parents to promote a shared sense of family values. As such, the child was viewed by one childminder to "*become part of the childminder's family*" (cm5), and the focus on building relationships was described by another childminder as enabling the creation of:

> *strong bonds with the childminder and family. The children become extended members of the childminder's family. The childminder will work with the parents to instil values, help to educate and provide a home-from-home setting. A childminder is someone who you can confidently leave your child with knowing they are being cared for as they would be at home and protected on a day-to-day basis.* (cm7)

It was believed by a childminder in this study that "*most childminders welcome children into the family, house rules in place, table manners, routines*" (cm2), and another added that they are "*very loving and develop attachments with the children*" (cm3). An inclusive approach is encouraged through the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021a), including adherence to appropriate adult-to-child ratios, which guide the childminders to work with a manageable number of children across the age groups. The EYFS (Department for Education, 2021a) stipulates a ratio of a maximum of six children under the age of eight years old to one adult, of which three may be under five years old and only one may be under one year of age. These ratios are highly valued by childminders (Gaunt, 2022); one childminder explained that this was because "*their individual needs are met more closely, as if you have just three little ones each day, you get to know them completely*" (cm1). The structure and requirements

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

provided by the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021a) are demonstrated by another childminder to promote an inclusive approach:

> *A childminder looks after children of all ages from all backgrounds and ethnic groups … A childminder can work on her own … have a special relationship with all her parents and make good, special relationships with all her children. A childminder can know a child as well as her own, as she can work in small groups with them.* (cm6)

Home and community environment

In terms of the home environment, O'Regan *et al.* (2021) found that childminders in Ireland utilised at least two rooms within their home, whereas the childminders in this study emphasised the sense that they "*give up their whole home, family life and commitments to others to give the children in their care the best possible start*" (cm5), indicating that the extent of the environment stretches across the entirety of the home and home life. Similarly, in Brooker's (2016) study, the childminders made frequent reference to the home as being a defining feature of their provision, as well as recognising that a home-from-home environment is one of the reasons why parents choose a childminder over a group-based setting. The quality of the physical environment of childminding settings was assessed by Otero and Melhuish (2015), who utilised the Family Childcare Environment Rating Scale (Harms *et al.*, 2007). However, within this auditing tool, the subscale of space and furnishings looks for environmental elements such as "child sized furniture … [and] display of children's artwork" (Otero and Melhuish, 2015, p. 35), which are arguably more reflective of the expectations of a group-based setting, rather than a home (O'Connell, 2011). Instead, there is a need for more appropriate tools to be created, informed by a deeper understanding of what characterises quality in home-based environments.

An important distinction between themselves and group-based settings is exemplified by the childminders within this study, who identified the home as only one of the environments that they and the children in their care have access to on a daily basis. It was prominent throughout the research that childminders placed a strong sense of value on their access to a wider environment outside of their home base. As this childminder explained:

> *They are able to take the children on outings and see the world – not just stuck in the same four walls. They go to parks, farms, soft play centres, etc. The children are then able to become sociable as well as gain experience and knowledge.* (cm3)

Mayall and Petrie (1983) considered this notion in their research, which deemed childminders' homely setting to be beneficial for children not just in terms of quality, but also by providing an opportunity to be involved in daily life within the communities in which they lived. Within sector publications such as *Nursery World* (Evans, 2011), there are some examples and case studies of childminders' use of their local communities and places of interest to support learning, and Barnetson (2012, p. 11) portrayed childminders, and thus the children in their care, as having access to the "whole world to play in".

In this research, we discussed the value of weekly shopping trips, engagement in community toddler groups, and school runs, and one childminder commented: "*more often than not the children are taken to all sorts of different places, such as parks, [the] zoo, wild walks as well as soft play and local parks with slides and swings*" (cm2). She added that "*in the home we can be just as creative with the space we have, but also have downtime*" (cm2). Another childminder was aware that opportunities such as these "*can include taking children on outings in the environment to broaden each child's knowledge and understanding of the world they live in*" (cm4), while a third childminder emphasised the value they place on access to the wider community as a social and educational opportunity, stating that the children "*are not stuck in one setting with the same people every day*" (cm3). Further, one of the childminders in this study reported that through a home-based approach, "*a childminder can*

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

provide a great deal of flexibility for the childcare arrangements for full-time working parents that may not be offered by a nursery/preschool who offer set hours" (cm7). This was supported by another childminder, who stated that childminders offer "*part-time care, shift work [and] overnight care*" (cm2).

Care and education

The amalgamation of the responsibilities of care and education for childminders occurred when they were required to adhere to and implement the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). As a result, the childminders in this study emphasised the developing view of Taggart (2011; 2022) that care and love should be better recognised as core components of their practice, which "has a legitimate aspiration to be a 'caring profession' like others such as nursing or social work" (Taggart, 2011, p. 85).

Government policy has driven the role of a childminder, transforming it from a traditional unregulated responsibility to provide care for children, to a position that includes the additional regulated and inspected expectation to offer early education as defined by a statutory framework. This political move generated a further layer of complexity to the identity of childminders, and there is a deepening understanding within literature, towards notions of "care and love … as viable and credible aspects of the education of the child" (Page, 2018, p. 134), exemplified by one of the childminders in this group:

> *Childminding is like having a mum and teacher and role model all wanting the best for you and making you the best you can be – you feel attached, secure, loved, valued and able to flourish with these roots.* (cm1)

Despite a developing recognition of care as an integral element of early childhood provision, Brooker (2016) found that the childminders in her study remained divided into two categories based on whether they valued care more highly than education, or vice versa. However, the examples shared by the childminders in this research demonstrate that notions of care and education are interwoven and more complex than simply two different groupings. For example, the childminders confirmed their understanding that "*a childminder has to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage to ensure each child is meeting developmental milestones … it is important that the three prime areas of learning are covered*" (cm4), while at the same time retaining their home-based approach towards achieving this responsibility, whereby "*the setting allows the child to feel at home with learning*" (cm7). Thus, the notion presented by one childminder in this study of "*well-being and educational care*" (cm4) exemplifies the complexity of these concepts and warrants further exploration in future research.

MacGill (2016) believed that models of care "differ in terms of enactments of responsibility, reciprocity of relationships, values, morals and cultural practices" (p. 239) and proposed the need for authentic engagement with a framework of care. However, value-laden care practices are complex and hard to define (Taggart, 2011), and, as demonstrated in this research, within the context of childminding, they are intertwined with descriptions of the home environment and the way in which the childminders provide educational experiences. Furthermore, O'Regan *et al.* (2021) reported a difference perceived by childminders in Ireland, between orchestrated activities, created through the use of specialised equipment and toys (for example, role-play areas), and ordinary activities that childminders can provide through real-life experiences. Examples that illustrate this notion in the English childminding context were offered by those who participated in this research, including the use of the stairs in a home setting, as an opportunity to develop climbing skills, and visits to the shop in which children are engaged in identifying healthy foods and counting money. Real-life examples such as these were described as learning opportunities, as shared by one childminder who reflected that she offered "*a range of activities to help children develop to their full potential … [I] follow the EYFS curriculum, observing each child individually and helping them to reach their next step in their development*" (cm3). The complexity of the notion of care and education is epitomised through one of the childminder's

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

views that "*to achieve this [high-quality care], childminders take on training sometimes at 'teacher level' so that they can be seen [as being] as professional as their competition*" (cm5).

Conclusions and recommendations

Framed by the need for a greater awareness of the provision of childcare and education by childminders in England (Ang *et al.*, 2017), this research shares insights into how a local group of childminders perceive themselves. The discussion covers broad themes of family values, home and community environment, and care and education. Underpinning these views is the notion that while childminding is regulated within the same statutory early years framework as group-based provision (Department for Education, 2021a), it warrants recognition as employing a distinct pedagogical approach to the provision of care and education that needs to be better understood. Yet, distinguishing the specificities of pedagogical approaches to ECEC is a complex task. Childminders are self-employed, taking ownership of their business and their childcare service; therefore, their practice is most often a reflection of their own family values (Brooker, 2016) and is undertaken, in part, privately in the home. In addition, the challenges that arise from the self-employed nature of a home-based childminding role are highlighted, in the context of being less visible than group-based approaches to childcare and education. Within this article, a sense of the values, confidence and pride that a local group of childminders hold for their work with children and their families is presented.

The examples shared from this study are limited due to the small number of childminders participating in the session and as such are recognised as a limitation of the research in terms of not being generalisable. Nevertheless, the childminders do provide a localised insight into some of the features that distinguish the childminder approach to childcare and education, relative to the contextualised way in which this group of childminders work. Through this research, the childminders have offered the basis for a deeper discussion of the childminding approach, and there is much scope to build on these initial insights and to develop and refine the notion of what makes childminding distinctive. In previous studies, such as that of Mayall and Petrie (1983, p. 3), childminders emphasised the influence of policymakers on childcare provision. More recently, policy developments have aligned childminding within educational frameworks in England (Department for Education, 2021a) and provided a different context in which childminders now work, one that moves away from the largely unregulated childminding context depicted in international examples (Bauters and Vandenbroeck, 2017; Gromada *et al.*, 2020; O'Regan *et al.*, 2021). Research, such as that of Campbell-Barr (2018) and Basford (2019), has continued to call for a greater understanding of the distinctive pedagogical approaches across early childhood provision, to better inform policy development; it is here that the insights discussed in this article offer a contribution and emphasise the need to work with childminders, to explore and define their distinct approach to childcare and education.

Childminders retain the tradition of being self-employed, which includes sole responsibility for the running of their business, yet they are attempting to do so within an ever-changing early years policy landscape and with minimal support and understanding. Some examples of childminding practice and pedagogy have begun to appear within sector publications (Russell, 2021), and the childminders in this study demonstrated their willingness and desire to inform the developing understanding of their distinctive approach to childcare and education. Childminders are predominantly women who are largely qualified beyond the minimum registration requirements. They provide high-quality childcare and education to the children and families that they work with, despite the ongoing challenges faced when working within frameworks and measures of quality more relevant to group-based settings. As such, the overarching conclusion from the insights presented in this paper is that the childminding approach to childcare and education in England warrants further exploration, to address and inform

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

the lack of understanding of the role across the wider sector, particularly by those tasked with supporting, regulating, inspecting, training and leading the childminding workforce.

I recommend the use, in future work with childminders, of innovative and collaborative approaches towards rebuilding local networks, support groups and communities of practice. Initiatives such as these must be re-established in order to provide opportunities for childminders to build a deeper understanding of their approach and to ensure appropriate support for childminders to work together in defining their knowledge base and identity (Owen, 2007; Campbell-Barr, 2018). Moreover, I argue that insight into the distinctiveness and specificities of childminding practice is necessary and will be strengthened through future research that provides opportunities for childminders to actively participate in this process.

Declaration of authorship and conflict-of-interest statement

The author confirms that this is their own work and there are no known conflicts of interest, financial or non-financial, associated with this publication.

References

Aaronricks, K. (2020) *Exploring a cyclical model of professional development: insights from childminders.* Doctoral thesis. Anglia Ruskin University. Available at: https://arro.anglia.ac.uk/id/eprint/706796/ (Accessed: 10 April 2022).

Ang, L., Brooker, E. and Stephen, C. (2017) 'A review of the research on childminding: understanding children's experiences in home-based childcare settings', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45, pp. 261–270.

Barnetson, K. (2012) 'Childminders have the whole world to play in', *Early Years and Childcare News in Essex*, August, p. 11.

Basford, J. (2019) 'The early years foundation stage: whose knowledge, whose values?', *Education 3-13 – International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 47(7), pp. 779–783.

Bauters, V. and Vandenbroeck, M. (2017) 'The professionalisation of family day care in Flanders, France and Germany', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(3), pp. 386–397.

Bond, M. and Kersey, D. (2002) 'Expanding childminding provision in areas of deprivation', *Local Economy*, 17(4), pp. 303–312.

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research, fourth edition*, London. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (Accessed: 14 February 2023).

Brooker, L. (2016) 'Childminders, parents and policy: testing the triangle of care', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 14(1), pp. 69–83.

Brydon-Miller, M., Prudente, M. and Aguja, S. (2017) 'Educational action research as transformative practice', in D. Wyse, N. Selwyn, E. Smith and L. E. Suter (eds) *The BERA/SAGE handbook of educational research.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 435–450.

Callanan, M. (2014) *Study of Early Education and Development: views and experiences of childminders.* Research report, Department for Education. Available at:

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

https://seed.natcen.ac.uk/media/2897/rr395_childcare_provision_views_and_experiences_of_childminders.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2017).

Campbell-Barr, V. (2018) 'The silencing of the knowledge-base in early childhood education and care professionalism', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(1), pp. 75–89.

Campbell-Barr, V. (2019) 'Professional knowledges for early childhood education and care', *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 44(1), pp. 134–146.

Carter, M. A. and Fewster, C. (2013) 'Diversifying early years professional learning—one size no longer fits all', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), pp. 73–80.

Chalke, J. (2013) 'Will the early years professional please stand up? Professionalism in the early childhood workforce in England', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14(3), pp. 212–222.

Community Relations Commission (1975) *Who minds? A study of working mothers and childminding in ethnic minority communities*. London: Community Relations Commission.

Cotton, L. (2013) '"It's just more in the real world really": how can a local project support early years practitioners from different settings in working and learning together?', *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 33(1), pp. 18–32.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*. Available at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00261-2008 (Accessed: 10 May 2017).

Department for Education (2021a) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974907/EYFS_framework_-_March_2021.pdf (Accessed: 9 March 2022).

Department for Education (2021b) *Survey of childcare and early years providers: main summary, England, 2021*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1039675/Main_summary_survey_of_childcare_and_early_years_providers_2021.pdf (Accessed: 10 March 2022).

Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Early years foundation stage: direction of travel paper*. Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/7310/1/060309_rmann_fndtn_eyfs_direction_of_travel.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2019).

Early Education (2011) *Code of ethics.* Available at: https://early-education.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Code-of-Ethics.pdf (Accessed: 20 July 2020).

Ellingson, L. L. (2009) *Engaging crystallization in qualitative research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Ellingson, L. L. (2013) 'Analysis and representation across the continuum', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials.* 4th edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 413–443.

Evans, M. (2011) *EYFS best practice: all about … childminding*. Available at: https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/eyfs-best-practice-all-about-childminding (Accessed: 13 April 2022).

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

Evetts, J. (2003) 'The sociological analysis of professionalism: occupational change in the modern world', *International Sociology*, 18(2), pp. 395–415.

Ferri, E. (1992) *What makes childminding work? A study of training for childminders*. London: National Children's Bureau.

Fitzgerald, D. and Kay, J. (2016) *Understanding early years policy*. 4th edn. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Gaunt, C. (2022) *Nine in 10 early years settings oppose Government plans to change childcare ratios*. Available at: https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/nine-in-10-early-years-settings-oppose-government-plans-to-change-childcare-ratios (Accessed: 10 June 2022).

Georgeson, J. and Payler, J. (2013) *International perspectives on early childhood education and care*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Gergen, K. J. and Gergen, M. M. (2015) 'Social construction and research as action', in H. Bradbury (ed.) *The SAGE handbook of action research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 401–408.

Gromada, A., Richardson, D. and Rees, G. (2020) *Childcare in a global crisis: the impact of COVID-19 on work and family life*. Available at: https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1109-childcare-in-a-global-crisis-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-work-and-family-life.html (Accessed: 10 March 2022).

Harms, T., Cryer, D. and Clifford, R. M. (2007) *Family child care environment rating scale.* Revised edn. Teachers College Press.

Hordern, J. (2012) 'A productive system of early years professional development', *Early Years*, 33(2), pp. 106–118.

Jackson, B. and Jackson, S. (1979) *Childminder: a study in action research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Jones, L. and Osgood, J. (2007) 'Mapping the fabricated identity of childminders: pride and prejudice', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8(4), pp. 289–300.

Lawler, R. (2022) *Alliance raises concerns about Covid-19 guidance for childminders*. Available at: https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2022/02/alliance-raises-concerns-about-covid-19-guidance-childminders (Accessed: 16 May 2022).

Lepper, J. (2022) *Early years funding significantly less than expected, sector fears*. Available at: https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/early-years-funding-significantly-less-than-expected-sector-fears (Accessed: 20 April 2022).

Lightfoot, S. and Frost, D. (2015) 'The professional identity of early years educators in England: implications for a transformative approach to continuing professional development', *Professional Development in Education*, 41(2), pp. 401–418.

MacGill, B. (2016) 'A paradigm shift in education: pedagogy, standpoint and ethics of care', *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 11(3), pp. 238–247.

Mayall, B. and Petrie, P. (1983) *Childminding and day nurseries: what kind of care?* London: Heinemann Educational Books.

McGillivray, G. (2008) 'Nannies, nursery nurses and early years professionals: constructions of professional identity in the early years workforce in England', *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, 16(2), pp. 242–254.

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

McNiff, J. (2017) *Action research: all you need to know*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Mooney, A. (2003) 'What it means to be a childminder: work or love?', in A. Mooney and J. Statham (eds) *Family day care: international perspectives on policy, practice and quality.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 111–128.

Mooney, A., Moss, P. and Owen, C. (2001) *A survey of former childminders*. Norwich: HMSO.

Nutbrown, C. (2012) *Foundations for quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications – Nutbrown Review.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175463/Nutbrown-Review.pdf (Accessed: 12 July 2015).

O'Connell, R. (2011) 'Paperwork, rotas, words and posters: an anthropological account of some inner London childminders' encounters with professionalisation', *The Sociological Review*, 59(4), pp. 779–802.

Ofsted (2021) *Main findings: childcare providers and inspections as at 31 August 2021*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-august-2021/main-findings-childcare-providers-and-inspections-as-at-31-august-2021 (Accessed: 13 April 2022).

Ofsted (2022) *Early years inspection handbook for Ofsted-registered provision*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-handbook-eif/early-years-inspection-handbook-for-ofsted-registered-provision-for-september-2021 (Accessed: 13 April 2022).

O'Regan, M., Halpenny, A. M. and Hayes, N. (2021) '"It all depends …" A Real Life Learning model informing childminding pedagogy in Ireland', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, pp. 1–17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2021.1933921

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004) *Starting strong: curricula and pedagogies in early childhood education and care.* Available at: http://www.oecd.org/education/school/31672150.pdf (Accessed: 4 May 2019).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) *Doing better for families*. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/social/soc/doingbetterforfamilies.htm (Accessed: 30 November 2019).

Osgood, J. (2005) 'Who cares? The classed nature of childcare', *Gender and Education*, 17(3), pp. 289–303.

Otero, M. P. and Melhuish, E. (2015) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): study of the quality of childminder provision in England*. Research report, Department for Education. Available at: https://seed.natcen.ac.uk/media/5723/RR480B_-_SEED_the_quality_of_childminder_provision_in_England.pdf (Accessed: 8 May 2017).

Owen, S. (2000) 'Assessing quality in childminding', *Children & Society*, 14(2), pp. 147–153.

Owen, S. (2007) 'Childminding in Britain', *Young Children*, 62(6), pp. 28–30.

PACEY (2018) *Get the facts on childminder myths in the UK*. Available at: https://www.pacey.org.uk/news-and-views/pacey-blog/2018/october-2018/get-the-facts-on-childminder-myths-in-the-uk/ (Accessed: 10 March 2022).

DOI: 10.60512/repository.norland.ac.uk.00000007

PACEY (2019) *PACEY launches research into decline of childminding*. Available at: https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/pacey-launches-research-into-decline-of-childminding (Accessed: 3 June 2020).

Page, J. (2018) 'Characterising the principles of Professional Love in early childhood care and education', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), pp. 125–141.

Pritchard, A. and Woollard, J. (2010) *Psychology for the classroom: constructivism and social learning*. London: Routledge.

Russell, M. J. (2021) *A special report on: childminding*. Available at: https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/a-special-report-on-childminding (Accessed: 10 April 2022).

Somekh, B. and Zeichner, K. (2009) 'Action research for educational reform: remodelling action research theories and practices in local contexts', *Educational Action Research*, 17(1), pp. 5–21.

Statham, J. and Mooney, A. (2003) 'Across the spectrum: an introduction to family day care internationally', in A. Mooney and J. Statham (eds) *Family day care: international perspectives on policy, practice and quality.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, pp. 11–20.

Taggart, G. (2011) 'Don't we care?: the ethics and emotional labour of early years professionalism', *Early Years*, 31(1), pp. 85–95.

Taggart, G. (2022) 'Revolutionary love: early childhood education as counter-culture', *Sustainability*, 14(8), article number 4474.

Van Laere, K. and Vandenbroeck, M. (2018) 'The (in)convenience of care in preschool education: examining staff views on educare', *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 38(1), pp. 4–18.

Wenger, É. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. and Perry, C. (2002) 'Action research within organisations and university thesis writing', *The Learning Organization*, 9(4), pp. 171–179.