

Characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare: exploring the views of trained childminders and nannies

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Abstract

This study explored the qualities of home-based childcare in England from the perspectives of qualified nannies and registered childminders. An initial framing of key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare was drawn from extant literature. An online questionnaire was developed and distributed among members of professional networks. This resulted in 99 full responses from qualified nannies and registered childminders based in England, with a total of 856 individual replies across the 20 items of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was followed up with an online focus group discussion in which six nannies participated. Thematic analyses of the questionnaire and focus group data were synthesised to identify overarching themes and their sub-themes. The findings of this study corroborated previous research findings revealing that home-based childcare is a flexible and affordable service that enables parental employment, serves as a parental substitute, nurtures child wellbeing and promotes learning. It is underpinned by strong relationships, a distinct pedagogy and unique structural and contextual qualities. This study also offers further insights into the personal attributes of home-based educators and their role as professional knowledge brokers, supporting parents with their parenting and with personal and family challenges. As such, home-based childcare is conceptualised as a support system for families, which goes beyond caring for children.

Keywords: home-based childcare, qualities, characteristics, support system, knowledge brokering

Introduction

Home-based childcare, defined as non-parental, non-familial childcare provided by a childminder or nanny, is widely used in the UK for children from birth up to the age of five years old (Ang *et al.*, 2017). Internationally, home-based childcare – often referred to as family day care (Mooney and Statham, 2003) – is considered to be an integral and almost indispensable service for parents in employment (Ang *et al.*, 2017; Hooper, 2019). It represents a wide range of care arrangements offered either formally or informally in the caregiver’s domestic premises, although around the world such arrangements vary considerably depending on a country’s specific policies and regulations (Ang *et al.*, 2017; Slot, 2018).

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on paid-for home-based childcare provided in England by registered childminders and qualified nannies, hereafter referred to as educarers, to reflect the indistinguishable elements of education and care within childcare. Childminders are required to join the Early Years Register to look after children from birth up to the age of five years old and must implement the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (statutory standards for learning development and care) (Department for Education, 2021). Childminders complete essential basic training in childcare/education, safeguarding, food hygiene and first aid and may have additional qualifications. Nannies are employed by a family to care for a child (or children) in the child’s own home and their registration is voluntary. The nannies who participated in this research are distinctive in that they have specialist, usually degree-level, training in early years education and care (Purdon, 2021).

Although home-based childcare provides vital support for families, there is a “dearth of research in the area compared to the more established body of scholarship on centre-based provision” (Ang and Tabu, 2018, p. 145), and “relatively little is known about the home-based providers caring for young children” (Hooper, 2019, p. 275). Even less is known about home-based childcare offered by qualified nannies (Purdon, 2021; Kalitowski, 2017), who are often conflated with au pairs despite their distinct differences in terms of their professional aspirations and qualifications (Feintuch, 2015; Adamson, 2017), and who are assumed to serve a small minority of wealthy families and are therefore not considered part of mainstream childcare (Leach *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, the heterogeneity and inconsistent definition of the role of childcare, as well as the wide range of policy contexts across countries, make it difficult to establish a useful framework to assess and improve the quality of home-based childcare (Tonyan *et al.*, 2017; Hooper, 2019).

Initial studies, in the form of literature reviews, evaluation studies and empirical research, have explored some of the characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare, but researchers have also recommended that further research should be undertaken to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of this type of provision (Collombet, 2016) and to explore and define its key characteristics and qualities (Ang *et al.*, 2017). The research project reported in this paper explored the key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare from the perspective of trained home-based educarers, based on their experience and practice.

For the purposes of this paper, we make a distinction between the terms ‘characteristics’ and ‘qualities’, even though these terms are often defined synonymously (‘Characteristic’, no date). We use the term ‘characteristics’ to refer to key features of home-based childcare that make it distinguishable from centre-based childcare in terms of the types of services offered and the children’s developmental and learning outcomes. We use the term ‘qualities’ to note specific indicators (or clusters of indicators) that impact on the key characteristics of home-based childcare.

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of existing literature concerning the characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare. We outline the research methodology and data analysis, and then present and discuss the key emergent themes, before concluding with key arguments and recommendations.

Literature review

Home-based childcare is an essential service for families due to its flexibility, accessibility and affordability, even in middle- or high-income countries with well-established early childhood education and care systems (Slot, 2018). Home-based childcare provides family support, especially for vulnerable families, and offers children personalised, rich and varied learning experiences, as well as ensuring continuity of care between home, school, family and the community (Ang *et al.*, 2017). Parents often choose home-based childcare because centre-based childcare is not always available due to factors such as location, availability or family income (Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020), and they value it as a flexible form of childcare that fits around their working lives, especially when working non-standard hours (Slot, 2018; Fauth *et al.*, 2013). The crucial and indispensable role of home-based childcare became more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, when centre-based provision became impractical and difficult to attend, due to country-wide lockdowns, which led to many parents favouring home-based childcare (Gromada *et al.*, 2020).

Parents also choose home-based childcare for reasons such as trust and communication, the close relationships of home-based educators with families and children, and the belief that children receive personal attention (Hooper, 2019; Slot, 2018; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Tonyan *et al.*, 2017; Leach *et al.*, 2008). Parents are more satisfied and happier with home-based childcare, compared to centre-based provision, for several reasons, including home-based educators' relationships with families and children, their genuine interest in children's interests and needs and the physical affection they display towards them, their communication with children, and their attention to children's emotional wellbeing (Lehrer *et al.*, 2015; Fauth *et al.*, 2013). They see home-based childcare as an extension of parental care, with educators providing physical affection and showing genuine interest in attending to children's needs (Fauth *et al.*, 2013). For parents, warm interactions, positive relationships and stimulating activities are important factors for choosing home-based childcare (O'Regan *et al.*, 2020; Lehrer *et al.*, 2015). Thus, while parents consider practical matters in choosing home-based childcare, their decisions are balanced with their subjective feelings about its quality (Chen and Bradbury, 2020).

Smaller group sizes, good adult-to-child ratios and qualified educators are structural qualities that benefit children and are often used as proxy measures for quality evaluation (Leach *et al.*, 2008; Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020). Small group settings enable home-based educators to develop closer relationships with both the child and the parent, and to establish effective and respectful communication and mutual trust that positively contribute to children's wellbeing and learning (Ang and Tabu, 2018; Chen and Bradbury, 2020; Thomas, 2021). Children enjoy a stable and unchanged environment and a high level of educator responsiveness, and in some cases they are exposed to mixed-age interactions, all of which enable them to establish bonds and develop securely (O'Regan *et al.*, 2021; Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020; Ang and Tabu, 2018). Educationally focused and highly engaged home-based educators are fairly consistent in their family support practices (Hooper, 2019), adopt a distinct real-life, discursive and enacted pedagogy, and form a close-knit community of practice (O'Regan *et al.*, 2021; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Fauth *et al.*, 2013).

Quality as an applied concept within the early childhood field has long been debated and contested on the grounds that it is subjective, complex and multidimensional, requiring assessment of quality to be contextualised as well as the consideration of structural parameters and processes, relational interactions between children and adults, and outcomes for children (Owen, 2000; Leach *et al.*, 2008). Despite the difficulties in defining quality, there are a few measures that can be reliably used in all types of childcare settings (Leach *et al.*, 2008). These measures have been designed mainly around the dominant perceptions of quality found in centre-based provision (O’Connell, 2011), and when they are used to measure home-based childcare, the findings do not always reflect its unique characteristics and often reveal poor to moderate quality (Hooper, 2019; Tonyan *et al.*, 2017; O’Connell, 2011). Furthermore, the registration status of home-based educators also impacts the findings of evaluation studies concerning home-based childcare. For example, in England, home-based educators who are not registered with Ofsted are often classed as informal child carers, and as a result evaluation studies may not reflect the quality of their services.

However, when available tools are adapted to better reflect home-based childcare and a distinction is made between childminders and nannies, and informal child carers, a different picture is revealed. In their Families, Children and Child Care longitudinal study, Leach *et al.* (2008) reported that, for children aged between 10 and 18 months old, the observed quality of home-based childcare in domestic settings with one caregiver was higher than for nursery provision with multiple caregivers. Childminders and nannies were more aware of health and safety issues than grandparent carers and offered more outings and activities. Nannies were found to have the highest levels of positive relationships with children at age 18 months. Recent comparative studies have also revealed that children aged two, three and four years old in the care of childminders and informal childcare (e.g., relatives, friends and nannies) had higher scores for verbal language ability than children in centre-based childcare; in addition, there have been positive (although not statistically significant) findings for behavioural self-regulation and prosocial behaviour and lower levels of emotional symptoms (being worried, unhappy or nervous) (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018). In home-based childcare, children experience lower noise levels, greater wellbeing and higher caregiver sensitivity that is associated with lower production of salivary cortisol, as an indicator of stress levels (Groeneveld *et al.*, 2010), although the latter finding remains inconclusive (Tervahartiala *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the wide range of policy contexts across countries and the critical differences between home-based childcare provided by nannies in the home of the family, and childcare offered by childminders for several families in their own home (Tonyan *et al.*, 2017; Hooper, 2019), the literature revealed that there are some defining characteristics and qualities which are broadly similar (see Figure 1). Key characteristics include (i) a family service, which offers flexible, accessible and affordable childcare that enables parental employment and serves as a substitute for parental care; and (ii) positive child outcomes concerning their wellbeing, behavioural regulation and prosocial behaviour, as well as lower levels of anxiety and stress. Key qualities are along dimensions that encompass (i) relational qualities, i.e., strong relationships with children and families, and communication and trust, with children receiving personal attention and physical affection; (ii) structural qualities, such as qualified staff, low child-to-adult ratios and low staff turnover; (iii) contextual variables, such as a stable and secure environment, and mixed-age groups; and (iv) a distinct discursive, enacted and real-life pedagogy.

It is evident that home-based childcare is more than caring for children. It is a unique and distinct type of childcare and provides a unique service for families. Therefore, it cannot be conceptualised and evaluated against developmental frameworks applicable to centre-based childcare. Instead, it is important to identify the key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare that bring about positive outcomes

for children. In this context, the current study sought to explore further the key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare through the lens of those who practise it, attending to their rarely heard voices. More specifically, the study explored the views of trained childminders and nannies, based on their work experience. In this paper, we address the following research question: how do trained childminders and nannies describe the characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare?

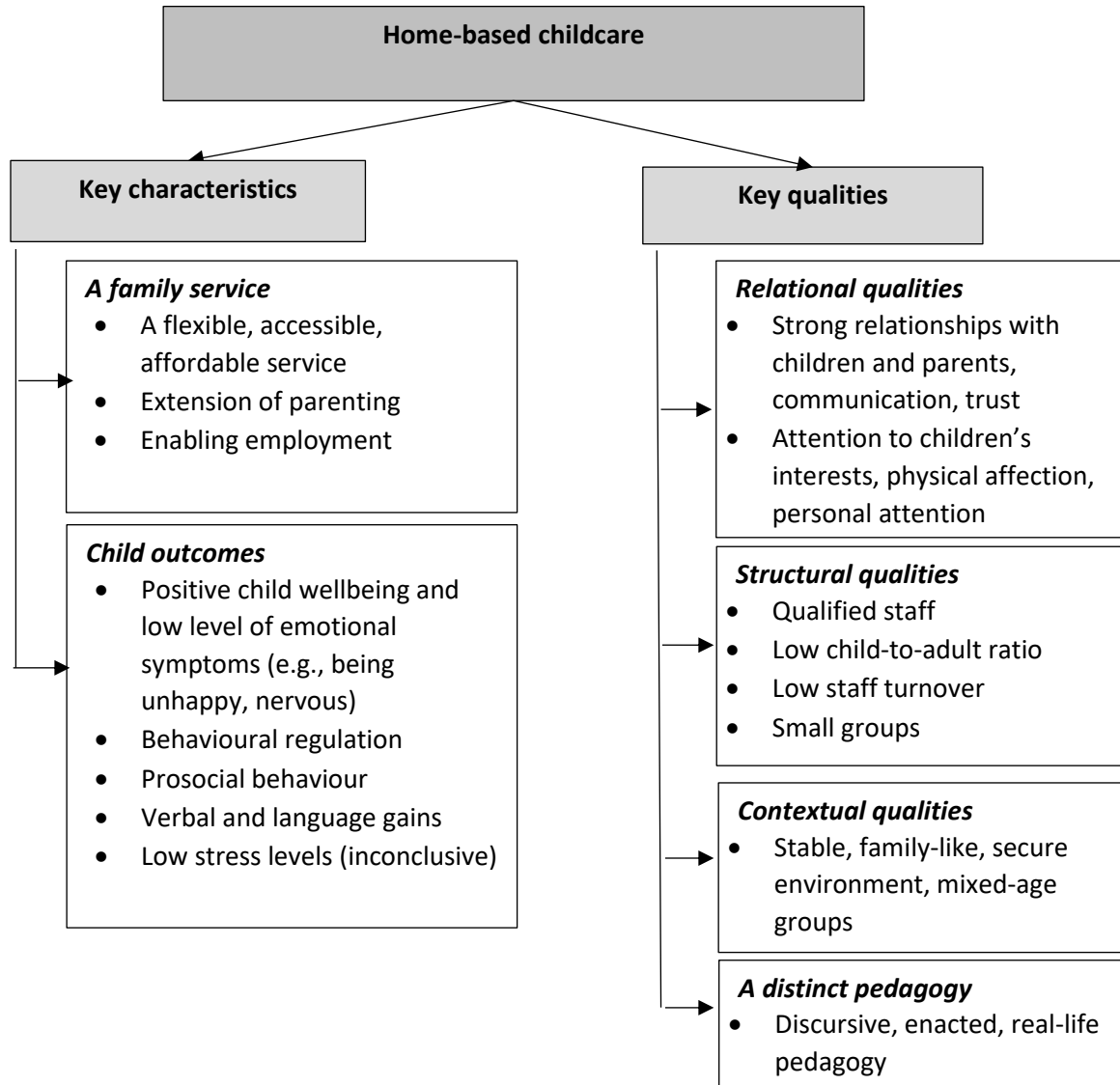


Figure 1 Key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare, identified from a review of literature

Methodology

To address the aim of the study and the research question, a qualitative methodology was adopted, consisting of an online survey and a focus group discussion, which were employed in a sequential manner (Creswell, 2007). Accordingly, the online questionnaire was circulated for completion by eligible respondents, and then, after the questionnaire data had been analysed, the emerging key themes were explored in more detail in a focus group discussion.

Sample

Respondents to the online questionnaire and participants in the focus group discussion formed a purposive sample (Creswell, 2007) that consisted of trained childminders and nannies working in England only, on the grounds of variation in early years policy further afield. Access to the study respondents was made through professional childminding and nannying networks and via an advert on social media. Thus, questionnaire respondents and focus group participants formed a self-selected group, with all the advantages and limitations that self-selection entails.

Data collection tools

For the online survey, a questionnaire was designed which included five sections. One section consisted of closed questions about the respondents' demographic characteristics – for example, their role (childminder/nanny), years of work experience, location of work, qualifications, and the ages of the children under their care. The second section comprised questions about the respondents' roles, including their main responsibilities and work experience, while the third section asked them to describe how they support children's learning and development, and health and wellbeing, as well as how they support parents; they were asked to give concrete examples and to note any challenging and rewarding experiences. The fourth section asked them to state the key elements that they believe constitute high-quality home-based childcare, how the government can support families to access such services, and how Covid-19 affected them. The final section consisted of questions about their identity as home-based child carers, including what they think is unique about their identity, and how they would explain their role to someone who does not know much about it.

The questionnaire design was informed by the existing literature about home-based childcare, plus preliminary data gathered during a conference from lecturers and researchers involved in the education of nannies (Norland, 2021). The questionnaire was piloted among a small group of nannies and childminders ($n = 6$) over a week, and then was revised to include 20 questions under the five sections described above. The questionnaire was circulated among members of 14 professional networks and was open for completion for two and a half weeks leading up to 13 August 2021. Upon closure of the online survey, there were a total of 931 viewings of the questionnaire. The initial viewings were high, but they gradually declined, with no views or responses close to the closing date. It is likely that as the weeks progressed, the survey advertisement was pushed to the bottom of participants' feeds. By the closing date of the online survey, 114 questionnaires had been completed. Ten participants did not answer beyond the first question and were therefore removed, and five participants were removed because their workplace was outside England; this resulted in 99 viable responses (response rate 10.6%). In total, there were 856 individual replies across the 20 questions of the questionnaire.

To explore the emerging key issues from the analysis of the questionnaire data in more depth, a focus group was organised, which took place in November 2021, via Microsoft Teams. The focus group

participants were all nannies who were respondents to the online questionnaire. Prior to the focus group discussion, the participants received a summary of the emerging key issues from the questionnaire data analysis and were asked to reflect on them and consider any additional feedback. With the participants' consent, the focus group discussion was recorded. Initially, 24 respondents – 13 childminders and 11 nannies – expressed an interest in participating in the focus group discussion. However, when the focus group was organised, there was no take-up from childminders, and thus only one discussion was conducted, with six nannies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent via a letter which explained the purpose of the research and the fact that participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential (BERA, 2019), as well as outlining how personal data would be stored and used in line with data protection requirements (*Data Protection Act 2018*). Ethics approval was received from the Research Ethics Committee of the lead institution.

Study validity and credibility

Certain steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the study in order to substantiate its trustworthiness. These included the design of the questionnaire, which was informed by the relevant literature, with questions reflecting the research question of the study; the piloting and subsequent revision of the questionnaire; the analysis of the two sets of data, which was conducted in a sequential manner; and the fact that respondents to the online questionnaire had the opportunity to check the initial findings and elaborate further, by volunteering to participate in the focus group discussion. The emergent key themes of the study (as outlined in the 'Emergent key themes – discussion' section below) were presented in a way that maintained the authenticity and richness of participants' responses.

Study limitations

The study is limited on the grounds that it explores only the views of home-based educarers who are trained or hold relevant qualifications, and there was only one focus group with nannies, leaving a gap in exploring further the views of childminders via this method. In addition, the study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and when lockdown restrictions were in place, a situation that altered considerably families' day-to-day lives and the working conditions of home-based child carers. Thus, the findings can only be understood under these conditions and may not be representative of home-based childcare offered under a wider range of arrangements or outside the exceptional circumstances that prevailed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finally, the fact that the open-ended questionnaire was informed by existing literature and academics who educate and train home-based educarers may reflect potential bias in its content.

Data analysis

The data from the questionnaire were analysed using NVivo software. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that attempted to capture issues that were not specifically confined to the content of the questionnaire, which was largely informed by existing literature. The following key issues emerged:

- how children are supported and building rapport with children

- how the family is supported and building rapport with parents
- duties and practicalities within home-based childcare
- traits, key characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare
- difficulties within the role, and feeling supported in the role
- difficulties within the sector
- government policy and support
- training and necessary procedures
- why home-based childcare matters.

Subsequently, the focus group data was analysed following a hybrid thematic analysis which used the same codes that were derived from the analysis of the questionnaire data, while allowing for further codes to be elicited. The focus group discussion data analysis did not yield any new codes and themes. Instead, the participants elaborated further on the key themes that had emerged from the questionnaire data analysis. Interestingly, the discussion was mainly about policy and government support (Papatheodorou *et al.*, 2022).

Emergent key themes – discussion

This section presents and discusses the key emerging issues in relation to the research question: how do trained childminders and nannies describe the characteristics and qualities of home-based childcare? The findings are presented as themes and sub-themes (Table 1) and supported by direct quotes taken from the participants' responses to maintain the authenticity and richness of the descriptions of their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). First, the demographic characteristics of respondents will be presented to contextualise the findings in terms of the participants' qualifications, work experience, the age range of children under their care, and their work location.

Respondents' demographic characteristics

Of the 99 respondents, 39 were childminders and 60 nannies. Ninety-two respondents had an early childhood qualification, with nearly two-thirds of them (56) having a level 3 qualification, and one-third (31) having a level 4–6 graduate qualification (Table 2). Half of the respondents (50) had between 0 and 10 years' work experience, with more than two-thirds of them working in London and the south of England, and more nannies had served longer in their profession (20+ years) than childminders (Table 3). At the time of the study, the respondents were working with 171 children, with the majority of both childminders and nannies (38 and 43, respectively) working with children up to the age of three years old (Table 4).

Table 1 Summary of key findings – themes and sub-themes

Key characteristics of home-based childcare	
Theme	Sub-themes
Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A continuum of flexible and reliable childcare services, enabling parental employment and serving as a parental substitute
Nurturing children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child wellbeing, emotional expression and socialisation • Child health and healthy eating • Physical activity and outdoor experiences • Self-care
Children’s learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age-appropriate, planned and in-the-moment play opportunities • Observing, scaffolding and assessing learning
Nurturing parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing and routine communication • Specialist advice and support • Emotional support
Qualities of home-based childcare	
Affective relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bonding, love, laughter and fun • Communication • Trust
Personal attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation and efficiency, determination, reliability, honesty, integrity, love, and pride
Professional knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child development and learning, and specialist knowledge
A distinct pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A pedagogy of life and for life
Structural qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group size, child-to-adult ratio and low staff turnover
Contextual qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar, stable, secure environment

Table 2 Respondents' roles and qualifications (n = 99)

Demographic characteristics	Childminders	Nannies
Role	39	60
Qualifications		
Early years – entry level	1	1
Early years – level 3	21	35
Early years – level 4–6	11	20
Early years – level 6+	2	1
Other qualifications	4	3

Table 3 Respondents' work experience and location of work (n = 99)

Demographic characteristics	Childminders	Nannies
Work experience		
0–10 years	20	30
11–19 years	14	13
20+ years	4	18
Location of work		
Childminders and nannies		
London	27	
East England, south-east England, south-west England	53	
Rest of the country	19	

Table 4 The age of children under the care of the respondents ($n = 171$)

Children’s age range	Childminders	Nannies
Birth to 3 years	38	43
4–7 years	29	27
8+ years	20	14

Key characteristics of home-based childcare

Childcare

A continuum of flexible and reliable childcare services, enabling parental employment and serving as a parental substitute. Consistent with other studies (Ang *et al.*, 2017; Fauth *et al.*, 2013), this study found that home-based childcare is a flexible, family-needs-tailored service. Home-based educarers enable parental employment and act as substitute parents by offering reliable, thoughtful and caring childcare, going above and beyond their duties. They provide wrap-around services which are unique, and more than a nursery practitioner can offer.

Nannies noted that they provide “more reliable, flexible care, more peace of mind”, “support parents in the rearing of their children [and] step in when parents are away or at work, and love and care for the child”. They offer “a thoughtful, caring and practical service” and “tailor the care to the families’ needs”. Their role is “much more unique than a nursery practitioner and somewhere between carer and parent”. They are “prepared to go above and beyond [their] job duties ... [and] are responsible for all schooling and medical requirements along with nursery duties and light household management”. In the focus group discussion, a nanny commented that they “support parents to get back to work and promote women in the workforce. Many who work shift work/unconventional hours, such as doctors, lawyers, etc., without nannies would not be able to continue in their roles due to the nature of time constraints.”

Similarly, childminders noted that they become “a second mum” and “ensure continuity of care with as much flexibility as [they] can, for a personal, home-from-home approach”. They provide “a wrap-around service to school age children (for breakfast, school drop-off and pick-up and after-school)” and often act as “key worker, storyteller, agony aunt, peacemaker, baker and chef ... taxi service, hairdressers, occasionally nurse”.

Nurturing children

Child wellbeing, emotional expression and socialisation. Again, consistent with other studies (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; O’Regan *et al.*, 2020; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Lehrer *et al.*, 2015; Fauth *et al.*, 2013), the respondents revealed that children’s wellbeing and socialisation are central to their practices, as they aim to ensure that the children are happy, confident and form positive relationships. Nannies noted that they “care for children’s emotional wellbeing” and ensure that the children “are happy and healthy” and show “high levels of attachment”. Similarly, childminders mentioned that they support “children’s emotional wellbeing, positive relationships, personal and social skills; teach children to be kind to others; [and] enhance, nurture, develop and embrace every child’s unique personality, learning style, attachments, and confidence”.

Both nannies and childminders explained that they support children's wellbeing by being aware of children's emotional state and allowing emotional expression without judgement, and they do this by being attentive listeners, using appropriate language and modelling emotional expression. Nannies noted that it is important to be "aware of when they [the children] are feeling troubled, frustrated", to "listen to them", "remain a constant, calm presence in their life who they can share their thoughts and feelings with", "help [them] with appropriate language" and "allow children time to decompress in the day". They recognised that "talking about emotions and their connections to behaviours is an important part of health and wellbeing", and one nanny noted that "a lot of parents struggle with this". Thus, they allow "children to speak about themselves freely, [and] recount memories". They help children "to keep their cool when they aren't happy", reassure them that "it's OK to be angry or sad", and encourage them "to describe their feelings", explaining that "when upset, angry or frustrated, we need to use our words".

Similarly, childminders reported that they "talk about feelings, emotions, experiences ... encourage children to express how they feel ... talk about why we feel cross or sad or happy ... how we may express those emotions", and that they support children to "become happy independent wonderful young people". One childminder wrote: "I accept all emotions from the children without labelling emotions as good or bad." Another explained: "I'm also very open with my feelings (within reason!) as I want the children to know that everyone feels the same things, though not necessarily at the same time!" Childminders reported that they "model language to do with feelings and emotions; share feelings daily and why expressing feelings is very important; [and] move on to emotional regulation once [children are] at a stage where they can understand what they are feeling". They also implement activities such as "mindful Mondays – using mindfulness experiences".

Child health and healthy eating. Another key characteristic that emerged from the responses of nannies and childminders was their focus on children's health, by attending to healthy eating, physical activity and outdoor aspects of early childhood practices – aspects of care that are also mentioned in both the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (Department for Education, 2021) and contemporary research (Musgrave and Payler, 2021). Nannies stated that they provide "healthy food, teaching them [children] [that a] snack is OK sometimes and should be healthy for their body", and they "have regular conversations about healthy eating and exercise", so that children are "aware of the appropriate nutrition their growing bodies need". Childminders also reported that they ensure that the "children eat well": they "provide healthy meals and snacks, encourage children to prepare their own snacks" and "support children in making good choices about a safe and healthy lifestyle and encourage them to discuss any concerns".

Home-based educarers reported that they use actual cooking and playful learning as opportunities to promote healthy eating. A childminder explained that they "cook a different breakfast each day depending on the activities that day and discuss with children how that will give them energy for the day" to consider "what is good for our body or not". This food preparation was framed "as a science experiment to see what breakfast they thought worked best for their bodies". A nanny also reported that they use "play and craft activities to teach about food groups" and "promote healthy eating, cooking from scratch (where children help with growing veg and assist with meal prep)".

Physical activity and outdoor experiences. Physical activity and outdoor experiences were closely linked to children's health. Nannies explained that they "have lots of outdoor play and doing something active", "try to get outside every day for a walk", and "enjoy lots of fresh air and moving around". Similarly, childminders noted that they "encourage exercise", including "garden activities, movement and dance,

park visits, [and] soft play”, and “spend lots of time outside in any weather ... to build children’s confidence and self-esteem”, which “is not only great for mental health but physical health [too]”.

Self-care. Self-care offers opportunities for a pedagogy of life and for life to promote children’s personal hygiene and independence. Nannies explained that they assist children to “be independent in their care routines, taking time to enable them in dressing themselves, brushing their teeth and hair with support etc.”. In this way, children become “confident, [and] know that they can figure things out for themselves” – the role of the nanny is “to provide explanation when they struggle”. Childminders, too, noted that they assist children “with all personal hygiene and teach the children how to look after our body and mind through learning resources and through active play”.

Children’s learning

Age-appropriate, planned and in-the-moment play opportunities. Despite studies showing mixed findings about provision for children’s early learning and development in home-based childcare (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020), this study has shown that children’s learning and schooling form part of home-based educarers’ daily activities. Both nannies and childminders noted that they provide a range of age-appropriate activities and experiences. They plan and prepare activities and take advantage of in-the-moment play opportunities (arising from everyday life, as discussed above) and cross-age peer-to-peer support, while also considering parental requests.

Nannies explained that they promote “each child’s development by meeting their individual needs”, have the “freedom to run with the child’s interests and needs”, “do small activities to support development through planned and in-the-moment play”, “support schooling through home based activities” and have “hours of fun learning phonics”. Similarly, childminders explained that “learning and development of children is key to a child’s success and therefore is of utmost importance in all areas ... [T]o expand knowledge and experiences supporting children’s learning and development is no different to what it would be in a nursery setting.” They noted that they “encourage active learning through planned activities as well as child led learning expanding on the situations the children find themselves in”. They are “able to tailor the week around a small number of children’s interests and development needs, taking into account the requests from a single set of parents” and “work closely with parents to support children to reach their full potential within a homely environment”.

These findings show that both nannies and childminders are educationally focused and oriented, potentially a reflection of their training and qualifications. Still, as a nanny commented in the focus group discussion, “nannying is seen more as childcare ... rather than having an educational element”. The same nanny noted that “[we] ourselves undermine our position because we haven’t managed yet to bring together a care education ... It seems those who are involved in early years settings [and] having a curriculum, they are perceived as having even within the sector higher status than childminders and nannies.” The nanny went on to state that nannying “is not just about, you know, wiping snotty noses and pooey bottoms. It is educating the children and seeing them through, and, you know, making them into the adults of the future.”

Observing, scaffolding and assessing learning. Home-based educarers scaffold, observe and assess children’s progress with reference to early learning goals, which concurs with Purdon’s (2021) finding that nannies support quality interactions and sustained shared thinking, and reflects Hooper’s (2019) observation of an educationally focused home-based childcare workforce. Nannies noted that they “observe children and track and assess their learning”. They “look at early learning goals and ensure they

are met and prepare [children] for school”. Likewise, childminders’ approach includes “observing, assessing and planning for next steps and scaffolding learning, play and conversations between children, if needed”. Childminders also noted that the children under their care “get to interact with children that are not necessarily within their age group which allows for peer-to-peer scaffolding to occur”.

Nurturing parents

Information sharing and routine communication. The wider remit of home-based educarers, beyond caring for and educating children, is evident in their role of supporting and nurturing parents with their parenting. They do this by means of regular communication, providing information and specialist advice, and maintaining a two-way dialogue to alleviate any anxieties and ensure continuity and consistency of care. Nannies explained that they “experience things that the parents may miss on a day-to-day basis”, so they ensure parents “have no worries”. They do so by “document[ing] day-to-day care and routines ... [and] children’s progress”. They also “allow more visibility to what goes on, have open conversations at the end of the day to do a handover to ensure continuity of care for the children”. Similarly, childminders ensured that parents were “kept up to date with [their child’s] day”. They explained that they “have a two-way dialogue with parents and ensure that they are included and feel a part of children’s learning and development because they have a key role in children’s lives”.

Specialist advice and support. Nannies and childminders are often a source of specialist knowledge and support concerning children’s development. Nannies reported that they provide “advice, specialist knowledge and experience ... e.g., about nutrition/weaning/breastfeeding ... [and] day/night routine for children and also do research for new products”. Similarly, childminders noted that they are a source of information concerning “toileting, speech, behaviour and when children start school”.

Emotional support. Crucially, home-based educarers become a source of emotional support when parents experience difficult personal and family circumstances. Nannies recognised that “parents need emotional support as much as the children on occasions”, and they spend time “listening to their wishes and worries”. They explained that they give “support to parents during hard moments”, such as “bereavement”, and “offer emotional coaching for the children/child but also the parents too”. They create an “environment where adults are supported and supportive and kind”, and they acknowledge that home-based educarers need to be “knowledgeable and nurturing practitioners”. In the same way, childminders explained that they “offer a friendly ear when parents just want to talk ... and emotional and specialist support when they go through divorce, a parent’s suicide, or sexual abuse”. They ensure that “all feel like one big extended family where everyone is working together in the child’s best interest”.

Qualities of home-based childcare

Affective relationships

Bonding, love, laughter and fun. Both nannies and childminders emphasised the importance of building relationships, as reported by others (O’Regan *et al.*, 2020; Ang *et al.*, 2017; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Lehrer *et al.*, 2015; Fauth *et al.*, 2013). Interestingly, despite the ambiguous place of affective interactions in an early childhood professional context due to safeguarding and child protection concerns (Page, 2017), the respondents repeatedly referred to relational affective states such as love, fun, bonding and attachment, shared joy and happiness, and long-term friendship, as noted also by O’Regan *et al.* (2020). They highlighted the importance of attentive listening and emotional expression as key components of relationship formation. Working with a small number of families or even just one, as may be the case with

nannies, home-based educarers get to know the children and their parents well and form close personal relationships that mitigate safeguarding and child protection concerns.

Nannies noted that they “bond with children” and “value making each other laugh and having fun”. The nanny role means “becoming part of another family ... a somewhat intimate part of their lives and the attachment and bonds we form over time with families [are] unique, positive [and] long term”. In the focus group discussion, a nanny noted that they “build emotional relationships with the families and children on a one-to-one basis” and explained that “concerning our bond with the children we care for, I feel the proudest when someone I don’t know tells me that they thought I was the mother of those children before I disclosed that I am their nanny”. Childminders also reported “good relationship[s]”, “relationships built on trust and kindness”, “professional but close relationships with parents”, “friendship”, “fun, love and happiness with the children and families and those special moments with the little ones”.

Communication. Communication and emotional rapport were reported as key to relationship formation, echoing similar findings from other studies (Ang *et al.*, 2017; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Fauth *et al.*, 2013). Home-based educarers noted that they encourage communication, asking questions on any issue, and reporting and discussing any concerns; they aim to be understanding listeners, giving a few minutes each day to parents to establish trust and a genuine partnership. Nannies explained that they “encourage communication, learning from all around, so [are] always talking, asking and answering questions and developing conversations around anything”, as well as “reporting concerns to parents and health professionals if/when relevant”. One nanny commented: “It is about being naturally able to chat to anyone.” The childminders also brought up the importance of “having good communication skills, being friendly and open, listening to the children and families, keep[ing] the lines of communication open to encourage working in partnership” and taking “a few minutes each day should a parent require”. They commented that this is “communication that you cannot get in a setting, [you] communicate with parents, nurseries, school, health visitors, Ofsted or agencies”.

Trust. As reported by Fauth *et al.* (2013), trust was mentioned as an important element of relationships. One nanny noted that a nanny is a person whom “the parents trust to do the job ... from a parent POV [point of view], they need to trust the nanny to do their job as the professional”, while another nanny admitted that “gaining the love and trust from a child is something that I cherish dearly”. Similarly, a childminder commented that “parents get to know me well and trust me to care for their child as they would, yet help them learn at the same time”, while another one noted: “I believe many of my parents trust my judgement as I am older than them and have been working as a childminder for many years. They see the older children that have been with me for many years.”

Personal attributes

Organisation and efficiency, determination, reliability, honesty, integrity, love, and pride. Both nannies and childminders reported a range of personal attributes that they possessed and that were valued in their professional lives. Nannies recognised the importance of “personality, [you] have to be a certain type of person to do the job, it is not suited to everyone”. They took pride in being “organised, calm and efficient, highly motivated and showing integrity, passion, and commitment”, as well as possessing “an interest in learning and development”. Childminders highlighted similar traits: “dedication and determination and being at the moment!; being organised; caring, honesty, safety, reliability, pride, role model and one word we use all the time – INTEGRITY – do the right thing even when nobody is watching”.

They expressed “the desire to do the job as a vocation”, explaining that “you have got to love the job and the families you look after ... to enjoy and make every day magical and special”.

Professional knowledge

Child development and learning, and specialist knowledge. The professional knowledge and competencies required to do the work were explicitly and indirectly mentioned by the respondents, reflecting an educationally focused and highly engaged home-based childcare workforce (Hooper, 2019). Nannies noted the importance of having a “good understanding of child development; attachment awareness and expertise in recognizing the additional therapeutic needs”, as well as “skills and competencies to document observations of play and learning/milestones and create weekly activity plans and meal plans”.

A range of knowledge and competencies required for home-based childcare were evident across several of the themes discussed above, including knowledge and competencies relating to children’s emotional development and wellbeing, and pedagogical practices (e.g., observation, documentation, scaffolding, assessment); additional specialist knowledge about child development (e.g., nutrition, healthy living, toileting) and parental emotional support (e.g., bereavement, depression, divorce); and research skills for accessing new information. In the focus group discussion, a nanny noted that “we are an integral part of the workforce”, and another one added that “nannies need to be valued as they are professionals and care for the most precious children which cannot be replaced”.

A distinct pedagogy

A pedagogy of life and for life. Echoing O’Regan *et al.*’s (2020) real-life pedagogy and Ang and Tabu’s (2018) discursive enacted pedagogy, the respondents embraced a reflexive and flexible pedagogy that is responsive to children’s everyday experiences. As discussed above, cooking, self-help, physical activity and outdoor experiences become the source for ‘out of life’ planned and impromptu, in-the-moment opportunities for learning to encourage and support skills for life. The home environment and the small number of children provide a unique context for such out-of-life, real-life, enacted and discursive pedagogy.

Structural qualities

Group size, child-to-adult ratio and low staff turnover. Structural factors, as reported by other researchers (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020) are applicable to this study, as respondents were trained nannies and childminders, who – by the nature of home-based childcare – work with a favourable child-to-adult ratio, with child carers being a relatively constant figure in children’s lives versus multiple caregivers. This was elaborated by a nanny in the focus group discussion, who noted “the emotional impact of having a nanny versus multiple caregiver relationships within a setting”.

Contextual qualities

Familiar, stable, secure environment. Contextual qualities referred to included familiar, stable and secure environments, and mixed-age interactions and socialisation. Nannies noted that children are “cared for in the comfort of their own home and enjoy the familiarity and security of their own surroundings”, while childminders explained that they “support children to reach their full potential within a homely environment”.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has revealed that there are common characteristics and qualities in home-based childcare offered by nannies and childminders, despite role variability between and within each professional group. Furthermore, to a large extent, the findings of this study corroborated findings from previous studies. Home-based educarers have been found to offer a continuum of flexible, affordable childcare that is tailored to families' needs, enabling parental employment and acting as a parental substitute during their absence (Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020; Slot, 2018; Ang *et al.*, 2017; Fauth *et al.*, 2013). Children's nurturing is at the heart of the practices of home-based educarers, who attend to and support children's emotional needs, socialisation, self-help skills, healthy living and eating, physical exercise, and outdoor experiences (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; O'Regan *et al.*, 2020; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Lehrer *et al.*, 2015; Fauth *et al.*, 2013) (see Figure 2, which presents a reframing of home-based childcare based on the key findings from this study).

Despite the mixed or inconsistent findings of previous studies about children's learning and developmental outcomes (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2021; Chaudry and Sandstrom, 2020), this study has revealed that home-based child carers systematically pursued children's education by following the EYFS framework, using pre-planned and impromptu learning opportunities, and mostly adopting a real-life enacted pedagogy. Home-based educarers observed, documented and tracked children's learning and shared the children's progress with parents, and their practices were informed by professional knowledge about child development and learning. These findings are significant and support Hooper's (2019) and Purdon's (2021) arguments about the importance of having trained, educationally focused and highly engaged home-based educarers.

The home-based educarers applied a real-life, discursive and enacted pedagogy, as noted by other researchers (O'Regan *et al.*, 2020; Ang and Tabu, 2018), enabled by both structural and contextual parameters. Small groups of children, cross-age interactions and peer support in a family or family-like environment provided opportunities for both pre-planned and in-the-moment learning opportunities and activities. While home-based educarers supported children's learning in line with the EYFS by scaffolding, observing and tracking their progress, children's learning of life skills was evident in activities connected to healthy living and eating, physical and outdoor experiences, and self-help. These findings are of significance, demonstrating the richness of children's learning experiences, which evolve organically as everyday life happens.

Again, consistent with previous studies (O'Regan *et al.*, 2020; Ang *et al.*, 2017; Ang and Tabu, 2018; Lehrer *et al.*, 2015; Fauth *et al.*, 2013), nannies and childminders valued the strong relationships that they established with both the children and their families, based on ongoing communication and trust. Despite their ambiguous place in professional early childhood practices, the affective nature of relationships was evident in the respondents' references to bonding, loving, and the shared laughter and fun with children and their families. Ongoing, regular and two-way communication and the sharing of information were noted as being equally important for reassuring parents and ensuring continuity of care, as well as for professional transparency and accountability purposes.

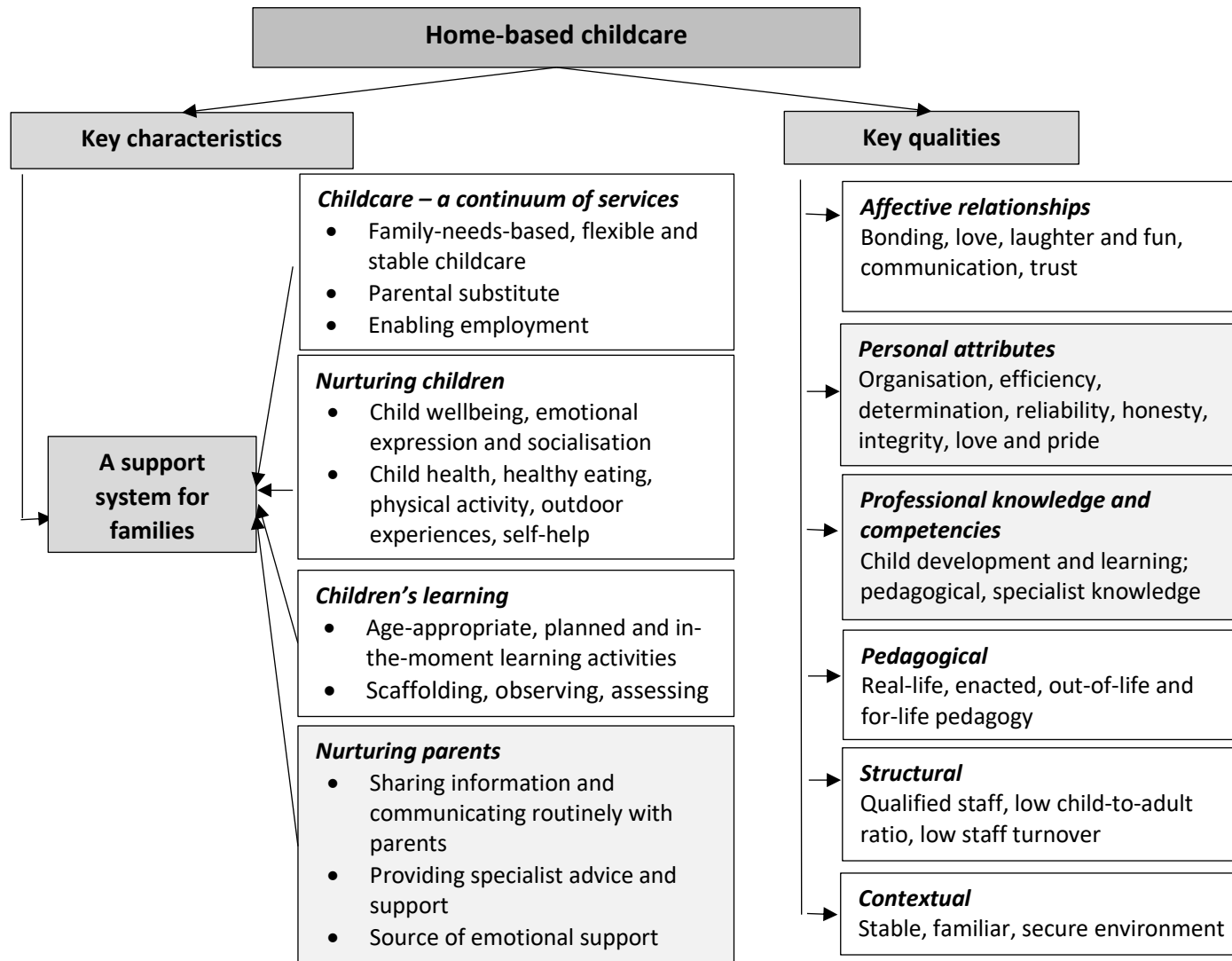


Figure 2 Reframing home-based childcare (shaded boxes indicate key findings from the present study)

The fact that the findings of this research corroborate those of previous studies is not surprising, as the survey questionnaire was largely informed by extant literature on home-based childcare, while the focus group explored further the emergent key themes from the survey. However, an important feature of this study was a focus on the expressed views of nannies and childminders themselves, and there are two key findings that offer further insights into the qualities and the role of home-based educarers. Firstly, the respondents reported on the professional attributes required to fulfil the wide remit and multiple roles they undertake as childminders and nannies. These include being organised, efficient, reliable and determined, and showing integrity and honesty, while love and pride were also key in the professional identity of home-based educarers.

Secondly, this study revealed that home-based educarers are a nurturing force for parents, by utilising their professional knowledge and, when required, doing research to obtain specialist advice and support. The home-based educarers in our study did this in three ways. Firstly, they provided information related to a wide range of child-related issues (e.g., nutrition, weaning, toileting, speech and language, and transition to school) to support parents with their parenting. Secondly, they became a friendly ear for parents to share their worries and wishes, and, thirdly, they offered specialist advice and help when parents were experiencing challenging personal and/or family circumstances. In this role and capacity, home-based educarers can be seen as professional knowledge brokers. This is possible because, as knowledge bridging theories postulate (Rycroft-Smith, 2022), home-based educarers have a deep understanding of families' social context and situation and strong interpersonal relationships. Being immersed in a family's life, home-based educarers can draw on and translate their professional knowledge into actionable decisions that are appropriate to a family's circumstances. As such, home-based educare is not just about caring for children. Instead, it becomes a support system for families, with home-based educarers acting as knowledge brokers and a source of emotional support for parents. Caring and the wellbeing of children are central to home-based childcare, but home-based educarers also recognise the importance of parental wellbeing for its own sake and for the parenting of their children (Figure 3). However, for home-based childcare to be a support system, home-based educarers must have a wide range of professional knowledge and personal attributes and qualities. It is the latter that indicates the importance of having well-trained and committed educarers, whose professional knowledge, skills and attributes shape their practice as a support system for parents, addressing parental and child wellbeing (the direction of influence denoted by the dotted arrow).

Thus, it is argued that home-based childcare cannot be conceptualised and theorised along centre-based childcare frameworks, nor should it be evaluated with tools applicable to that context. Instead, it is proposed that it is reconceptualised as a family support system, with home-based educarers understood as professional knowledge brokers, who go beyond offering direct childcare services. Such a reconceptualisation of home-based childcare is significant, especially for families who might experience personal and family challenges, beyond the need for flexible and accessible childcare.

One notable limitation of this study is that it was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore the findings can only be interpreted in that context. It is thus recommended that further research is undertaken among trained home-based child carers in the post-pandemic context, as family needs may have altered. It is also important to explore the views of families who make use of trained home-based educarers. As there is limited research among children, there is scope to explore children's views of their experiences of home-based childcare.

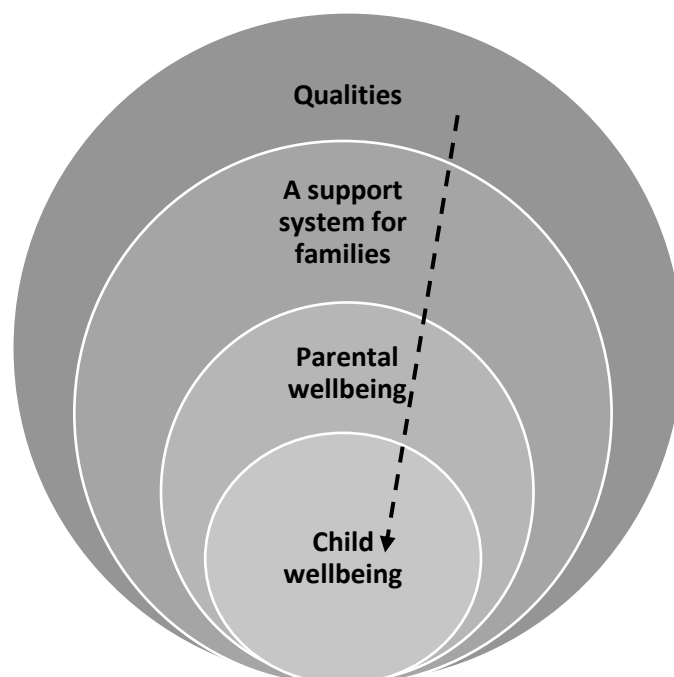


Figure 3 **Conceptualisation of home-based childcare as a family support system**

Furthermore, the proposed conceptualisation of home-based childcare as a support system for families and the notion of home-based child carers as knowledge brokers also require further exploration and substantiation. Finally, the research findings of this and previous studies about home-based childcare are worth disseminating among policymakers to raise awareness of the unique contribution of home-based childcare to children's and families' wellbeing, to promote it as a vital part of a continuum of childcare services, alongside centre-based provision, and to enhance the profile of the profession.

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