

## A profession in transition: childminding in Ireland

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### Abstract

Currently, childminding (family childcare/day care) in Ireland remains predominantly informal childcare, outside regulation, with little support and no formal competence requirements for the profession. However, the new National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) lays out a pathway towards regulation, support and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders. This article draws on recent doctoral research, which outlines the practices and professionalism of paid childminders with a view to informing upcoming changes.

The research was conducted primarily within the framework of ecocultural theory. A pragmatic, mixed-method approach was adopted. Following an initial online survey ( $n = 325$ ) and a world cafe forum ( $n = 40$ ), semi-structured interviews ( $n = 17$ ) were conducted using the Ecocultural Family Interview for Childminders.

Findings revealed two significant cultural models of practice and pedagogy: the Close Relationship model and the Real-Life Learning model. In addition, a distinctive understanding of professionalism and a shared professional code of practice were found among childminders.

In conclusion, childminders in the study rejected an imposed professionalism in favour of a consultative approach sensitive to the agency of self-employed childminders. In developing professional 21st-century childminding, Ireland must develop a regulatory system specific to Irish childminding.

**Keywords:** childminding, ecocultural theory, cultural models, regulation, government policy

## Introduction

Despite the significant role of childminding in national childcare provision, little research had focused on it in Ireland (Daly, 2010; Garrity and McGrath, 2011), until the doctoral research that this article draws on explored childminders' cultural models of practice, pedagogy and professionalism on the eve of new childminding regulations (O'Regan *et al.*, 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022). The intention was to develop an evidence base on childminding in Ireland to support national policy development. There were three key research questions:

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

This article will provide a brief overview of the recent history of Irish childminding, followed by a description of the pragmatic research design within the framework of ecocultural theory. The key research findings will then be presented along with their relevance to the current developments under the National Action Plan for Childminding.

## A brief history

Childminding, in various guises, has been self-sustaining in Ireland for several generations as a form of paid work for women. The *Constitution of Ireland 1937* articulated the ideal of the woman's place in the home: "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." Thus, from 1933 to 1973, the so-called 'marriage bar' prevented married women from teaching or working in the civil service (Daly and Clavero, 2002). Maternal childcare was the norm, with most non-parental childcare provided by family members in the household, by live-in domestic servants or in infant classes at primary school (Walsh, 2005).

However, from the 1970s onwards, changes in legislation, such as the introduction of equal pay and paid maternity leave, led to increased numbers of mothers working outside the home. Labour-market participation increased from between 5% and 6% for married women in the 1960s, to around 27% by 1983. In the 1990s, against a backdrop of growing female employment, the demand for childcare grew rapidly, rising from 42% of working-age women (15–64 years) in 1990, to over 63% in 2007 at the peak of the economic boom, sometimes called the Celtic Tigris due to the rapid expansion of the female workforce (Russell *et al.*, 2017).

The *Child Care Act 1991* introduced regulations for all forms of paid childcare. In this Act, a childminder was legally defined as a person who single-handedly, in their own home, minds children. However, the Act exempted most childminders from its provisions: only childminders caring for four or more unrelated preschool children were included. In 2007, 75% of children aged 0–12 years experienced parental childcare at home (outside of school), while 10% of children were with a childminder, au pair or nanny, according to the Quarterly National Household Survey on Childcare (Central Statistics Office, 2010; 2016).

## The policy context 2000 to the present

Since the first National Childcare Strategy, substantial and significant changes have occurred within the childcare sector in Ireland. Such developments were initially driven by labour-market demands,

with capital investment in purpose-built childcare centres under two EU-supported, government-funded programmes. The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000–2006) and the National Investment Childcare Programme (2006–2013) both included a childminding strand: the National Childminding Initiative.

The rapid expansion of centre-based services under these public–private investment schemes between 2000 and 2010 reconfigured the landscape of early years provision in Ireland, displacing many existing childminders while prioritising the development of centre-based care (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 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 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018).

The National Childcare Strategy 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” (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000, 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 childminder’s home, should be required to register. This goal has yet to be realised.

## The National Childminding Initiative

As part of the National Childcare Strategy, the National Childminding Initiative aimed to professionalise informal childminders, in preparation for the planned new early years registration system for all early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Daly, 2010). Similar to the model developed in the UK (Greener, 2009), the National Guidelines for Childminders (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2008) promoted a more entrepreneurial, professional model of childminding intended to raise the quality of childminding services and improve outcomes for children.

The National Childminding Initiative encouraged those working with children at home to gain ECEC qualifications and to register with Revenue, the Irish government agency responsible for tax-related matters, in order to operate small childminding businesses from their own homes. It encouraged childminders caring for four or five pre-schoolers to fulfil their legal obligation to make a statutory notification to the Health Service Executive. A system of voluntary notification was created for exempt childminders, who could care for three unrelated preschool children, including their own preschool children, in addition to school-age children, up to a maximum of six children at any one time in the family home under planning regulations (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2022). These childminders were encouraged to submit a voluntary notification to local Childcare Committees: new agencies offering support services and training for childcare providers, including childminders.

Different strands of the National Childminding Initiative were presented as the means of improving childminding quality: firstly, by offering a free 10-hour course, the Quality Awareness Programme for Childminders; secondly, by providing support through local childminder advisers, who managed voluntary notification and offered home visits; and, thirdly, by developing local childminder networks. In addition, there were financial components: Childcare 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, while also promoting insurance for childminding services (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2008; Daly, 2010). The National Childminding

Initiative also provided funding to Childminding Ireland, the national professional association for childminders.

This entrepreneurial model of childminding encouraged childminders to see themselves as business owners, in keeping with the neoliberal vision of the childcare market (Gallagher, 2012), although the impact of this approach on ECEC quality in Europe has been extensively contested since that time (Campbell-Barr, 2013). However, from 2010, successive funding cuts effectively dismantled local Childminder Advisory Services, excluding childminding from most government supports, amid repeated calls for the proportionate regulation of childminding in various reports (Start Strong, 2012; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013).

In 2016, the creation of the new National Childcare Scheme introduced income-related subsidisation of childcare for all parents, leading to significant pressure for such subsidies to apply to childminding as well, as it remained a commonly used form of childcare for young children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2019). A working group on childminding reform proposed a staged approach to the regulation of childminding (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018), which was followed by a process of public consultation. In 2021, the National Action Plan (2021–2028) was published, proposing the complete regulation of all childminders, with associated training and supports, by 2028 (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). Nonetheless, at the time of writing, the vast majority of childminders remain legally exempt from regulation under the *Child Care Act 1991*.

Home-based childcare, including nannies, au pairs and relatives, paid and unpaid, still forms the largest source of non-parental childcare (29%), often used in combination with preschools, creches (day-care centres) and afterschool provision (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). 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 a paid relative (Central Statistics Office, 2016). According to the Census in 2016, this translates into approximately 43,000 preschool children and a further 44,000 school-age children, leading to an estimated 15,000 to 35,000 childminders caring for children aged 0–12 years nationally (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). In 2020, an Ipsos MRBI survey of parents on their childcare use pre-March 2020 indicated that 15% of children (aged 0–14 years) were cared for by a childminder in the childminder's home, and 6% by an au pair or nanny in the child's home (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021). At the time of writing, around 70 childminders are registered with Tusla, the national child and family agency charged with the regulation of childcare since 2014 (*Child and Family Agency Act 2013*).

## Research into childminding in Ireland

Childminding remains under-researched in Ireland and internationally, even though in France and Belgium, childminders constitute the largest part of the care and education workforce for children up to three years old (Ang *et al.*, 2016; Vandenbroeck and Bauters, 2017). As the *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care* report highlighted: "In many countries, they work in very difficult conditions, with limited educational support and low income ... In short, it is a largely undervalued workforce ... that deserves particular attention with regard to its professionalism" (Urban *et al.*, 2011, p. 14).

In a pragmatic research design, this study was conducted primarily within the theoretical framework of ecocultural theory (Gallimore *et al.*, 1993; Weisner, 2010), while also referencing the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and concepts in attachment theory (Bowlby, 2007). For the

purpose of triangulation, the study employed a mixed-method approach, using an online survey and a world cafe forum (Brown *et al.*, 2007) initially, before adopting 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.

Since the purpose was to develop an evidence base on childminding in Ireland to support national policy development, the bioecological model of human development was used initially as the theoretical framework because of its "explicit interest in applications to policies and programs pertinent to enhancing youth and family development" (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 794). Attitudes to professionalisation in childminding were explored in an online survey ( $n = 325$ ) with childminders and parents, followed by a world cafe forum – a variation on the focus group necessitated by the larger number of childminders expected ( $n = 40$ ) – at the annual general meeting of Childminding Ireland. These methods allowed stakeholders within the separate microsystems – the childminding context and the family context – to articulate their views within the exosystem of the socio-political context (i.e., the National Childminding Initiative etc.) and the broader macrosystem of Irish culture. However, the surprising finding that professional childminders were concerned that professionalisation might compromise the essence of childminding led to a significant shift in focus to try to capture that essence by documenting the home-based microsystem of childminding.

## Ecocultural research into Irish childminding

In keeping with a focus on ecological systems, the study utilised the lens of ecocultural theory (Keogh and Weisner, 1993) to describe the essence of childminding, as it theorises links between daily activity and childminders' cultural models and values (Tonyan, 2013). Cultural models can be defined as "presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared ... by the members of a society" (Holland and Quinn, 1987, p. 4) and used to guide their everyday life. Ecocultural theory was developed to uncover these models in family support research (Bernheimer and Weisner, 2007) and was adapted for childminding research with multiple families in California (Tonyan, 2015), before being further adapted for research in the Irish ECEC context.

Ecocultural theory differs from other ecological approaches in at least two 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, 2010). This is well illustrated by Individual Family Service Plans for families with a developmentally delayed child: applying the ecocultural approach to understand family-level outcomes as well as individual child outcomes, different families were supported very differently in sustainable early-intervention programmes (Gallimore *et al.*, 1993).

Secondly, in ecocultural theory, daily routines form a critical unit of analysis (Bernheimer *et al.*, 1990). 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 (Rogoff, 2003). Thus, when childminders talk through their daily caregiving routines, their descriptions reflect the meaning systems that undergird those practices, including cultural models, whether consciously held or not (Gallimore and Lopez, 2002). 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 and Nuttall, 2014). Thus, the daily routine of activities reveals the underlying values and beliefs that hold sway in the household, which is critical to understanding how and why childminders construct their daily routines in conjunction with their client families (Tonyan, 2017).

The original Ecocultural Family Interview (Bernheimer and Weisner, 2007) focused on a family's daily routines as these develop within the resources and constraints of their ecology, drawing on the beliefs



and values within the family's culture. Since a childminding niche contains multiple families and operates as a business, the Ecocultural Family Interview was adapted for use in childminding research in California (California Child Care Research Partnership, 2014) and further tailored for the Irish ECEC context.

## Study participation

From the initial online survey in 2015, there were 325 valid responses from childminders ( $n = 181$ ) and parents ( $n = 144$ ). Approximately half of the responses came from emails to known childminders in snowball sampling, and the remainder came in response to links placed on social media (Bhutta, 2011). Subsequently, 40 childminders attended the world cafe forum in 2016 at the invitation of Childminding Ireland, which also sought participants for the EFICh interviews at roadshows around the country in 2018. Ultimately, 17 childminders were interviewed in 2018: two of these were registered with Tusla and 15 were members of Childminding Ireland. All participants were female, and over 70% ( $n = 12$ ) held a QQI Level 5 in Early Childhood Education and Care, the national standard qualification for centre-based ECEC practitioners, a 400-hour, post-secondary certificate. Nearly 30% of interviewees ( $n = 5$ ) also held qualifications at degree level in other disciplines, in line with the national average of 27% for 25- to 64-year-olds in 2018 (OECD, 2019).

The EFICh research protocol has three main components: the semi-structured, conversational interview; childminder photographs illustrating their daily practice; and the completion of rating scales by the researcher, with qualitative vignettes to explain each rating. In addition, a background survey gathered information about the family's economic circumstances, the childminder's reported levels of agency, their education level and their views on early childhood. Two visits were made to each setting: an initial visit to explain the research, deliver the background survey and conduct a holistic observation; and a second visit, during which an EFICh interview of approximately one to one-and-a-half hours was conducted.

A key project-specific topic was cultural models. Childminders were rated according to fit as either high, medium or low, starting with the Close Relationship and School Readiness models identified in California. To receive a 'high' rating, the childminder had to value a model in what she said, enact it in her daily-routine activities and evaluate its impact on the children's outcomes in some way. A 'medium' rating means the childminder partially valued, enacted or saw the model, while a 'low' rating means that there was little or no evidence of valuing, enacting or seeing the model. Subsequently, the data were coded using Dedoose®, a web-based application for analysing mixed-method research with text, photos, audio and spreadsheet data (Salmona *et al.*, 2019), allowing for a qualitative analytic process of structured discovery, "during which analytic strategies remained open to unexpected processes and patterns while focusing on project-specific topics" (Weisner, 2014, p. 167).

## Study limitations

This research was conducted between 2015 and 2019, as the government moved towards mandatory regulation of paid childminding (Government of Ireland, 2019). It was vital to describe the unique nature of childminding beforehand, so that a sustainable regulatory and support system could be developed, which would honour this particular form of ECEC. However, in the absence of a national register of childminders, the study was conducted with a small, self-selecting sample of professionalised childminders; as such, it captured the cultural models and views of childminders shaped to some extent by the National Childminding Initiative. Therefore, it may reflect primarily the views of childminders who are better qualified and more confident about coming forward to

participate. Caution should be exercised in applying the findings to Irish childminders in general.

## Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Technological University Dublin in accordance with its policies and procedures. All participants were given full and accurate information regarding the background, nature, purpose and outputs of the research to allow them to make an informed decision to participate, and they were made aware that they could withdraw at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed regarding any information disclosed; participants' names in this article are pseudonyms. No observations of individual children were conducted, and all photographs used as prompts during interviews were shared with parental consent. No photos of children were retained for use by the researcher afterwards.

## Key research findings

This research was conducted over four years. The initial phase of the research focused on quantifying and describing the impact of the National Childminding Initiative on childminder and parent attitudes to professionalisation. The second ecocultural phase sought to explore childminders' values and practice in more qualitative depth.

### *Initial findings*

The initial phase of this research (i.e., the online survey and world cafe forum) identified high levels of professional awareness (Cameron and Moss, 2007) among childminder respondents, revealing clear evidence of the impact of the National Childminding Initiative over the previous decade. Childminders had rising levels of ECEC education, embraced childminding as a career and valued their distinctive practice as childminders. They enjoyed the autonomy of self-employment as a childminder and advocated for specific childminding qualifications in ECEC, staffed local networks and proportionate childminding regulations, once accompanied by supports.

However, a significant challenge was the relatively low earnings of childminders, despite the high cost of childcare for parents. Moreover, current programmes in early education were described as poor preparation for home-based childminding, while the early years regulations (Government of Ireland, 2016) were described as not fit for purpose, and likely to compromise the 'essence of childminding', as respondents described it.

### *Ecocultural findings*

To explore and describe the essence of childminding, the ecocultural approach was used. Two distinct cultural models were documented among childminders – namely, a Close Relationship model of praxis, and a Real-Life Learning model of pedagogy. In addition, distinctive features of childminder professionalism were identified, balancing business relationships and close relationships within a cultural model of professionalism.

### *Close Relationship model*

The most prevalent cultural model identified in this study was a Close Relationship model, similar to that identified in California by Tonyan (2017), with all 17 respondents scoring a 'high' rating. 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 through play and conversation, and building relationships through these interactions. Childminders value the strong

relationships they have with children who are or have been in their care.

Close bonds were developed in the intimacy and familiarity of the home setting, where interactions with the same small group of children occurred on a daily basis. For some interviewees, the close bond with children in the home was the essence of childminding, as well as its greatest reward:

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 creche, where it's bigger and you might not be with the same children all the time. (Shona)

Analysis highlighted the value of long-term, enduring relationships, conceptualising all those involved as extended family. Childminders were included in the family celebrations and rituals of the minded children, such as birthday parties, communions and confirmations, and even parents' weddings.

Childminders' own family members were usually involved in the service. Adult children, the childminders' parents and other relatives helped with school runs and purchase and preparation of food. Some husbands/partners became part of the children's routine, 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 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)

## ***Real-Life Learning model***

A second cultural model identified was a model of pedagogy dubbed 'real-life learning' by interviewees. Whereas most participants were rated 'low' on the School Readiness model identified by Tonyan (2017), the majority of respondents (16/17) were rated 'high' on the Real-Life Learning model. In this cultural model, the primary goal is to explore learning opportunities presented by everyday experiences as they arise, engaging children in a nurturing pedagogy (Hayes and Kernan, 2008) with a flexible, emergent curriculum reminiscent of the Reggio Emilia approach. The childminder prioritises child-led, relationship-driven learning mediated through everyday experiences both in an enriched home environment and out in the community.

The value of learning in a low-stress, home-from-home environment for children was often highlighted. One interviewee used photographs to illustrate real-life learning. One photograph showed a three-year-old child chopping vegetables with a real knife, helping to prepare a stew for the evening meal. Another showed 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 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 creches. (Nicky)

Childminders also emphasised the freedom of everyday contacts in the community, where the children are doing everything with the childminder, as illustrated by the following explanation of a photograph taken during a school run:

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. (Rianne)

## ***Childminder professionalism***

In the initial survey, childminders' sense of agency in running their services was a striking finding, and the EFICh interviews only expanded and deepened this, highlighting how essential the creativity of childminders is in initiating services. These childminders were also proud 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 Childminding Ireland and other childcare organisations.

Furthermore, a common code of professional conduct was clearly evident among childminders – one which valued trustworthiness, reliability and flexibility as principles of professional practice in relation to client families. To be entrusted with caring for other parents' children was seen as both an honour and a responsibility by childminders in the study. One participant, Mary, mentioned how significant it was "that their parents trust me. Like I have them longer than what they spend with their parents, you know, it really is lovely." Another childminder spoke of working through migraines to maintain a reliable service for families, while another described increasing the days and hours of childminding to meet an emergency need, when the mum ended up staying in hospital for much longer than expected. These values were a source of professional pride.

Ecocultural research has also highlighted a distinctive process of childminder professionalisation (shown in Figure 1). Firstly, the most common starting point for becoming a childminder was parenthood (typically, motherhood), rather than making a career choice to train for early years work, in contrast to other early years professionals. In fact, most interviewees ( $n = 13/17$ ) had pursued careers in unrelated disciplines prior to starting a childminding service. The main motivation for starting a service was to earn enough income to be able to afford to stay at home, caring for their own babies and toddlers. Thus, childminding was a family adaption to facilitate a stable family niche rooted in their values and beliefs, working within family resources and constraints to meet the needs of family members, as ecocultural theory proposes.

Secondly, participants, as adult learners, sought professional training which was relevant, 'just-in-time' education specific to childminding (Tonyan *et al.*, 2017, p. 39). While 70% (12/17) had completed the 400-hour national qualification for centre-based ECEC practitioners, several interviewees mentioned that it had not really prepared them for childminding. They advocated for more relevant education specifically for childminders, preferably delivered through local staffed childminding networks (Bromer *et al.*, 2009). Thirdly, given the relationship-driven focus of their practice with children and families, supportive supervision for lone childminders was considered preferable to, and a vital addition to, childminding inspections.

Finally, childminders stated that there should be public recognition for the unique provision childminding offers children, rather than pressure to conform to inappropriate centre-based standards. Childminders bring children from other families into the intimacy of the family home – not a purpose-built, child-sized environment, open 7am to 7pm, but a home where all the generations live, eat, work and sleep. Participants clearly articulated a desire for specific childminding regulations, sensitive to this key difference:

Really [I want the policymakers] 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 creches ... to sort of respect us as a profession as well – that at the end of the day, the majority of us have our own families and we're working in our own homes. (Chloe)

Ultimately, childminders in this research were willing to register if – and only if – the regulations respect, honour and support the essential differences that make childminding what it is.

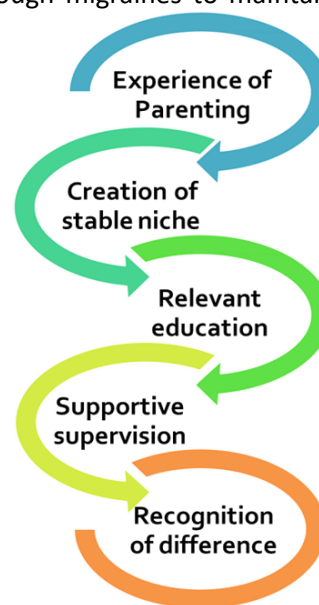


Figure 1 An ecocultural view of the process of childminder professionalisation in Ireland

## Discussion

A key finding in this study was the strength and prevalence of a Close Relationship model among Irish childminders, which extended that specified by Tonyan and Nuttall (2014), in particular regarding the enduring nature of the relationships, and the conceptualisation of the service in terms of extended family. A striking aspect 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 described 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). Thus, childminders have the potential not only to provide continuity of care between home, school and the community (Ang *et al.*, 2016), but also to promote a web of supportive relationships for increasingly mobile and migrating families in Ireland (Garrity and McGrath, 2011).

This research also documented a Real-Life Learning model, a cultural model not previously described in Ireland or elsewhere. However, many of the components of the Real-Life Learning model – a relational, nurturing child-led pedagogy, an emergent curriculum in mixed age groups, an enriched home learning environment – have been highlighted in previous studies as key elements of childminding practice in the UK, Sweden and the US (Fauth *et al.*, 2011; Freeman and Karlsson, 2012).

A small group size is a vital structural component of the Real-Life Learning model. The home-from-home setting means a more unhurried, low-stress environment for the child than is possible in centre-based provision (Groeneveld *et al.*, 2010). The small number of children means childminders can prioritise one-on-one, individual attention in sensitive, attuned relationships (Dalli *et al.*, 2011). 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 and Kernan, 2008; Freeman, 2011).

Research into process quality has shown that group size may matter more than staff ratio: smaller group sizes have been associated with higher process quality in the MeMoQ longitudinal study in Flanders (Laevers *et al.*, 2016). With smaller numbers, childminders can be more flexible with regard to routine, allowing the young child's needs and interests to be prioritised more easily (Otero and Melhuish, 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020), in a child-led, emergent curriculum (Rinaldi, 2005; Freeman and Karlsson, 2012). One result highlighted by research in Ireland and the UK is better outcomes in terms of speech and language development for very young children with childminders (McGinnity *et al.*, 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020).

In small childminding settings, the positive effect of smaller group sizes on socio-emotional wellbeing is particularly evident (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021). The Study of Early Education and Development hypothesised: "It may be that a greater level of one-to-one interaction in individual ECEC is helpful in building children's emotional resilience" (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020, p. 24). Similarly, the national longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland reported that at age five, children who have grown up with childminders show "fewer socio-emotional difficulties" and a "higher level of pro-social behaviour" (Russell *et al.*, 2016, p. v).

Among childminders with small numbers of preschool children, the Real-Life Learning model was not only prevalent but also pointedly differentiated by participants from perceptions of school readiness commonly found in centre-based preschool settings in Ireland (Ring *et al.*, 2016). This model presents significant contrasts with the School Readiness model that Tonyan, Paulsell and Shivers (2017) described among childminders in California, where a large-scale childminding licence allows up to 14 children with an assistant. That model more closely resembles the Irish solo preschool provider, who can offer a sessional preschool service for up to 11 children, sometimes in home-based environments (Neylon, 2014). Irish childminders' choice of pedagogy is clearly linked to the structural parameters of

group size and adult–child ratio in their own home.

Based on the findings in this research, there is also a call for a new ecocultural understanding of childminder professionalism, in response to one of the central research questions: what is a professional childminder? Findings in relation to childminder agency and advocacy in particular suggest that the role of the individual childminder should be highlighted in the ecocultural definition of childminding. The original definition, proposed by Tonyan and Nuttall (2014), should be amended to read:

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 (O’Regan *et al.*, 2022, p. 11).

## Policy implications

The implications of these findings should inform the development of a new regulatory system for childminding in Ireland. In early 2021, the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021) was published, laying out an eight-year plan to include childminders in the national ECEC system on a phased basis (see Figure 2), with access to childcare subsidies for parents using childminders. It is an ambitious plan, which promises to respond to childminders’ aspirations as identified in the present research.

The vision statement of the National Action Plan for Childminding clearly echoes findings in the present study. Drawing on the views expressed by childminders, parents and other stakeholders during the consultation process, it reads as follows:

- “That the children, families, and communities of Ireland can experience the benefits of quality childminding in a relationship-based, home-from-home, family life environment.
- That the life-learning, continuity of care and flexibility that quality childminding provides is acknowledged, supported by the development of an appropriate quality assurance system that protects and enhances this long-established and respected model of childcare” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021, p. 40).

The plan promises childminder-specific regulations, an oft-repeated request at every phase of the present research. It also seeks to develop bespoke education and quality supports for childminders, delivered in local staffed childminding networks – other deeply felt needs articulated by respondents. At the same time, inclusion in the ECEC system will mean that increasing numbers of childminders, who will be registered under these new regulations, will be able to offer the National Childcare Scheme to parents who are using their services.



Figure 2 Summary of the National Action Plan for Childminding in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2021, p. 70)

## Conclusions

The National Action Plan for Childminding promises both inclusion in the national ECEC system, and regulations and training specific to childminding – two key hopes highlighted in this research. However, it remains vital that a competent system is actually delivered which truly meets the needs of working childminders and young children and reflects the relationship-driven ethos of childminding in Ireland. As the recent OECD review of ECEC quality in Ireland summarises:

Plans to bring childminders into the regulatory system are highly welcome, but need to be developed further with care so as not to drive childminders out of the ECEC system (OECD, 2021, p. 13).

Such competent national systems for childminding exist in Denmark (Halling-Illum and Breuer, 2009) and France (Letablier and Fagnani, 2009), among other countries. While the details of its implementation remain to be seen, if the National Action Plan lives up to its vision statement, an effective new childminder support system could be created in Ireland too. Ecocultural models of practice and pedagogy have the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of such a tailored system of regulations, education and supports. Instead of imposed forms of professionalism, such a system could nurture and develop Irish childminders' professionalism from within.

## 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.

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