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Childminding in Northern Ireland:
an exploration of practice, quality and the impact of vertical placements on children

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National Children's Bureau: working with children, for children

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NCB NI

The National Children's Bureau Northern Ireland (NCB NI) is a leading research and development charity working to improve the lives of children and young people, reducing the impact of inequalities.

NCB works with children, for children to influence government policy, be a strong voice for young people and front-line professionals, and provide practical solutions on a range of social issues.

This is done through working in partnership, sharing knowledge, resources and services. There is a particular focus on the participation of children and young people in issues that affect their lives and work to ensure that their voices are represented where appropriate in the work of NCB.

NICMA

NICMA (Northern Ireland Childminding Association) - the Childminding Association is a charity and is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland.

NICMA offers registered childminders training, support, insurance and also operates an online vacancy service which helps childminders fill vacancies. It also offers support and advice for parents looking for a childminder. In addition, it speaks on behalf of the childminding sector to policy makers and government.

Executive Summary

Background

This research represents the first ever study of childminding practice in Northern Ireland which looks in detail at issues such as quality in childminding practice and the benefits and challenges of vertical grouping (i.e. children of different ages being cared for together). The study also provides a profile of childminders in terms of age, gender, qualifications held and access to training and support.

This study had two overall aims, namely:

- To explore issues of practice and quality within childminding in Northern Ireland.
- To ascertain the impacts on children of vertical grouping.

Methodology

The methodology comprised the following activities:

- A literature review on the issues of quality in childminding practice and the impact of vertical/mixed age placements on children;
- Postal self-completion surveys with 230 randomly selected childminders and 261 parents;
- A total of nine focus group discussions with 49 childminders, 4 focus groups and a telephone interview with 16 parents across all 5 of the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) areas;
- Interviews with 14 children, aged 4-11 years and;
- The completion of questions asked on behalf of NCB NI in the Kids Life and Times (KLT) survey by 3773 Year 7 pupils.

Key findings, conclusions and recommendations

In addressing the study's specific objectives, the findings relating to each have been summarised under the following key headings:

Features of childminding practice

- Objective 1 - What does childminding practice in Northern Ireland look like?

Quality in childminding practice

- Objective 2 - From the perspectives of childminders, parents and children, what does quality look like and how does it manifest itself in childminding practice?
- Objective 3 - What would help to enhance the quality of childminding practice from the perspectives of childminders and parents?
- Objective 4 - To what extent do specific childcare qualifications matter to both parents and childminders in terms of their views on quality and practice?

Vertical grouping in childminding practice

- Objective 5 - What is the impact of vertical grouping on children from the perspectives of childminders, parents and children themselves?
- Objective 6 - What are the challenges to providing and using vertical grouping?
- Objective 7 - To what extent are the impacts of vertical grouping an influencing factor in motivating parents to choose childminding over other forms of day care?

Support and development of childminding practice

- Objective 8 - What are the benefits of having specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- Objective 9 - What are the barriers to achieving specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- Objective 10 - Does Quality First Accreditation (from NICMA) benefit childminders? If so, how? If not, why not?

Using the headings above, the remainder of this summary presents the key findings of the research, the resultant conclusions that can be drawn from these and recommendations for improving childminding practice, including implications for relevant policy development.

Profile of childminders

Summary of key findings

- The research found that there is no typical childminder in Northern Ireland. Whilst the majority are white females, they vary in terms of age and religion, experience and qualifications held.
- With the exception of those qualified at diploma/degree level, childminders in this research are better qualified than the general population. They are also less likely to have no qualifications than the general population - 16% have no general qualifications compared to 29% in the most recent census (NI Census, 2011). Older childminders (aged 61+) tend to be more likely not to have any qualifications following the trend in the general population (NI Census, 2011).
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are not required to hold any specific childcare qualifications but over half of those participating in this research do. Again, older childminders are much less likely to hold childcare qualifications. Childminders in the Belfast HSCT area are more likely to have no childcare qualifications compared to those based in the Western HSCT.
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are very experienced with almost two-thirds of research participants having more than 4 years experience as a childminder. Half have experience of working in another early years or educational setting prior to becoming a childminder.
- On average, childminders in this study are being paid to look after 4 children from 3 different families. As childminders generally are registered to care for 6 children, this suggests that, on average, childminders have 2 free places to fill (although childminders' own children may be taking up these places). 11% of childminders surveyed provide care for children with special needs.
- Many childminders work on average 7.3 hours per week day. One-third of those surveyed work later than 6pm, two-thirds before 8am and 12% provide care overnight.

Conclusions

- Childminders in this research have demonstrated that childminding is a purposeful and permanent career choice and is not a short-term or temporary job.
- Although there is no obligation on childminders to hold *specific childcare qualifications*, more than half do, which is evidence of their dedication and commitment to a chosen profession and career path.
- However, there are gaps in relation to the holding of qualifications, particularly for older childminders. They may be very experienced but they may also be missing out on new developments regarding caring for children, which could have an impact on their work.
- A relatively high proportion of childminders care for children with special needs. Such childminders may require specialised training on specific conditions in order to fully meet the needs of the children they care for.

Features of childminding practice

Summary of key findings

- Childminders in this research had more mixed views than McGaha et al., (2011) and Child Action Inc (undated) in relation to planning. Some indicated that it was an important element of childminding practice. However, many felt that planning needed to be flexible to meet the needs of children, cope with the demands of the weather, accommodate older children's routines (e.g. school collections) and facilitate free play and child-led activities.
- Childminders reported that children in their care were involved in a wide range of activities to stimulate various development areas. The most common of these were gross motor skills activities, activities that develop language skills, early literacy, numeracy and cognitive abilities, creative activities and imaginary play.
- In the interviews and Kids Life and Times (KLT) survey children expressed their enjoyment and happiness in participating in a wide range of activities at their childminders. These activities included baking, watching TV and playing computer

games. Notably, children were more likely to report watching TV in a childminding setting than in an after-schools club.

- Many children enjoyed playing outside at their childminders. Key outdoor activities included football and playing with garden toys (e.g. trampolines).
- Completing homework also featured prominently for school-going children in the KLT survey and interviews as an activity undertaken at their childminders.
- Childminders supplemented children's experience to aid their development by using low-cost or no-cost facilities outside of their home when caring for children, including local parks, playgrounds and libraries.
- Childminders valued free play and reported incorporating early education and learning into their practice through the provision of free play. Free play was also seen as beneficial in encouraging and enabling children's imagination.
- For the most part both parents and childminders believed that their role involved providing both care and early education. Childminders stressed that caring and educating are interdependent aspects of their role.

Conclusions

- The degree to which childminders reported planning daily activities, the range of activities they indicated undertaking and their reported use of other facilities, such as libraries and parks, to engage children, suggests that childminding practice is an intentional effort to help develop children's abilities, skills and capacities.
- Childminders' role as both carers and co-educators with parents clearly suggests that childminders are working in line with recommendations from the Nutbrown Review (2012), which stressed the importance of facilitating learning in an early years setting, and are also supporting the educational development of school-aged children.
- Given the dependence on local amenities, any future and recent cutbacks (including those that have resulted in library closures) may have a detrimental impact on both childminders and the children in their care.
- In order to facilitate free play, childminders require access to a wide range of resources or the use of open-ended resources (e.g. art and craft materials). Lack of, or limited access to, such resources (as well as a lack of knowledge of how to use

them) may mean, that some children being cared for by a childminder are less likely to participate in, and benefit from, free play.

Policy and practice recommendations

These findings provide a clear message to policy makers about the important role childminders can play in the early education of children. Current and future opportunities targeting young children's development, such as the Get Involved in Your Child's Education programme from the Department of Education (DE), should acknowledge this role and be extended to include other significant adults in a child's life, such as childminders.

1. We recommend that the Department of Education initiates a public education campaign aimed at parents to raise their awareness, and recognise the potential value, of the everyday early education development that happens in a childminding setting. Parents need to be more aware that children can learn valuable skills at home and at their childminders *before* their formal education begins. This could be achieved through the distribution of leaflets, posters and billboards in public places such as doctors' surgeries, libraries, public transport spaces and pre-school settings.
2. Childminders should be trained to work with open ended resources in order to facilitate free play more effectively in their settings.

Quality in childminding practice

Summary of key findings

- Quality in a childminding setting is a multi-faceted concept comprising of the provision of a safe physical environment, childminder-child, childminder-parent interactions, flexibility and childminders' adherence to policy and procedures (including the inspection process). In the focus groups, childminders were more likely to state that the relationship they have with a parent is fundamental to providing a high quality service and parents were more likely to point towards the physical setting offered by a childminder and the child-centred elements of their practice.

- Childcare training and qualifications are not of primary importance to parents and childminders in regards to the quality of childminding practice, though they were felt to be of benefit in terms of continuous professional development.
- Parents and childminders stated that the quality of care offered in a childminding setting was higher than that offered in other childcare settings. The reasons for this included: the unique home-like environment offered; the development of secure attachments and; individualised care and flexibility.
- These findings support the views of Leach (2011) who maintains that the ‘ordinary-ness’ of the home environment and its everyday activities has a bigger positive impact on children compared to more structured settings. Leach (2011) attributes this impact to secure attachments between the childminder and child, and there was evidence of these attachments in childminders’ settings.
- Parents’ primary reason for choosing childminding over other forms of childcare was the homely environment offered.
- It was felt that childminders do not hold the same professional status as other childcare professionals. Reasons for these views included: childminders are viewed as ‘stay at home mums’; childminding is considered an easy job; childminders are not required to hold any specific childcare training or qualifications and; the existence of unregistered childminders undermines the professionalism of childminding.

Conclusions

- More reflective practice can be encouraged through specific childcare training which may in turn raise the quality of care provided.
- The lack of mandatory specific childcare qualifications for childminders is a barrier to raising the status of registered childminding and the existence of unregistered childminders undermines attempts by registered childminders to prove the quality of their work to the general public.

Policy and practice recommendations

1. These findings suggest that more needs to be done to raise the profile and status of childminding, in particular around the professional aspects of the role and the care features that are associated with high quality in a childminding setting, e.g. the homely environment, the experienced workforce, personal relationships and the

child-centred flexible approach.

2. In order to enhance the profile and status of childminding, the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS), the HSCTs and associated relevant structures such as Childcare Partnerships and voluntary sector organisations such as NICMA, need to raise public awareness of:
 - a. the high quality of care offered in a childminding setting
 - b. the prevalence of childcare qualifications amongst childminders in Northern Ireland
 - c. the high level of experience held by childminders (65% have more than 4 years childminding experience)
 - d. the range of activities childminders provide that contribute to children's learning and development
 - e. the homely environment of the setting and the potential for secure attachments being formed between the child and childminder.
3. Greater support also needs to be given to childminders by the HSCTs, NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships in managing their relationships with parents so that the benefits for children of being in a mixed age setting are optimised.
4. We recommend that the HSCTs make inspection reports available online to ensure greater transparency and so that parents can make an informed decision regarding their choice of childcare.
5. Given the introduction of the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care (DHSSPS, 2012) during the course of this research and its aim of raising the quality of care provided to children we recommend that the impact of the Standards is evaluated across the full range of childcare settings in Northern Ireland.
6. The forthcoming childcare strategy is due later in 2014 and needs to take account of this research, its findings, conclusions, policy implications and recommendations. Childminding, as it provides the greatest number of childcare places in Northern Ireland, needs to be more explicitly recognised in this strategy.

Benefits and challenges of vertical grouping

Summary of key findings

- Parents, childminders and children identified many benefits associated with vertical grouping.
- One of the main benefits was the promotion of learning, with a majority of childminders (98%) and parents (97%) stating that children learn a lot from older children. These views on the promotion of learning in mixed age placements were echoed in the focus groups.
- A high proportion (88%) of both parents and childminders noted that mixed age settings have a family feel more commonly associated with a home and children benefit from this natural environment. Linked to this, children noted that they liked spending time with siblings at their childminders.
- Older children acting as positive role models, the development of social skills such as patience, empathy and leadership, and the promotion of mixed age friendships were all additional benefits of mixed age settings identified by the respondents.
- In the survey findings, childminders were more likely than parents to identify challenges associated with mixed age placements.
- One of these challenges involved the logistics of catering for the needs of different age groups, i.e. scheduling younger children's nap times around school pick-ups (43% of childminders identified this as a challenge compared to 22% of parents).
- Not having enough resources to meet the needs of different age groups was another challenge more likely to be identified in the survey findings by childminders (36%) than parents (9%). However, in the focus groups and interviews this issue was raised by all groups of respondents, including children.
- There were mixed views from childminders and parents on behavioural challenges of mixed age settings.
- Childminders identified the challenge of older children being domineering of younger children and childminders (24%) were more likely to identify the challenge of older children becoming more babyish as a result of being around younger children compared to parents (7%) in the survey findings. In addition, childminders and children were more likely to note that younger children can disrupt the activities of older children.

- Although behavioural issues, such as older children bullying and being too rough around younger children, were identified only by a small proportion of childminders and parents in the survey findings, in the focus groups some respondents did express concerns about older children exposing younger children to age inappropriate activities (e.g. electronic games/devices).
- Solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping included improved planning and having access to a wide variety of resources and activities. Some childminders' views echoed those of Child Action Inc (undated) when discussing the importance of planning when caring for children of mixed ages.
- Overall, the benefits of mixed age settings were seen to outweigh the challenges because they are similar to a home setting, they promote learning and the development of social skills, different age groups (including siblings) can enjoy being together and there is less pressure for children to conform to age expected 'norms'.
- Childminders (91%) and parents (90%) also felt that children learn from participating in everyday activities with their childminder.

Conclusions

- All participants (adults and children) in this research could readily identify several benefits of vertical grouping. However, challenges of vertical grouping are more readily identified by childminders and children than by parents. Perhaps this is because childminders and children experience firsthand both challenges and benefits whereas parents are not physically present in the childminding setting. There is a consensus among parents and childminders that the perceived benefits of vertical grouping far outweigh the associated challenges and drawbacks.
- Childminders may need to be provided with more support in order to mitigate the challenges of vertical grouping so that the benefits can be maximised for the children in their care.

Policy and practice recommendations

1. These findings show children benefit from being cared for in mixed age settings. As vertical grouping is a characteristic unique to childminding settings, the public awareness campaign mentioned previously should also include this unique feature of childminding. This should focus on the many benefits of vertical grouping identified

in this research, for example:

- a. Opportunities for learning
 - b. Mixed age friendships
 - c. Older children becoming role models
 - d. Development of social skills
 - e. Siblings being cared for together
2. We recommend that in the promotion of childminding as a form of childcare, NICMA should emphasise the benefits of vertical placements to parents.
 3. We recommend that current training for childminders provided by NICMA, the Childcare Partnerships and Further Education Colleges incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping, for example, by recommending the use of open-ended resources and activities and weekly planners.
 4. As some older children reported experiencing loneliness and boredom as a result of being cared for in a mixed age setting, we recommend that childminders are encouraged to include and listen to the voices of these children in the development of their weekly planners and associated activities.

Support and development of childminding practice

Summary of key findings

- Childminders main sources of childcare training were the HSCT Teams and NICMA and many of the childminders had taken up training opportunities.
- One fifth of childminders had not accessed childcare training and discrepancies were identified according to geography and age. Childminders from the Northern HSCT and those aged 61+ were more likely not to have accessed childcare training.
- The main barriers which prevented childminders from accessing childcare training were scheduling, location and cost.

- Childminders identified a range of sources of support, e.g. peer support, NICMA and Early Years Teams from the HSCTs.
- While peer support was important to many childminders, membership of childminding networks and support groups was low which suggests that many childminders engage with their peers informally for support. Childminders identified confidentiality concerns and poor governance as key barriers to their involvement in childminding support groups and networks.
- Overall, childminders were satisfied with the practice support and advice that they had received.
- Addressing unregistered childminding was considered a key way to enhance childminding practice in Northern Ireland. Actions identified to address this issue included a public education campaign aimed at parents and a greater enforcement of the law.
- Awareness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was low amongst childminders. Those that were aware of EYFS had mixed opinions about the introduction of an equivalent set of standards for early childcare providers in Northern Ireland, with 21% stating that it should be introduced and 27% stating that it should not.
- These findings and reactions to the idea of a set of standards similar to EYFS reflect the debate in the literature about the education-care divide/continuum within early years provision as outlined by Lindon (2006), Adams and Adams (2011) and Laing (2011).

Conclusions

- The large proportion of childminders accessing childcare training is an indication of the interest childminders have in their profession. However, some barriers associated with accessing training seem insurmountable for childminders which may prevent a significant minority furthering their career. Some 11% of childminders care for children with special needs and therefore it is crucial that they are equipped to meet these specific needs. However, the lack of specific childcare qualifications and lack of take up of training opportunities among some childminders raises concerns that some childminders may be caring for children with special needs without having appropriate skills and knowledge.

- The high levels of satisfaction among childminders with the levels of support offered is encouraging to those in the HSCTs and NICMA and is an endorsement of the quality of peer support among childminders in Northern Ireland.
- However, the isolation felt by some childminders (and especially non-NICMA members) suggests that more could be done to enhance support for all childminders in Northern Ireland.
- NICMA's Quality First Accreditation has been of benefit to childminders in terms of giving parents confidence in their practice and providing the childminders with new ideas.

Policy and practice recommendations

1. While the actions outlined by Bright Start, i.e. the development of the childcare workforce, are to be welcomed, if these are to be achieved there is a need for cross-departmental cooperation where DHSSPS, DE and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) act together in terms of the development of childcare and early education practice and for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to be involved in workforce development. The development of the workforce within childminding needs to be adequately and appropriately resourced with relevant and accessible training, addressing the barriers identified in this research. We recommend that OFMDFM ring fence funding for this purpose.
2. Training providers should explore the provision of modules/units in specific areas as well as full courses leading to qualifications.
3. As previously mentioned, it is vital that current training that exists for childminders incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping. The Childcare Partnerships should devise a training course focusing on this aspect of childminding practice. This course should:
 - a. Include definitions of vertical grouping.
 - b. Highlight the benefits of vertical grouping which include the promotion of learning, the homely feel of a mixed age setting, positive role models, the development of social skills and the promotion of mixed age friendships.
 - c. Highlight the challenges of vertical grouping which include logistical issues

when caring for different age groups, not having enough resources to meet the needs of different age groups and behavioural challenges such as older children becoming more babyish around younger children and younger children disrupting the activities of older children.

- d. Identify solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping, such as improved planning, open-ended resources and activities.
4. Training for new and existing childminders should emphasise what quality in childminding practice looks like and how best to achieve this.
5. The status of childminding and indeed childminding practice is likely to improve through a higher proportion of childminders completing specific childcare training and qualifications. However, training providers need to take greater cognisance of the barriers identified in this research to childminders accessing training. For example, training by all providers should be organised at a time that is convenient to childminders (i.e. after 7pm or on weekends) and an appropriate number of spaces must be made available. These barriers need to be addressed if the key first actions of the Bright Start programme are to be achieved, i.e. the development of the childcare workforce.
6. As childminders would be unwilling to charge more for having higher qualifications, for fear of losing business, other incentives need to be considered if they are to be encouraged to develop professionally. For example, free or discounted training, vouchers for free play resources, discounts on insurance.
7. Older childminders need to be encouraged and incentivised to take up training opportunities, perhaps by involving them in the provision of training so that they can share their vast experience with their younger peers. This could be done through a buddy system where new childminders are linked with more experienced childminders who can act as a mentor.
8. In order to encourage a higher uptake of childcare qualifications amongst childminders, we recommend that training providers and support organisations provide a platform for qualified childminders to share their experiences of completing qualifications and how they have incorporated this learning into their practice effectively. We recommend that these knowledge sharing opportunities take place at information sessions for prospective childminders, at the NICMA AGM and as part of childminding training programmes and support groups.
9. Childminders who are caring for children with special needs need to have access to appropriate training in order to meet these children's specific needs.

10. We welcome the intention to have an advertising campaign within the Bright Start action plan to promote the benefits of registered childcare to parents. However, we also recommend that there should be an education campaign led by the DHSSPS, HSCTs, the Childcare Partnerships and NICMA in relation to childminding aimed at the following:
 - a. Current and prospective unregistered childminders – to highlight the fact that such practice is illegal and to reinforce the benefits of being registered.
 - b. The general public – to highlight the professionalism of childminding, what it entails and communicate the quality features of childminding practice.
11. We recommend that there should be more robust enforcement of the law regarding unregistered childminding by the DHSSPS and HSCTs.
12. Despite childminders' membership of support groups being low, there is evidence to suggest that childminders do see value in participating in these networks (i.e. opportunity to share good practice and support networks can help reduce isolation). We recommend that NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships address the barriers identified in the research to childminders' participation in these groups. For example, NICMA and non-NICMA members should be offered guidance in establishing and running support groups with the assistance of support workers from NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships.
13. A high proportion of childminders who completed the NICMA Quality First Accreditation found this course of benefit. We recommend that NICMA promote the benefits identified in the research of undertaking this course. For example, it gave parents confidence in childminders' practice and provided childminders with new ideas.
14. We recommend that NICMA consider offering different levels of membership, for example, 'comprehensive membership' might cover insurance and support, whereas 'basic level' membership might cover support needs only. This may enable those childminders who do not wish to purchase insurance from NICMA to still access support in order to develop their practice.

Summary of recommendations

To summarise, our recommendations arising from this study are as follows:

1. We recommend that the Department of Education initiates a public education campaign aimed at parents to raise their awareness, and recognise the potential value, of the everyday early education development that happens in a childminding setting.
2. Childminders should be trained to work with open ended resources in order to facilitate free play more effectively in their settings.
3. The DHSSPS, the HSCTs and associated relevant structures such as Childcare Partnerships and voluntary sector organisations such as NICMA, need to raise public awareness of the professional aspects of the role and the care features associated with high quality in a childminding setting, as identified in this research.
4. Greater support needs to be given to childminders by the HSCTs, NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships in managing their relationships with parents so that the benefits for children of being in a mixed age setting are optimised.
5. We recommend that the HSCTs make inspection reports available online to ensure greater transparency and allow parents to make an informed decision regarding their choice of childcare.
6. We recommend that the impact of the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care (DHSSPS, 2012) is evaluated across the full range of childcare settings in Northern Ireland.
7. The forthcoming childcare strategy needs to take account of this research, its findings, conclusions, policy implications and recommendations. Childminding, as it provides the greatest number of childcare places in Northern Ireland, needs to be explicitly recognised in this strategy.
8. As vertical grouping is a characteristic unique to childminding settings, the public awareness campaign mentioned in recommendation 3 should also include this unique feature of childminding. This should focus on the many benefits of vertical grouping identified in this research.
9. We recommend that in the promotion of childminding as a form of childcare, NICMA should emphasise the benefits of vertical placements to parents.

10. We recommend that current training for childminders provided by NICMA, the Childcare Partnerships and Further Education Colleges incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping.
11. As some older children reported experiencing loneliness and boredom as a result of being cared for in a mixed age setting, we recommend that childminders are encouraged to include and listen to the voices of these children in the development of their weekly planners and associated activities.
12. We recommend cross-departmental cooperation where DHSSPS, DE and OFMDFM act together in terms of the development of childcare and early education practice and for DEL to be involved in workforce development. The development of the workforce within childminding needs to be adequately and appropriately resourced with relevant and accessible training, addressing the barriers identified in this research. We recommend that OFMDFM ring fence funding for this purpose.
13. Training providers should explore the provision of modules/units in specific areas as well as full courses leading to qualifications.
14. It is vital that current training that exists for childminders incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping. The Childcare Partnerships should devise a training course focusing on this aspect of childminding practice.
15. Training for new and existing childminders should emphasise what quality in childminding practice looks like and how best to achieve this.
16. Training providers need to take greater cognisance of the barriers identified in this research to childminders accessing training.
17. As childminders would be unwilling to charge more for having higher qualifications, for fear of losing business, other incentives need to be considered if they are to be encouraged to develop professionally.
18. Older childminders need to be encouraged and incentivised to take up training opportunities, perhaps by involving them in the provision of training so that they can share their vast experience with their younger peers.

19. We recommend that training providers and support organisations provide a platform for qualified childminders to share their experiences of completing qualifications and how they have incorporated this learning into their practice effectively.
20. Childminders who are caring for children with special needs need to have access to appropriate training in order to meet these children's specific needs.
21. We welcome the intention to have an advertising campaign within the Bright Start action plan to promote the benefits of registered childcare to parents. However, we also recommend that there should be an education campaign led by the DHSSPS, HSCTs, the Childcare Partnerships and NICMA in relation to childminding aimed at the following:
 - a. Current and prospective unregistered childminders – to highlight the fact that such practice is illegal and to reinforce the benefits of being registered.
 - b. The general public – to highlight the professionalism of childminding, what it entails and communicate the quality features of childminding practice.
22. We recommend that there should be more robust enforcement of the law regarding unregistered childminding by the DHSSPS and HSCTs.
23. We recommend that NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships address the barriers identified in the research to childminders' participation in support groups.
24. We recommend that NICMA promote the benefits identified in the research of undertaking the Quality First Accreditation.
25. We recommend that NICMA consider offering different levels of membership, for example, 'comprehensive membership' might cover insurance and support, whereas 'basic level' membership might cover support needs only.

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1.0 Chapter 1: Background to the study

1.1 Introduction

This study into childminding practice in Northern Ireland was conducted from summer 2012 to autumn 2013 by the National Children's Bureau Northern Ireland (NCB NI) in partnership with the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA) and funded by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). This chapter provides a brief legislative and policy background to childminding in Northern Ireland. A definition for the term 'registered childminding' is also provided, along with an outline of the project's rationale, aims and objectives.

1.2 The legislative and policy framework for childminding in Northern Ireland

Childminding, along with other forms of childcare, is regulated by Article 123(2) of the Children (NI) Order, 1995 and by the Child Minding and Day Care (Application for Registration) Requirements (NI) Order, 1996. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has overall responsibility for setting the legislative and regulatory context within which childminding occurs. The Children (NI) Order 1995 defines a registered childminder as being

a person who looks after 1 or more children under the age of 12, for more than 2 hours per day, on domestic premises, for reward (Children (NI) Order 1995)

Childminders may be registered to care for up to 6 children between the ages of 0 - 12 years of age, including their own children¹. It is illegal for childminders to operate without being registered, however it is not illegal for parents to place their children in unregistered settings (Fawcett, 2010). Registration is managed by the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) and they also conduct annual inspections.

¹ Of the 6 children childminders can be registered to care for, a maximum of 3 must be under compulsory and a maximum of 3 must be above compulsory school age.

In policy terms, childminding is almost totally absent from recent draft strategy and policy documents such as the Early Years (0-6) Strategy (Department of Education, 2010). A review of the previous childcare strategy entitled Children First (Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety, 1999) was conducted in 2005 by DHSSPS (DHSSPS, 2005) and an economic appraisal has been conducted by OFMDFM on childcare options (OFMDFM, 2010). However, there is still no current finalised childcare strategy in place in Northern Ireland, so it remains to be seen what place, if any, childminding will be given in such a strategy. There have been a number of actions emanating as a result of the consultation process on the document 'Towards a Childcare Strategy'², issued in 2013, though to date few of these actions relate to childminding specifically. These actions are presented in the Bright Start framework (OFMDFM, 2013). One of the key first actions that specifically relates to childminding is a proposed Rural Childcare Programme which suggests a rural childminder start up package creating up to 1,000 childcare places. However, this action is subject to establishing demand and therefore it may not actually be realised.

During the early stages of this research the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety introduced the Minimum Standards for Childcare for children aged up to 12 years (DHSSPS, 2012a). Up until that time there had been no requirement in legislation for any *childcare* training or qualification for childminders prior to registration. Following the introduction of the Minimum Standards, registered childminders are now required to hold qualifications in paediatric first aid, child protection and health and safety. There is still no obligation on childminders to undertake *childcare specific* qualifications. There remains, therefore, a lack of standardisation in childcare practice or quality of care amongst childminders.

Childminders can currently receive support in training and other aspects of childminding development from NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships. NICMA (Northern Ireland Childminding Association) is a voluntary sector organisation providing training, support and insurance to registered childminders as well as a matching service between parents seeking a childminder and those with vacancies. Approximately 60% of registered childminders are NICMA members. Childcare Partnerships operate in each of the 5 Health and Social Care Trusts. These comprise of both statutory and voluntary sector organisations involved in the provision of the whole range of childcare, including childminding. Childcare Partnerships also provide training for childcare providers.

² Towards a Childcare Strategy sets out the vision and principles for a future Childcare Strategy

1.3 Rationale for this study

Registered childminding is the largest provider of full-time childcare in Northern Ireland. It accounts for 61% of full-time day care places and 38% of all childcare places here (DHSSPS, 2013). At any one time, there are over 18,000 children aged between 0 – 12 years being cared for by a childminder (DHSSPS, 2012b). Despite being the largest sector within childcare there is very little specific mention to childminding in recent policy developments in Northern Ireland, as mentioned above.

Research on the issue of childcare in Northern Ireland has largely focused on issues such as availability, cost and economics (e.g. Gray and Bruegel, 2003; Kinnear, 2003; Concordia, 2006). Whilst there has been some research that examined issues such as quality and practice, this has tended to occur in group day care settings such as day nurseries or playgroups (e.g. DE, 2004). Similarly, much of the research on childcare quality and practice further afield has focused on group settings. For example, the EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education), evaluation of 2 year old pilot in England and Scotland (Sylva et al., 1999) and the Millennium Cohort Study (Smith and Joshi, 2002). The impact of vertical grouping³ has received attention in the literature only outside of the UK, most notably in the US and Australia (e.g. Evangelou 1989; Katz, 1995; Stonehouse, 2006; Tansey, 2007). These research studies will be discussed in more depth in the literature review in Chapter 3.

The methodologies employed in many of the research studies mentioned above have excluded the voice of children and have instead contained only the opinions and perspectives of adults.

This project seeks to contribute to childcare policy and practice development by addressing the research gaps in relation to the quality and practice of childminding in Northern Ireland. These research gaps include: a profile of the childminding sector; the features of high quality in a childminding setting; the value of home-based childcare; the impacts of vertical grouping and; the support and development of childminding practice. The study will also employ a methodology that is inclusive of the opinions and perspective of children.

³ Vertical grouping can be defined as the grouping of children of different ages within childcare (see for example Levine, 2004; Oesterreich, 1995; McGaha et al., 2011). This means that infants, preschool children and school-going children are all cared for within the same room or space, in a similar manner to a naturally occurring family.

1.4 Aims and objectives

This study has two main overall aims. These are to:

- explore issues of practice and quality within childminding in Northern Ireland and
- ascertain the impacts on children of vertical grouping.

The specific objectives of the research are to provide answers to the following questions:

- What does childminding practice in Northern Ireland look like?
- From the perspectives of childminders, parents and children, what does quality look like or how does it manifest itself in childminding practice?
- What would help to enhance the quality of childminding practice from the perspectives of childminders and parents?
- To what extent do specific childcare qualifications matter to both parents and childminders in terms of their views on quality and practice?
- What is the impact of vertical grouping on children from the perspectives of childminders, parents and children themselves?
- What are the challenges to providing and using vertical grouping?
- To what extent are the impacts of vertical grouping an influencing factor in motivating parents to choose childminding over other forms of day care?
- What are the benefits of having specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- What are the barriers in achieving specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- Does Quality First Accreditation (from NICMA) benefit childminders? If so, how? If not, why not?

The remaining chapters of this report are set out as follows:

Chapter 2 describes the methodology used in the study.

Chapter 3 presents the findings of the literature review that were used to inform the study design.

Chapters 4-8 provide the findings and analysis under a number of different themes:

- A profile of childminding in Northern Ireland
- An exploration of the features of childminding practice
- An exploration of quality in childminding practice
- Vertical grouping in childminding practice
- Support and development of childminding practice

Chapter 9 outlines the conclusions and recommendations of the research.

2.0 Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the different research methods used at each stage of the study including the sample design, fieldwork procedures and analytical approaches used.

2.2 Literature review

The first stage of the project involved conducting a literature review on the issues of quality in childminding practice and the impact of vertical/mixed age placements on children.

Searches of a variety of databases were conducted by the NCB Library and Information Service to identify relevant literature on the two key areas of the research – quality in childminding practice and the impact of mixed age/vertical placements on children. The databases included ChildData and various databases and websites (e.g. National Foundation for Educational Research, NatCen, Institute of Education, and Nuffield Foundation). Initially inclusion criteria limited the search to the last five years (i.e. since 2007) and publications/resources from English speaking countries. However, in relation to the impact of mixed age placements, it was necessary to extend this as very little material has been published in this area since 2007.

Search terms and key words/phrases included childminding practice, quality in childminding practice and the impact of vertical/mixed age placements on children.

Each item was then screened for relevance, coded under different themes and summarised as outlined in the literature review in Chapter 3.

2.2.1 Katz's triangular framework

Drawing on Katz's (1994, cited by Hallam et al., 2009) model, identified in the literature review, a triangular framework was used to explore the perspectives of both providers of care for children in mixed age groups (i.e. childminders) and those receiving care provision (i.e. parents and children). In doing so it was envisaged that this would give the research the

inside-out, outside-in and bottom-up perspectives that were being sought in order to document views on childminding practice in Northern Ireland.

Drawing further on the messages from the literature review two main methods were used when conducting this research:

- surveys in phase one and;
- focus groups, interviews and a survey with year 7 pupils via the Kids Life and Time Survey (KLT) in phase two.

A survey methodology was used in phase one of the research to elicit the views of substantial numbers of childminders and parents, and more importantly to ensure that the research was robust in terms of reliability and validity. Focus groups were then used to gain a more in-depth understanding of the parents' and childminders' perspectives. Children's views were sought in two ways- through interviews (individually or with siblings) and from the KLT survey.

2.3 Phase 1 of fieldwork: self-completion surveys

2.3.1 Survey Design

A postal survey of a random sample of childminders and parents was conducted over two-months in November and December 2012 to ascertain the following:

- The profile of the Northern Ireland childminding population including levels of qualifications relevant to childcare
- What everyday childminding practice looks like
- Key features of quality of care in childminding practice
- The benefits of childminding over other forms of childcare
- Parents' motivation for choosing childminding as opposed to other forms of childcare
- The benefits and challenges of vertical placements (i.e. children of different ages being cared for in the same room) in childcare
- Views on enhancing childminding practice

As previously mentioned, the survey questions were informed by a brief literature review on quality, practice and vertical grouping as well as inputs from the project advisory group.

The survey instruments and associated supporting literature (e.g. letters and information leaflets explaining the project) were discussed and agreed with the OFMDFM project representative and the advisory group prior to administration. Drafts of these documents were also piloted as part of the research process. The research instruments are contained in the appendices book that accompanies this report⁴.

2.3.2 Sampling and recruitment for the surveys

A population database of registered childminders in Northern Ireland was created using a combination of data from each of the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) and NICMA membership data. This yielded a total of 3856 childminders. From the population database, a computer generated random sample of 1000 registered childminders was selected to take part in the survey. The random sample was reflective of the population profile of childminders in terms of the following:

- the percentage that are NICMA and non-NICMA members
- the percentage in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas
- the urban/rural divide
- area deprivation levels

In terms of parents, childminders were provided with questionnaires to distribute to the parents of all of the children they cared for (one questionnaire per family). Parents were also given the option of completing the questionnaire online.

2.3.3 Maximising response rates to the surveys

In order to maximise response rates to the surveys a number of techniques were employed:

- In the Autumn of 2012, prior to the distribution of the survey, NCB representatives attended 13 childminding support group meetings (which NICMA facilitate) and the NICMA annual conference/AGM to fully explain the project face-to-face to

⁴ The appendices book is available on request from NCB NI.

childminders and so that they in turn would be able to explain the research to parents and encourage their participation. This resulted in direct contact with 155 childminders;

- SureStart Childminding Network Coordinators and the chair persons of other childminding support groups in various locations in Northern Ireland were also written to with information;
- NICMA promoted the survey in its regular mail-outs and electronic communication to all of their members;
- Early Years Teams within the Health and Social Care Trusts were written to in order to inform them of the project and ensure participation from those childminders who are not members of NICMA;
- Follow-up telephone calls were made and text messages and reminder letters sent to childminders;
- There was an incentive offered to both childminders and parents in the form of a prize draw for twenty £100 high street shopping vouchers for those returning completed questionnaires (10 for childminders and 10 for parents);
- Freepost envelopes were used to facilitate easy return of the surveys and;
- Parents had the option of completing an online version of the survey.

2.3.4 Survey response rates - childminders

Whilst a random sample of 1000 childminders had been selected from the population database, the eligible sample was 961 due to a number of factors. For example, some childminders were no longer registered and others were not childminding at the time of the postal mailout (e.g. due to maternity leave, illness, and family bereavements). Other questionnaires were returned to NCB NI due to the addressee having left the premises or due to the address being inaccessible.

The total number of respondents was 230, which is a response rate of 24%. Table 1 shows that the sample of returned surveys from the childminders is reflective of the population of childminders in terms of HSCT area. The sample of returned surveys also reflects the rural/urban split and deprivation groupings of the population (see appendix 1). There were more NICMA members in the returned sample (80%) than in the population (57%).

Table 1: Breakdown of childminders by HSCT for population, eligible sample and achieved sample

Health & Social Care Trust	Achieved Sample % (230)	Eligible Sample % (961)	Population % (3856)
Northern	28% (64)	28% (266)	29% (1118)
South Eastern	27% (62)	28% (269)	26% (1003)
Southern	16% (37)	17% (165)	16% (617)
Western	17% (39)	14% (130)	15% (578)
Belfast	12% (28)	14% (131)	14% (540)

A full profile of the childminders who participated in this survey is included in Chapter 4.

2.3.5 Survey response rates - parents

Some 695 families received the parents' questionnaire. A total of 261 parents' questionnaires were returned (including 15 questionnaires completed online), which is a response rate of 38%.

Table 2 below shows that the parents' sample is reflective of the population of childminders in terms of HSCT area.

Table 2: Breakdown of parents by HSCT, childminder population, eligible childminder sample and achieved parents' sample

Health & Social Care Trust	Achieved Sample % (261)	Eligible Sample % (childminders)	Population % (childminders)
South Eastern	28%	28%	26%
Northern	25%	28%	29%
Southern	18%	17%	16%
Western	15%	14%	15%
Belfast	14%	14%	14%

2.3.6 Profile of parents

Profile statistics of the parents reveal the following:

- Age: ranged from 16 - 51 years with a mean age of 35 years
- Gender: almost all (95%) of parents were females
- Ethnicity: almost all (99%) were White
- Religion: just over half (51%) of parents indicated that they were Protestant whilst 42% said they were Catholic. The proportion of those not belonging to a religious group was 5% and those from an 'other' religious background represented 2%.
- Nationality: almost half (47%) indicated that they were British whilst 29% of respondents said they were Northern Irish and just over one-fifth (22%) indicated that they were Irish. Those from outside Europe made up 2% and Lithuanians 1% of the sample.

2.4 Phase 2 of fieldwork: focus groups

Phase two of the research took place between April and June 2013.

Following analysis of the survey results, nine focus group discussions across all five of the HSCT areas were held with a total of 49 childminders. Four focus groups and one telephone interview were also held with 16 parents across the five HSCTs.

2.4.1 Topic guide design

The purpose of the focus groups and interviews was to discuss in greater detail the survey findings, by exploring and unpicking the data to gain a more in-depth understanding of issues associated with quality of practice and impact of vertical placements.

Participants were each given a £20 high street voucher as a thank you for giving up their time. The topic guides for the childminders' and parents' focus groups, the children's interview topic guides, invite letters and the information and consent forms can be found in appendices 7-11. The focus groups were facilitated by staff from NCB's research team. The discussions were audio taped and manual notes were also taken.

2.4.2 Recruitment of focus group participants

Focus group participants were recruited from the survey respondents. Each childminder and parent who completed a survey was asked if s/he would be willing to participate in a focus group. This initially yielded approximately 60 participants for childminders and 64 participants for parents. However, following letters summarising key findings from the surveys to those who had initially indicated that they did not want to participate in focus groups, a further 22 childminders and a further 3 parents came forward. A 'snowball' technique was also used with parents as some parents asked if they could bring a friend who also used a registered childminder to the focus group. It was felt that this was permissible as long as each group was a mixture of friends and non-friends and it did encourage greater participation in the focus groups among parents.

2.5 Interviews with children

In addition to the focus group with adults, 14 children aged 4-11 years participated in individual or joint interviews (with siblings). The children were recruited via parents who participated in the survey and/or the focus groups. All HSCT areas were represented by the children with the exception of the Southern HSCT, as no children were successfully recruited from this area.

The purpose of the interviews was to hear from children themselves and obtain their opinions on being cared for in a vertical group (see topic guide in appendix 11). Projective and enabling techniques were used with the children to elicit their views. These included asking children to draw pictures of them at their childminders and feelings cards which depicted a range of emotions which the children could use if they wished. Parental consent, as well as the consent of the children, was obtained prior to conducting the interviews and issues such as confidentiality and anonymity were explained in language appropriate to the age and ability of the children. All of the children who participated in the interviews were given a small token of appreciation as a thank you.

2.6 Kids Life and Times survey (KLT)

The Kids Life and Times (KLT) is an annual online survey conducted by ARK (Access, Research, Knowledge – a partnership between the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast) of P7 children (i.e. those aged 10-11 years old) in Northern Ireland which is accessed by children in school. The survey aims to give children a voice on issues that affect them, and includes questions around issues that are important to children such as bullying at school, the transfer test, use of technology and children's feelings about themselves and their lives. This year's survey included questions on care arrangements for children after school hours. This provided an opportunity for NCB to purchase some additional questions in the survey to obtain further contributions of children's views for this research. Five questions were asked on the following topics (see appendix 2):

- where children went after school if not home (i.e. did they go to a relative's home, an after-school facility or to a childminder's house)?
- how happy children were if they went somewhere other than home and why?
- what kinds of activities were they involved in when at these settings?

2.6.1 Profile of KLT respondents

A total of 3,773 pupils completed the KLT survey, which represents 17% of the overall population of P7 pupils in Northern Ireland. The respondents were equally divided across gender with boys representing 49% of the sample and girls representing 51%. There was a similar split for the location of children with 46% based in urban areas and 54% based in rural areas.

Table 3 indicates the response rate within the Education and Library Board (ELB) areas for the respondents. The highest proportion of respondents were based in the Western ELB (25%) and the lowest were based in the Belfast ELB (12%)

Table 3: Response rate of KLT respondents by Education and Library Board

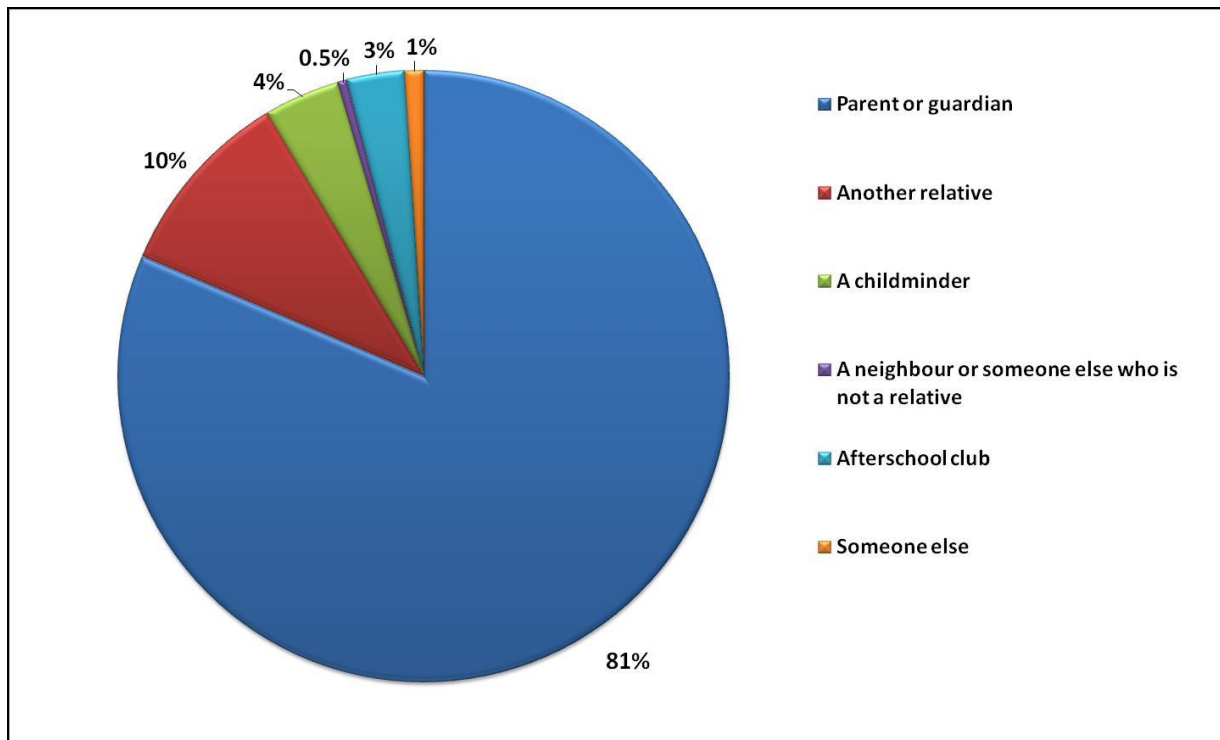
Education and Library Board (ELB)	%
Western	25
South Eastern	18
Northern	17
Southern	13
Belfast	12

n=3773

The responses from children cared for by a childminder are focused on in this report and, where appropriate, comparisons are made with children cared for in an after-schools setting as this is the only other place outside family or friends where children are cared for after school.

Of those children who participated in the 2013 KLT survey, a relatively small proportion went to a childminder after school (4%; 161). However, outside of care provided by family members (i.e. parents, guardian or another relative), a childminder was the most popular after care setting. This breakdown is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Where P7 children are cared for after school finishes



n= 3773

2.7 Data analysis

2.7.1 Survey data

All survey data for the childminders and parents was cleaned and entered into the statistical software package PASW Statistics 18⁵ for analysis. Data entry was undertaken in accordance with NCB data security principles which are contained in our Research Quality Plan (see appendix 3).

KLT survey data was also analysed using PASW Statistics 18.

⁵ PASW Statistics 18 formerly known as SPSS

2.7.2 Focus group and interview data

All focus group and interview data was taped and later transcribed. It was then stored and coded using the NVivo software package and thematic analysis was conducted to identify the key themes emerging from the data.

The following Chapters 4-8 present the findings from all of the methods used in the research.

2.8 Project Advisory Group

A project advisory group was established at an early stage of the project. The advisory group comprised of representatives from the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT), the Childcare Partnerships (CCP), the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA), the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the Department of Education (DE), and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). The role of the advisory group was to do the following:

- Advise on the research scope, methodology and instruments
- Inform the research content and outputs
- Help to ensure effective links between the research and policy/practice
- Disseminate the learning from the project's outputs

The advisory group met four times over the lifetime of the project, with email contact being used between meetings to keep members of the group up to date with the progress of the project.

3.0 Chapter 3: Literature review findings

3.1 Introduction

The main purpose of the literature review was to inform the development of the research instruments, in particular the surveys and focus groups with parents and childminders. It was also carried out to compare the findings of this study to what is already known in the field. The literature review focused on exploring the issues connected to the two main areas of the study, a) quality in childcare practice and b) the benefits and challenges of providing childcare in mixed age groups (also called vertical grouping) as well as the benefits and drawbacks for children of being cared for in mixed age groups.

3.2 What is quality in childminding practice?

According to the European Commission (2009), quality in terms of childcare relates to 'aspects that contribute to the social, emotional and cognitive development of the child' (European Commission, 2009: 8). Such aspects include qualifications and training of the workforce and much of the discussion on quality in childcare focuses on training issues. Across Europe, and indeed within countries, there is considerable variation in the level of education of childcare workers. Generally, those employed in early years *educational* settings tend to hold higher qualifications than those employed in private *childcare* settings, particularly private childminders:

...in almost all countries there is a large difference in education between nursery schools, pre-schools and crèches on the one hand and private childminders on the other...Private childminders...usually have a significantly lower level of education than childcare staff in other settings. (ibid:8)

The emphasis on qualifications of the childcare workforce has also been emphasised more recently by the Department for Education (2011), which has stated:

The quality of staff and in particular their qualification levels, is strongly associated with good quality provision, hence the Government's commitment to improve the quality of the early years workforce (DFE, 2011:23).

The recent Nutbrown Review (2012) concluded that the existing early year's system of qualifications did not sufficiently equip childcare workers with the 'knowledge, skills and understanding they need' to provide high quality experiences for children (Nutbrown, 2012:5). Furthermore it found that there were too many qualifications which were very

confusing and recommended Level 3⁶ as a minimum for the childcare workforce, including childminders.

In Northern Ireland, the DHSSPS (2012b) has also emphasised training for childcare staff in the recently published Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children under age 12:

Staff who are happy in their role, secure in the knowledge of their responsibilities and *well-trained to deal with all aspects of their job* provide an environment where children can thrive (DHSSPS, 2012a:30, our emphasis).

There is also a recognition in the new Minimum Standards that play work qualifications (as distinct from childcare qualifications) are the most appropriate qualifications for those providing childcare for school-age children, which many childminders do (DHSSPS, 2012a).

Childminders in Northern Ireland are now required (through the Minimum Standards) to have training in paediatric first aid, child protection and health and safety. However, childminders in Northern Ireland are **not** obliged to hold specific *childcare* or play work qualifications, unlike in England, where childminders must hold a local authority approved childcare qualification.

In the Republic of Ireland, there have been recent calls for all childcare workers to hold professional qualifications by the Association of Childcare Workers (Cullen, 2013).

The European Commission (2009) maintains that enhancing training levels would increase the status of childcare and 'bring [the] profession more in line with that of teachers' (2009: 9). Furthermore they argue that a more 'coherent picture of quality requirements' is needed which encompasses all settings, private and public, if negative impacts on some sectors or settings is to be avoided (ibid: 9).

In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), introduced in 2008, was intended to provide such coherence and childminders caring for children under the age of 5 are obliged to deliver the EYFS. The EYFS is a statutory framework which provides standards that all those working with young children must meet and great emphasis is placed on children being 'school ready'.

In 2009 the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) defined quality childcare as having three distinct but related elements: direct practice with children and their parents/carers; a suitably qualified workforce with opportunities for continuous development; and the EYFS contributing to enhancing the physical environment as well as the content of practice (see appendix 4).

⁶ Level 3 = NVQ Level 3 or its equivalent such as GCE AS and A levels, Advanced Diplomas

Whilst some childminders have found the EYFS to be positive in terms of placing their work on a par with other early years' professionals (see for example, Fauth et al., 2011), there has been criticism of having a 'curriculum' for, and 'forcing education' on, very young children from both childminders and parents (Adams and Adams, 2011; Laing, 2011).

This criticism also reflects a wider debate in the literature over whether childcare is care or education or a mixture of both. Some countries view it as both and see the distinction as being artificial. This view is also held by Leach (2011) who maintains that for young children there is no distinction between care and education - or between playing and learning - and insists that there should not be any such distinction in practice and quality. Leach maintains that children both learn and play through the use of everyday activities and advocates using everyday implements and items that occur in the natural world as well as toys to facilitate this (Leach, 2011:28).

This delineation between both education and care also tends to be reflected in policy and regulation in Northern Ireland, e.g. settings that implement the Department of Education's (NI) Two Year Old Programme are inspected by both the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) in Northern Ireland. According to Lindon, 'care was (and by too many people still is) regarded as second best to education' which has impacted negatively on quality (Lindon, 2006:23).

It is claimed that the distinction between education and care came about because of the differing development of early years care and early education (see for example Lindon, 2006). However, the arguments made by Adams (2011), Laing (2011) and Dahlberg et al., (2007) appear to be centred more on ideological approaches to childhood and what it means, rather than developments in social infrastructure within society.

3.3 Quality standards in childminding practice

Quality in childminding practice is often determined by standards, e.g. EYFS in England as mentioned and the Siolta framework in the Republic of Ireland. As outlined above there are 16 new Minimum Standards for childcare in Northern Ireland which cover 4 areas of quality. These areas are as follows:

1. Quality of care which incorporates safeguarding, development and play, health and wellbeing, promoting positive behaviour and partnership with parents
2. Quality of staffing, management and leadership
3. Quality of the physical environment (includes equipment and physical setting)

4. Quality of monitoring and evaluation

A fifth area provides lists of the policies and procedures required and samples of policies. Childminders are covered by all of these areas and are expected to implement the standards, though it is recognised that some modification may be necessary.

Alongside the publication of the Minimum Standards there are now also minimum standards for the Regulation of Childminding and Day Care Services by Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs). Whilst HSCTs will continue to inspect childminders against the standards and criteria laid down by the Children (NI) Order, 1995 (which include home, equipment, staffing, record keeping and ensuring that the children are 'happy and well cared for'), the Regulation Quality and Improvement Authority (RQIA) will also now inspect the Trusts' performance, regarding the implementation of the Minimum Standards.

Similarly in the Republic of Ireland, the Siolta framework (DES, undated) provides 16 different quality standards covering a variety of areas from the rights of the child, the environment, interactions to communication, parents and family and community involvement, to mention a few. Each of these standards has a number of components which in turn have 'Signposts for Reflection' and 'Think About' points which aim to stimulate thoughts and actions of providers, including childminders.

Internationally, rating scales have also been developed for both practitioners and those assessing them to use in order to judge the quality of childcare practice. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and its 'sister' scale ITERS (Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scale for those aged 1 year - 30 months) are two such tools (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2005; Harms, Cryer and Clifford, 2006), which are used extensively in countries throughout the world. Their equivalent for childminding is the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS) (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2007). The FCCERS scale covers areas such as the following:

1. Space and furnishings
2. Personal care routines
3. Listening and talking
4. Activities
5. Interaction – between the provider and children and between the children themselves
6. Programmed structure
7. Parents and provider

Within each of these areas there are a number of items that can be scored on a rating scale from 1 (inadequate) to 7 (excellent) and each score is clearly defined. The scale may be self administered and the document also poses questions for providers to promote reflective thinking and self-evaluation.

Hallam et al., (2009) distinguish between proximal and distal quality: distal quality is mainly focused on the structural aspects of care (e.g. environment, qualifications of staff) and tends to be judged via observations, ECERS ratings, interviews with staff etc. Proximal quality includes the real experiences of children and tends to be more focused on the interactions between the care giver and the child and how care givers support children's social and emotional development. Hallam et al., (2009) advocate for the use of multiple measures when childcare quality is being assessed. In this they echo Katz (1994, cited by Hallam et al., 2009) who proposed a triangular framework for examining quality in childcare. Katz advocated taking the perspectives of a range of stakeholders through inside-out (i.e. with staff), outside-in (i.e. with families) and bottom-up (i.e. with children) explorations.

Hallam et al., (2009) claim that often when childcare is being researched a top-down perspective seems to prevail, focusing largely on environmental and structural features. They argue for the inclusion of children's experiences in a bottom-up approach. This approach has also been advocated for in early education settings in Northern Ireland by Walsh and Gardner (2005).

According to Fawcett (2009) there appears to be a perception among the general public in Northern Ireland that childcare provided by childminders is of a lower quality than that provided in other settings e.g. day nurseries. The reason for this perception is not clear; it may be because a childminding setting is an ordinary private home or it may be due to the lack of qualifications required to become a childminder. According to Penelope Leach (2011) the 'ordinary-ness' of the home learning environment and its everyday activities has a bigger positive impact on very young children than settings that are more structured by age group. This she attributes mainly to the development of secure attachments that result from 'warm, responsive care' (Leach, 2011:26). Childminding, as it happens in 'ordinary' homes with mainly one childminder providing the care⁷, replicates the environment of the child's home. It also provides the consistent relationship between the childminder and the child to enable secure attachments to be made more easily than in group settings where a number of staff may work on a rota basis in each room.

Contrary to the perception among the general public (e.g. Fawcett, 2009), recent research from the Employers for Childcare Charitable Organisation reveals that almost identical proportions of parents in Northern Ireland were happy with the quality of care provided by

⁷ Some childminders may work in pairs in one home.

childminders (98%) as were those who use day nurseries (97%) (Employers for Childcare, 2012).

Research with children aged 10-11 years (Year 7 pupils) in Northern Ireland explored the relationship between different kinds of after school care, happiness levels with the care experienced and social and psychological well-being (Lloyd, 2011). The findings from this survey show that children were most happy with a relative but children who were cared for by a childminder were happier than those who attended an after-schools club.

3.4 The impact of vertical placements on children

This section of the literature review focuses on the impact of vertical placements on children, i.e. the benefits and drawbacks for children of being cared for in mixed age groups as well as the benefits and challenges to childminders in providing care for children in mixed age groups.

As previously noted it was necessary to extend the searches of published material beyond 2007 in order to find relevant literature in this area. The searches also revealed that most of the work in this area has been undertaken in the USA and Australia, with little or no engagement with this aspect in the UK or Ireland (or indeed elsewhere in Europe).

3.4.1 Benefits of vertical placements

A number of benefits have been identified for children when they are cared for in mixed age groupings. Older children enjoy 'teaching', nurturing and taking responsibility for younger children (Oesterreich, 1995; Penn State, undated; Child Action Inc, undated). As a result of this 'teaching', older children's confidence and self esteem grows (Stonehouse, 2006; Child Action Inc; McGaha et al., 2011). Older children also develop social skills such as patience, empathy and leadership skills as a result of interacting with younger children (Penn State, undated; Evangelou, 1989; Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004) and, in addition, older children's self-control is improved (Penn State, undated).

Younger children learn to attempt more complex tasks as they watch older children (McGaha et al, 2011; Levine, 2004) and being in mixed age groups helps younger children make transitions e.g. to pre-school (McGaha et al, 2011). Younger children are also exposed to new play and learning opportunities than would otherwise be the case (Penn State, undated).

There are also a range of benefits for both older and younger children that occur simultaneously, e.g. both older and younger children may develop/enhance reading skills if the older one reads to the younger one (Evangelou, 1989). It has been noted that childcare in mixed age groups more closely resembles a natural family grouping and therefore promotes family-like behaviour (Child Action Inc, undated, Oesterreich, 1995, Levine, 2004). In addition, several commentators have noted mutual benefits for both older and younger children, especially in terms of 'life skills': both sets of children develop skills such as negotiation, there is less bullying and more sharing (Penn State, undated) and there is more acceptance of differences in ability and behaviour among children and adults (Penn State, undated; Levine, 2004). Less competitive behaviour and more helpful behaviour has also been noted by other commentators (Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004), as has greater freedom for children to develop at their own rate rather than being compared to same-age peers (Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004).

Leach (2011) also identifies learning as a key benefit of mixed age groupings, and notes that this is particularly important for children who may not have siblings or other relatives (e.g. cousins) living nearby and it is important that this association with other children starts prior to playgroup age. For many children, meeting their peers as well as older or younger children is something that occurs naturally in a childminding setting.

Parents also benefit from mixed age placements in that siblings can be cared for together (Child Action Inc, undated; Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004), thereby simplifying logistical organisation in terms of drop-offs and collection and reducing the stress associated with getting to or from work on time.

There are also benefits for childminders as mixed age groups help maintain full enrolment (Child Action Inc, undated) and providers have more variety of activities to become involved in, which makes work more enjoyable (Oesterreich, 1995).

3.4.2 Challenges and drawbacks of vertical placements

Despite the benefits to children, parents and childminders outlined above, a number of challenges, drawbacks and potential problems associated with being cared for or caring for children in mixed age groups were also identified.

Older children may regress in their behaviour, becoming more babyish (Penn State, undated). Older children may raise issues that are beyond the understanding of younger children, e.g. sex, personal development, drug alcohol use/abuse (Tansey, 2007). They may seek greater independence and challenge the authority of the childminder or the limits set (ibid). Older children may be more aware that they are not in their own home and resent

this fact e.g. they may prefer to meet their friends in their own neighbourhood after school (Tansey, 2007; Levine, 2004). In addition, older primary school age children are entering puberty. A childminder therefore requires an understanding of their emotional needs and must be sensitive to both their physical and emotional needs, which may be difficult when trying to also meet the very basic needs of infants and toddlers, e.g. to be safe, clean and fed (Tansey, 2007).

An additional challenge includes the fact that older and younger children may not be interested in the same things or some activities may not be appropriate for younger children (Stonehouse, 2006; Penn State, undated; Tansey, 2007). Developmental differences between older and younger children and their responses may evoke conflict, e.g. younger children 'getting away with' certain behaviour or older children getting to do more things (Stonehouse, 2006; Penn State, undated). In addition, same-age playmates may be limited or non-existent (Oesterreich, 1995).

Challenges for the childminder include taking extra safety precautions when there are infants or toddlers in the group and accommodating daily routines e.g. naps/meal times which may need to be more flexible to accommodate all of the children (Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004). In addition, it can be difficult to plan activities for different age groups (Oesterreich, 1995; Levine, 2004).

3.4.3 Key factors in ensuring effective practice when caring for mixed age groups

Taking into consideration both the benefits but especially the potential challenges and drawbacks of care for children in mixed age groups, the literature identifies a number of key factors for providing an optimal experience for all concerned.

Planning and organisation of the daily routine are regarded as crucial (Child Action Inc, undated). Using open-ended materials and experiences (McGaha, 2011) means that all of the children can be involved in the activity in a way that is appropriate to them and their abilities. The physical arrangement of the room needs to be carefully thought out so that there is adequate space for both toddlers who are exploring and older children who may want to concentrate on an activity that requires fine motor skills or a quiet area to relax in after school as well as ensuring that all materials or toys are fully accessible for self-directed play by children (McGaha, 2011). In addition, adult participation and management is essential to ensuring positive interactions between older and younger children (McGaha, 2011).

3.5 Summary: findings from the literature review

- Whilst a substantial amount of the discussion on quality in childminding practice is focused on training and qualifications, quality is a multi-faceted concept incorporating the physical environment, child-adult interaction, child-to-child interaction, activities, partnership with parents and daily routines with children.
- In Northern Ireland there appears to be conflicting views on the quality of care offered in a childminding setting, with some reports describing negative perceptions of childminding among the general public whereas others report high levels of satisfaction among parents who use childminders.
- Childminders in Northern Ireland now have a new set of Minimum Standards to meet, although they are still not required to hold any specific childcare qualifications, unlike their peers in England.
- There is a fiercely contested debate as to whether childcare is simply care alone, early education alone or a mixture of both.
- There is a need to explore quality from the inside out (i.e. with staff), outside in (i.e. with families) and bottom-up (i.e. with children) perspectives and not only from the top-down (i.e. focusing on environmental and structural features), as seems to be the case with most research.
- Almost all of the literature in relation to vertical placements comes from the USA and Australia.
- A range of benefits for both younger and older children have been identified when they are cared for in mixed age groups. Benefits have also been identified for parents and childminders. These include:
 - Older children nurturing and taking responsibility for younger children
 - Older children gaining in confidence
 - Older and younger children learning from each other
 - Both older and younger children gaining valuable social and emotional skills
 - Promotes more family-like behaviour
 - More freedom for children to develop at their own pace

- Logistical organisation for parents is simplified when siblings are cared for in the same setting
- Mixed age groups help childminders maintain full enrolment and provide more variety in their work
- Several challenges for childminders for children have also been identified. These include:
 - Older children may regress in their behaviour
 - Older children may raise issues that are inappropriate for younger children
 - It may be difficult to meet all of the needs of older children as well as babies and toddlers
 - Older and young children may not be interested in participating in the same activities
 - Developmental differences may result in conflict
 - Same-age playmates may be non-existent
 - The logistics of accommodating the daily routines of school-age children as well as babies and/or toddlers may be very demanding (e.g. school collection times may clash with feeding or nap times)
- A number of key factors have been identified to overcome the challenges and drawbacks associated with mixed age childcare settings. These include:
 - Planning and organising of daily routine
 - Physical space planning
 - Open-ended activities
 - Carer management to ensure positive interaction between children of different age groups

4.0 Chapter 4: Findings - profile of childminders

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of specific survey data to generate a profile of childminders in Northern Ireland. Key areas covered in this profile include:

- Age, gender, religion and ethnicity
- General and childcare qualifications held by childminders
- Childminders' experience of caring for children
- Working hours and childcare spaces provided

4.2 Key demographics of childminders

Childminders in this research ranged in age from 20-72 years with the mean age being 45. Over half (55%) of respondents were aged between 41-60 years, whilst over one-third (36%) were aged under 40 (Table 4). A small proportion of respondents were aged over 61 years (7%).

The vast majority of childminders that responded to the survey were female and of White ethnic origin (99%).

Table 4: Age categories of childminders who participated in the survey

Age Category	%
40 years and under	36
41-60 years	55
61+ years	7

n=226

Table 5: Breakdown of religious background and nationality of childminders who participated in the survey

Religious background	%	Nationality	%
Protestant	58	British	62
Catholic	37	Northern Irish	18
Muslim	2	Irish	17
Other	2.5	Outside Europe	2
No religion	0.5	Polish	0.4
		Lithuanian	0.4

n=226

Table 5 shows the breakdown of childminders by religious background and nationality.

In terms of religious background over half (58%) of childminders indicated that they were Protestant, whilst over one-third (37%) were Catholic. A relatively small proportion (2.5%) indicated they were from an 'other' religious background. Muslims made up 2% of these respondents and those who indicated that they did not belong to any religious group made up 0.5% of the respondents. In terms of nationality, almost two-thirds (62%) indicated that they were British, whilst 18% indicated that they were Northern Irish, and 17% said they were Irish. Those who indicated they were from areas outside of Europe made up 2%, whilst both Polish and Lithuanian childminders made up less than half of 1% each (0.4%).

4.3 General qualifications

There was quite a broad range of general qualifications held by childminders, with some educated to degree level, some holding professional qualifications (e.g. nursing, teaching) and others holding a range of vocational qualifications, as Table 6 shows.

The proportion of childminders with no qualifications (16%) was relatively low compared to the Northern Ireland average, which was recorded at 29% in the most recent census (NI Census, 2011). Relative to the highest qualification level of the NI population recorded in the most recent census (NI Census, 2011), childminders in this research are better qualified

at Levels 1, 2 and 3 and fewer have no qualifications, 16% versus 29%. Almost one-fifth are qualified to Level 4 or above which is 5% less than the general population.

Table 6: Highest level of qualification held by childminders

Qualification	Percentage	General NI population
Level 4 qualification or above (Degree (for example BA, BSc), Higher Degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE), NVQ Level 4-5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher level, Foundation degree, Professional qualifications, e.g. teaching, nursing, accountancy)	19	24
Level 3 qualification (Level 3: 2+ A Levels/VCEs, 4+ AS Levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma, NVQ Level 3; Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma)	27	12
Level 2 qualification (5+ O Level (Passes)/CSEs (Grade 1)/GCSEs (Grades A*-C), School Certificate, 1 A Level/ 2-3 AS Levels/VCEs, Intermediate/Higher Diploma, Intermediate Diploma, NVQ level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/General Diploma, RSA Diploma)	20	15
Level 1 qualification (1-4 O'Levels/ GCE/GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma, NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVA, Basic/Essential Skills)	16	12
Other (Vocational/ Work-related qualifications, qualifications gained outside the UK)	3	8.5
No qualifications	16	29

n=230

Table 7 takes a closer look at those childminders with no general qualifications and shows that there are regional variations across NI and also variations across age groups. The Southern and South Eastern Trusts have the lowest proportions of childminders with no

general qualifications (11%), while this figure almost doubles for those childminders in the Western (21%), Belfast (21%) and Northern (19%) Trusts.

Table 7: Breakdown of childminders that have no general qualifications by HSCT area and by age group

Trust	% no general qualifications	Age Category	% no general qualifications
Western	21	40 years and under	5
Belfast	21	41-60 years	17
Northern	19	61+ years	75
South Eastern	11		
Southern	11		

n=37

Three-quarters (75%) of childminders aged 61+ years held no general qualifications whereas younger childminders were significantly less likely to have no qualifications. These findings reflect the trend in the general population with regard to educational attainment and age (Census, 2011).

4.4 Childcare qualifications

Over half (54%) of childminders held specific *childcare* qualifications in Northern Ireland, despite there being no requirement for them to hold these qualifications, as noted in the previous chapter (Ofsted, 2013).

Table 8 shows that the Introduction to Childminding Practice/ Introduction to Childcare Practice was the most common childcare qualification held by childminders (26%), followed by NVQ Levels 3 and 2 (18% and 13% respectively). Just 6% of childminders held both Level 2 and Level 3 NVQs. Very few held degree level or equivalent childcare qualifications. Table 8 provides the full breakdown of all childcare qualifications held by childminders. More information on each of these qualifications can be found in appendix 5.

Table 8: Childcare qualifications held by childminders ranked by highest level of qualification

Childcare Qualifications	%
Early Years Degree (Level 4)	4
NVQ Level 4 in Children’s Care, Learning and Development (Level 4)	1
CACHE Advanced Diploma in Childcare and Education (Level 3)	0.4
NVQ Level 3 in Children’s Care, Learning and Development	18
NNEB Certificate/Diploma in Nursery Nursing (Level 3)	3
BTEC National Award, Certificate, Diploma in Children's Care, Learning and Development - Level 3	2
CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Home-based Childcare (Level 3)	1
BTEC National Certificate, Diploma in Childhood Studies (Nursery Nursing) - Level 3	0.4
NVQ Level 2 in Children’s Care, Learning and Development (Level 2)	13
Certificate in Childminding Practice (Level 3)	5
Introduction to Childminding Practice/ Introduction to Childcare Practice (ICP) (Level 1)	26
Another childcare qualification	14
No childcare qualifications	46

n=230

As Table 8 shows almost half (46%) of childminders did not hold any specific childcare qualifications. Across Northern Ireland there were regional variations between HSCT areas and across age-groups as Table 9 below shows. For example in the Belfast HSCT area a much higher proportion of childminders had no childcare qualifications (59%) compared to the Western HSCT area (32%). Table 9 shows the full breakdown of those childminders with no childcare qualifications across the HSCT areas.

Table 9: Breakdown of childminders with no specific childcare qualifications by HSCT area and by age group

Trust	%	Age Category	% no childcare qualifications
Belfast	59	40 years and under	42
Northern	53	41-60 years	42
Southern	49	61+ years	88
South Eastern	39		
Western	32		

n=105

n=102

As can be seen from Table 9 older childminders were twice as likely to have no specific childcare qualifications as younger childminders, which follows the trend of general educational qualifications.

4.5 Childminders' experience of childminding

Table 10 shows that childminders in Northern Ireland are very experienced. Almost two-thirds (65%) of the childminders in this study have more than four years experience and just over one-quarter (26%) have between 1-3 years 11 months experience. Only 9% were relatively new to childminding having worked in the profession for under a year. Table 10 shows the complete breakdown of childminders length of experience in the profession.

Table 10: Childminders' length of time working as a childminder

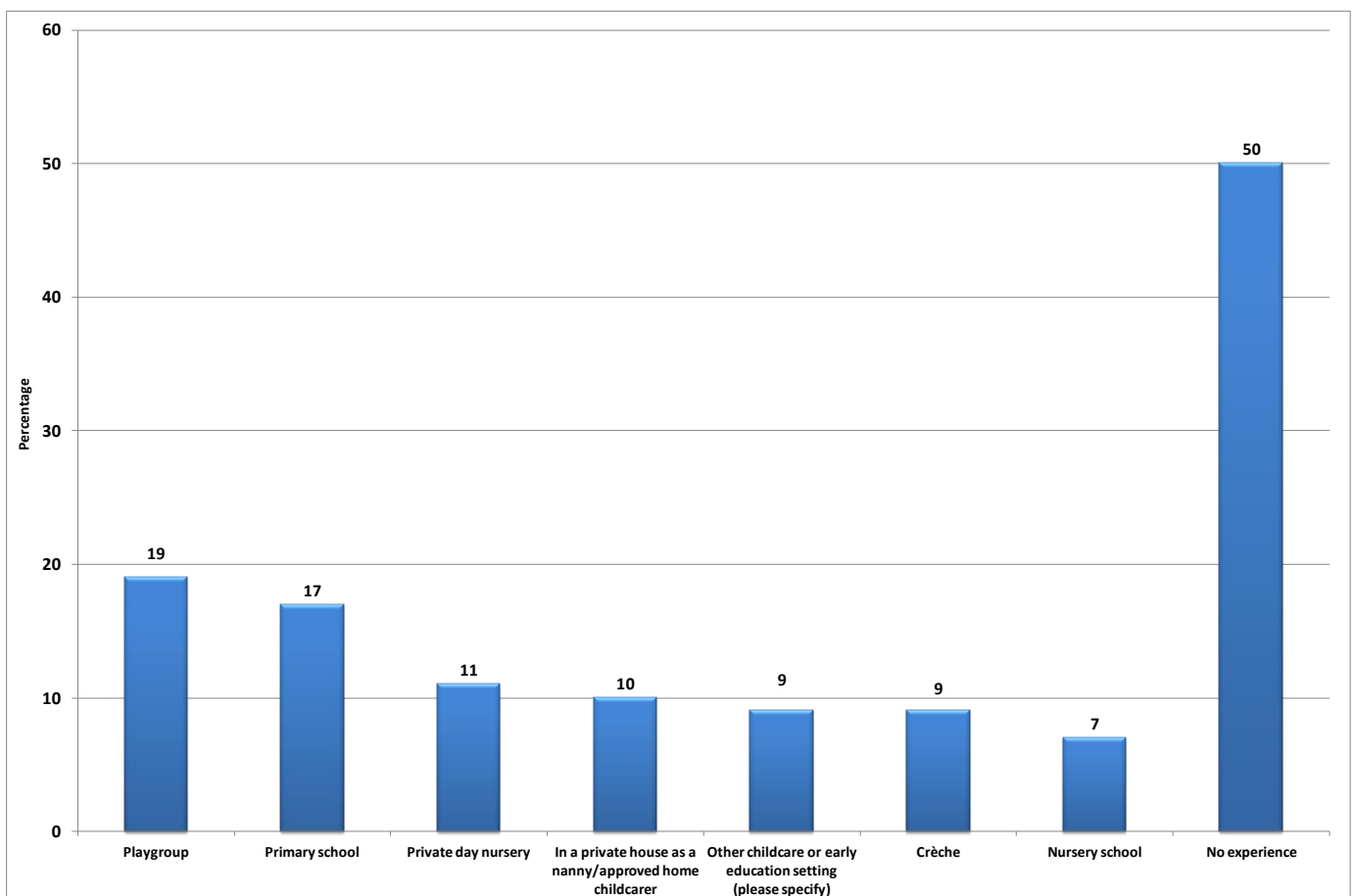
Duration:	%
Less than 1 year	9
Between 1 year- 1 year 11 months	10
Between 2 years and 2 years 11 months	8
Between 3 years and 3 years 11 months	8
More than 4 years	65

n=230

4.6 Childminders' previous relevant work experience

Exactly half of the childminders in this study had no experience of working in another childcare or education setting. The other half had experience of working in other settings, including nurseries, primary schools, playgroups, private day nurseries, private houses (as nannies) or working in crèche facilities within voluntary sector organisations (e.g. Women's Aid). Figure 2 shows the full range of settings where childminders had experience of working.

Figure 2: Childminders' previous relevant work experience



n=230

4.7 Working hours and childcare spaces

Findings from the survey on questions regarding childminders' working hours and childcare spaces are listed below:

- The average number of childcare places that childminders are registered to provide, i.e. specified on their registration certificate, is 6. 3 of these places are for those aged under 5 years and 3 are for those aged over 5 years⁸.
- The average childminder responding to this survey looks after 4 children from 3 different families.
- This would suggest that on average childminders have space for 2 more children (though childminders' own children may also fill these places).
- The average age of the children cared for in a childminders is 5 years.
- 11% of childminders care for children with special needs.
- The average number of hours worked per weekday by childminders is 7.3. For a full breakdown of childminders' average working hours per day please see appendix 6.
- Whilst there is very little childminding work undertaken at the weekends, over one-third (37%) of childminders provide care late in the evenings (defined as after 6pm) and 12% provide care overnight.
- Over two-thirds (69%) provide care early in the morning (i.e. before 8am).

⁸ Recent changes mean that this will be rephrased to 3 under compulsory school age and 3 over compulsory school age in future certificates issued by HSCTs.

4.8 Summary: profile of childminders

- The survey findings indicate that there is no typical childminder in Northern Ireland. Whilst the majority are White women they vary in terms of age and religion, experience and qualifications held.
- Childminders in this research are more likely to be qualified in Levels 1, 2 and 3 than the general population. Close to one-fifth are qualified up to Level 4.
- The population of childminders is less likely to have no qualifications than the general population- 16% have no general qualifications compared to 29% in the most recent census (NI Census, 2011). Older childminders (aged 61+) tended to be more likely not to have any qualifications following the trend in the general population (NI Census, 2011).
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are not required to hold any specific childcare qualifications, but over half do. Again, older childminders were much less likely to hold childcare qualifications. Childminders in the Belfast HSCT area were more likely to have no childcare qualifications compared to those based in the Western HSCT.
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are very experienced- almost two-thirds have more than 4 years experience as a childminder. Half had experience of working in another early years or educational setting.
- On average childminders are paid to look after 4 children from 3 different families. This suggests that on average childminders have 2 free places to fill (though childminders' own children may take up these places). The average age of children cared for is 5 years. 11% of childminders provide care for children with special needs.
- Many childminders work on average 7.3 hours per week day. However, one-third work later than 6pm, two-thirds before 8am and 12% provide care overnight.

5.0 Chapter 5: Findings - features of childminding practice

5.1 Introduction

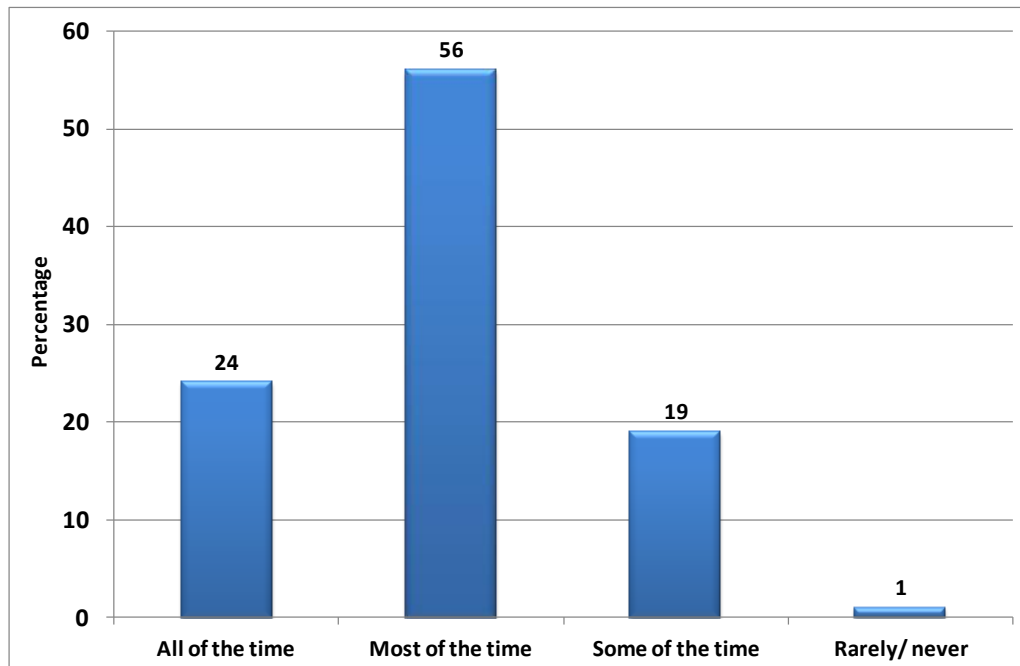
This chapter examines the research findings from the surveys, focus groups and interviews in relation to childminding practice and covers key areas including

- The extent to which planning features in childminding practice
- Activities and outings undertaken by childminders and children in their care
- Free play, i.e. unstructured play
- The role of childminders in the lives of young children, i.e. providing care and early education, care only or early education only

5.2 Planning in childminding practice

The majority of childminders surveyed (80%) reported planning activities either all or most of the time, as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: How often childminders plan activities



$n=230$

5.3 Importance of planning

Planning and its importance were further explored with childminders in the focus groups. Childminders were asked if they felt planning was linked to good practice and most felt that it was. The reasons for this view varied, for example some found it helpful to have a routine in place and felt that children are more content if they know there is a plan in place.

...we kind of have to plan because we have different age ranges every day of the week... it changes... so you have to plan out different activities just for the different age ranges and things. We would plan a lot... (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Others commented that a plan can help meet the specific needs of the children in their care and felt that planning is fundamental to good practice when caring for children of mixed ages.

...Planners – we use that because when we have so many different children and (have) to meet all their needs (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

However, some childminders felt that planning was not necessarily linked to good practice. For example, some noted how children's needs are difficult to predict and plan for, and thus childminders must be able to respond to a child's needs in an immediate sense and not be reliant on a plan.

...it depends on the child. You can't say, right we're going to do this and if it doesn't... it might not work out the way you thought it through, because all kids are different, you know. One child might come in and they are absolutely wrecked and they don't want to do anything; they just want to sit down and read a wee book or they just want to sit down and put on a DVD (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

...I think you have your activities; you have your autumn and you have your winter and whatever, but it is just as the day comes, you know, you'll think right, we'll do that (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

5.4 Nature of planning

It was apparent during the focus groups that for many childminders, planning was done in a loose and unstructured way. Many of the childminders built long-term flexible plans into

their practice and avoided making plans that were built around shorter time frames, for example on a daily basis.

Childminders felt that this degree of flexibility was desirable so that activities could be moulded around the weather.

You can have a plan, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you are going to go by it. But if you have a plan, at least you know... if it's raining, well we can go and do this or that. So if you've got a plan or a structure in place, you can always pull from different angles on that. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to say, right, eleven o'clock... we are going to do music. And ten o'clock we are doing this. You know you don't have to actually do it all (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Some childminders maintained that flexible planning was essential to facilitate free play.

I have an idea of what I might do during the week; sometimes it doesn't get done, sometimes it does...if they are just playing and having a great old time, I'll just let them do that, because free time and free play allows... sometimes kids don't get enough of that, imagination (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

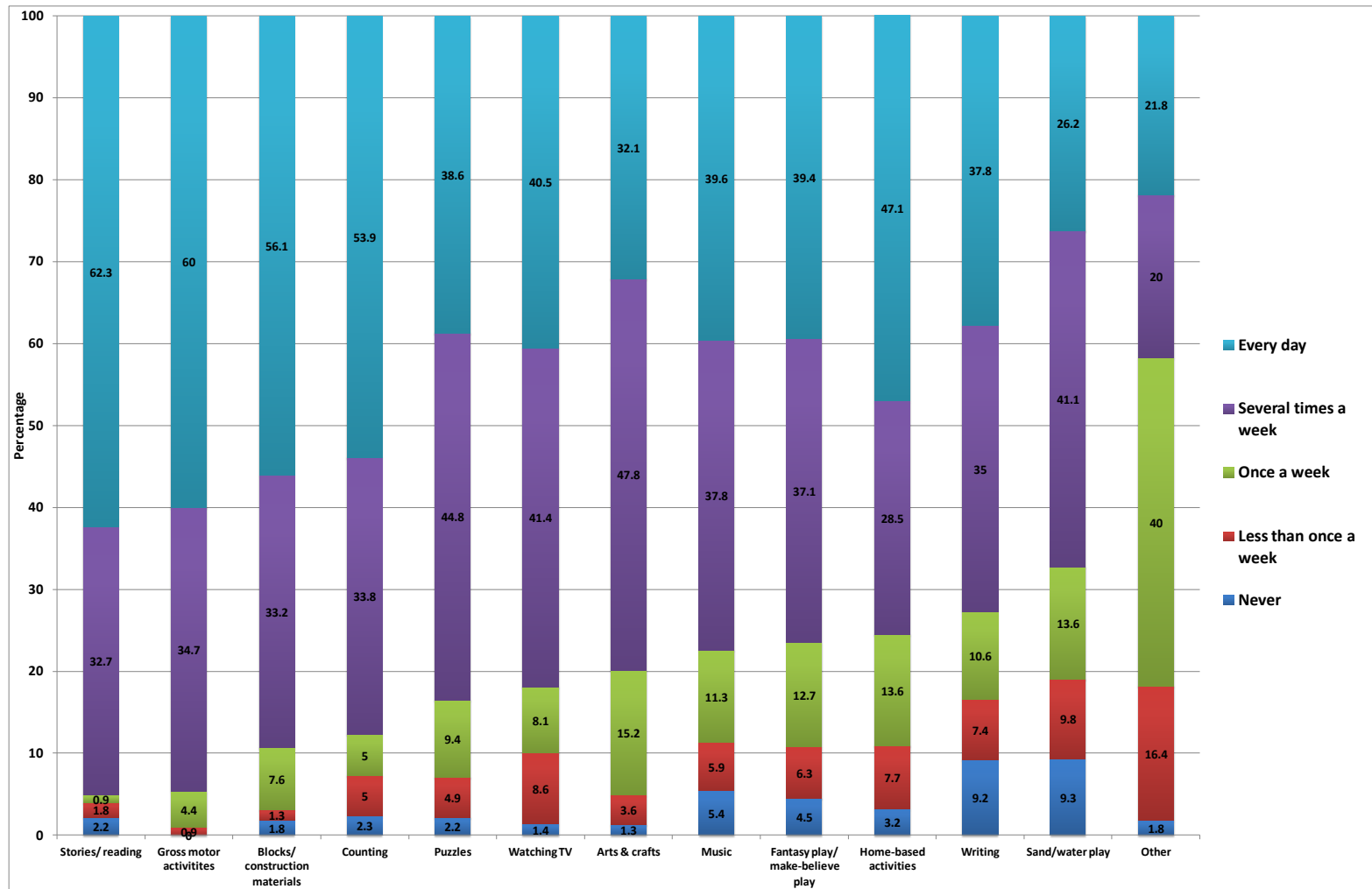
Others commented that aside from planning around the children's fixed routines (e.g. school-runs), activities undertaken in a childminding setting were largely child-led and thus flexible. Childminders felt that an ability to adapt to changing needs and environments were central features of their role.

There's a certain amount of planning I have to do because you've got your school times and that sort of thing, but there's that flexibility...Or I would say to them, we are going out now, what do you fancy doing? (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

5.5 Activities undertaken with children

Childminders surveyed were asked how often children spent time on a range of activities in a typical month and the findings are displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Frequency of activities undertaken by childminders in a typical month



n=230

According to the childminders in this study, children are involved in a very wide range of activities that target various areas of their development on a very regular basis. For example:

- Almost all (95%) participate in gross motor skills activities several times a week which are associated with readiness to learn at later stages of life.
- Early learning activities that develop language skills, number and counting concepts and cognitive abilities also feature highly in the daily and weekly routines of children.
- Creative activities and imaginary play that enables children to make sense of the world and express themselves in verbal and non-verbal ways are also prominent.

Children's activities were explored further using data from the KLT survey which allowed for some comparison of activities undertaken most days at a childminders compared to an after-schools club. Table 11 shows the full range of activities undertaken by the KLT respondents while being cared for by their childminder after school and those who attend an after-schools club, and key findings include:

- In most cases there were very similar responses from those who attended childminders and those who attended after-schools clubs.
- The only activity where there was a notable degree of difference is watching TV which is higher at a childminders (63%) than at an after-schools club (49%).
- There is a difference of almost 22% between what children in the KLT report and what childminders report with regard to watching TV (though the questions asked are not identical and childminders are reporting on a wider age-range of children). KLT indicated 63% watch TV most days whereas 41% of childminders indicated that TV was watched several times a week.

Table 11: Activities KLT respondents undertake at a childminders and after schools setting most days

Activity	Childminders %	After schools %
Watch TV	63	49
Play outside	63	64
Sport	59	58
Play electronic games/ computer	54	46
Homework by myself	53	55
Play with other children	45	51
Homework with help from someone	26	26
Music	25	28
Play by myself	17	21
Dance	12	9
Drama	10	9
Play with board games	6	2
Something else	3	10

Childminders $n=161$; After schools $n=116$

During the children’s interviews and in the KLT survey children also mentioned various activities that they participated in while at their childminders, e.g. baking, playing with their childminder’s pet and playing outside, as depicted in Figure 5.

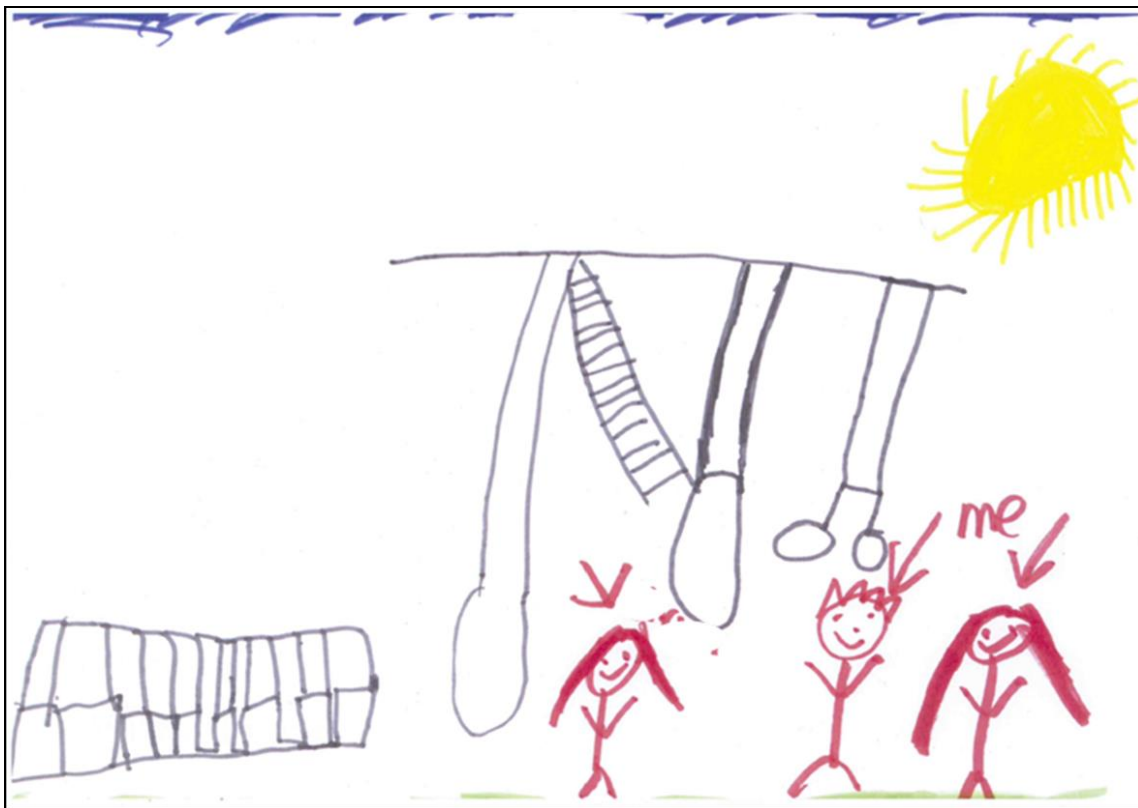
Sometimes we can make buns (Girl, 4, South Eastern HSCT)

I feel happy because when I go to my childminder I get to relax and have fun and play with the guinea pig (KLT respondent)

Some children noted that if they had to permanently leave their childminder they would miss the different games and activities available.

(If my mum told me I wasn't coming to the childminder's anymore) I would be sad because I couldn't get on the trampoline any more (Boy, 6, Western HSCT)

Figure 5: Drawing completed by a participant (aged 8) from the South Eastern HSCT which depicts play with friends in their childminder's garden with a range of activities.



Completing homework was a common activity identified by school-age children who attended a childminder. For example, over half (53%) of KLT respondents stated that they completed their homework at their childminders, while 26% stated they received help from their childminder (see Table 11).

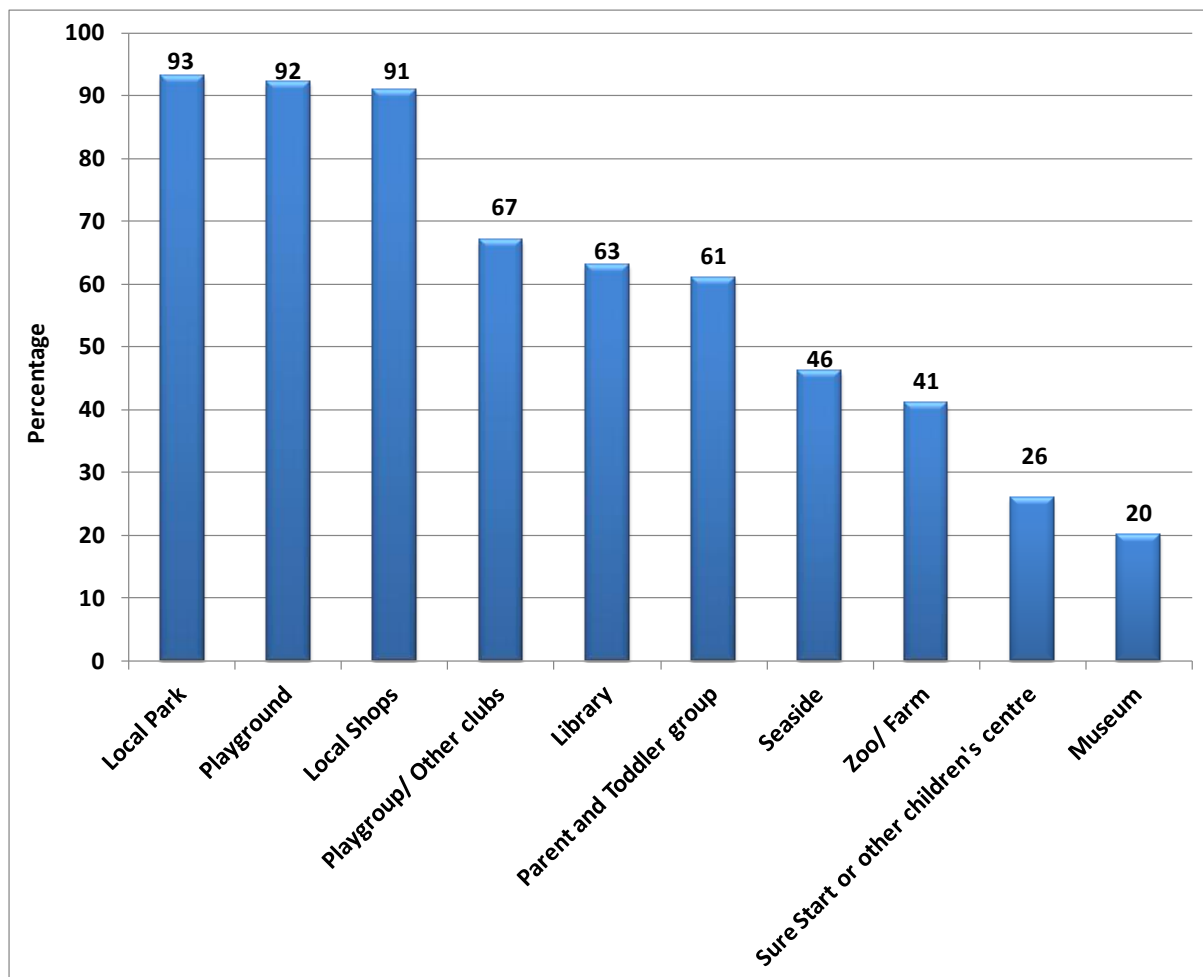
... my childminder is really nice to me and helps me with my homework (KLT respondent)

(I feel happy at my childminders because) ...I like being there and I can get my homework done so I will have more free time (later in the day) (KLT respondent)

5.6 Outings

In the surveys childminders were asked about outings to local amenities (e.g. libraries, parent and toddler groups, playgrounds) or to specific facilities such as zoos, farms or the seaside. Figure 6 illustrates the numerous places visited by childminders with children in the six months prior to the survey being completed.

Figure 6: Places childminders have visited in the last six months



n=222

The places most commonly visited by childminders and the children they looked after were

- Local parks (93%)
- Playgrounds (92%)

- Shops (91%)
- Playgroups (67%)
- Libraries (63%)
- Parent and toddler groups (61%)

During the focus groups, childminders talked about children's enjoyment of outings and how it stimulated areas of their development, e.g. speech and language.

...I would have brought her (autistic child) to the library and you know the way the library has the alphabet out in a big circle... And she adored bus travel...so we went by bus. And if you went into the library she would have just continually went round and round in the circle; so I would have said to her, we are going to jump on your letters for your name. So once I gave her a task... she could still go round in her circle, which she needed to do, but she could stop at the letters and she called them out, and go right round again and stop on her next letter. And when it came to the books she hadn't the patience to sit down, I mean she goes... climbing in, the way the chairs rotate, which was absolutely adorable for her... she was up on the chair constantly, round and round... (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

Well I take mine to childminding groups to get them interacting with other children. I also take them shopping, because I think that's good (Childminder, Western HSCT)

We would join in; you know if there was anything on in the community, we would join in walks or things like that. Take them out as much as we can because they love to get out and they love to get to the library and rhyme time and all that sort of thing because it develops their talking (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Children in the interviews and KLT respondents also commented on how they enjoyed going for outings while being cared for by their childminder.

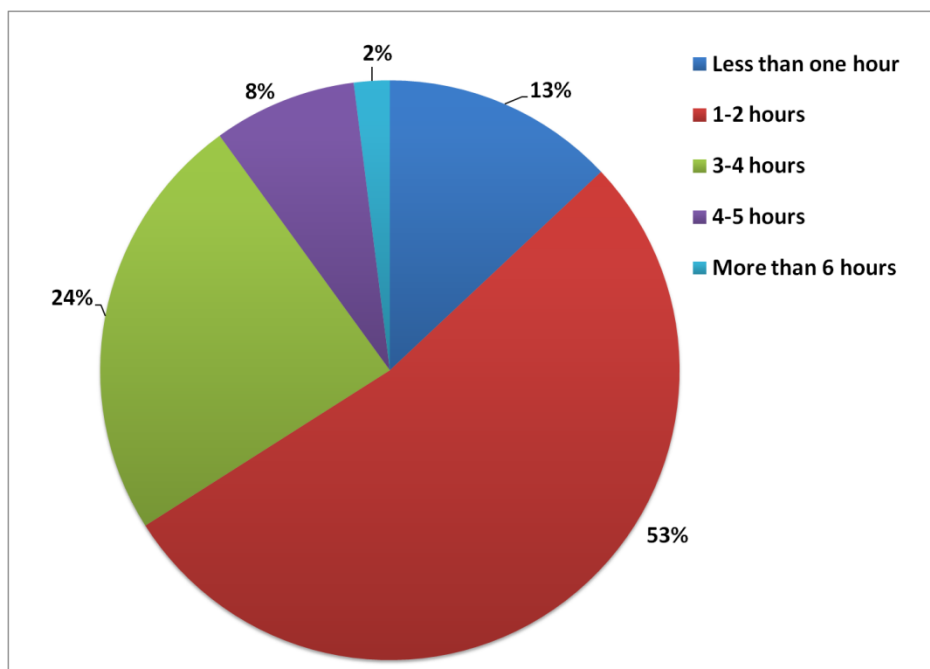
I feel a bit happy because at my childminder... takes us on trips ... to the park... (KLT respondent)

I have been at my childminders since I was very young... we go many places (KLT respondent)

5.7 Free play

As Figure 7 shows over half (53%) of childminders surveyed reported that children in their care were involved in free play for 1-2 hours each day, whilst almost another quarter indicated that children spent 3-4 hours per day in free play (Figure 7).

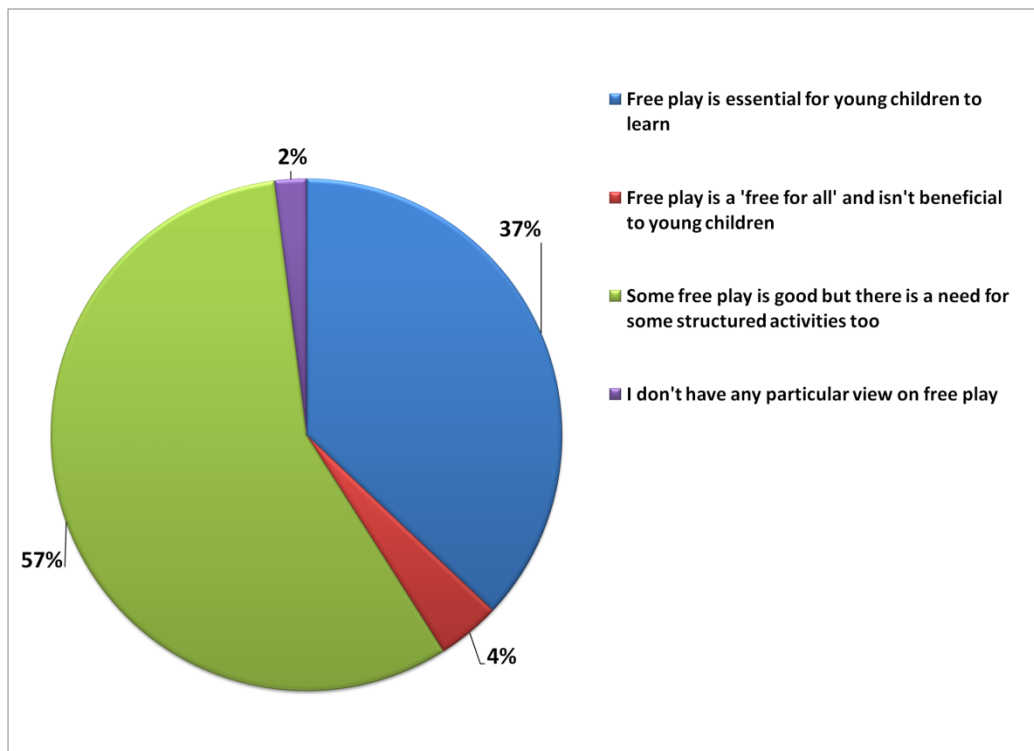
Figure 7: Length of time children spend in free play each day



n=223

The issue of free play evoked mainly positive views from childminders in both the surveys and focus groups. In the survey, the majority of childminders had positive views on free play, with over one-third (37%) of childminders stating that free play is essential for young children to learn and over half (57%) stating that some free play is good but there is a need for some structured activity during the child's day (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Childminders' views on free play



n=224

The positive views on free play were largely reflected in the focus groups, with many childminders also noting that they incorporated free play into their activities. A number of childminders discussed the various benefits of free play. For example, some felt that free play is an important element of a child's early education and stimulates their imagination.

They start playing with something... like if you set something up one way, that you have said, look you just play with what you want... they will build it in a different way, or do something, and you sort of think, oh right! So yeah, they are using their own imagination (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

Some also expressed views that free play helps children develop their social skills and boosts their learning.

It develops their own social skills as well. I just love sitting and just watching them interact with each other. Or even if there is a wee slight conflict, you see if you just sit back and watch how they deal with it. You know you are there if things get out of hand, obviously, but it is surprising the way they can just sort things out for themselves (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

Because that is where they learn; that's endless... mine are all into schools at the minute, or farmers and dogs. That's where they are in organising it, and they are in sorting themselves out and will organise the rest of them. I think that's what they learn from most, when they are left to their own devices (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Some childminders observed that as free play is child-led, it helps children concentrate and is fun. Many commented that in order to facilitate free play, childminders should interfere as little as possible.

I think it is where they learn, because I know if they are off and playing a game and then you step in, the game is over (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Some childminders highlighted many of the above benefits through anecdotes of free play in practice. These are displayed in the boxes below.

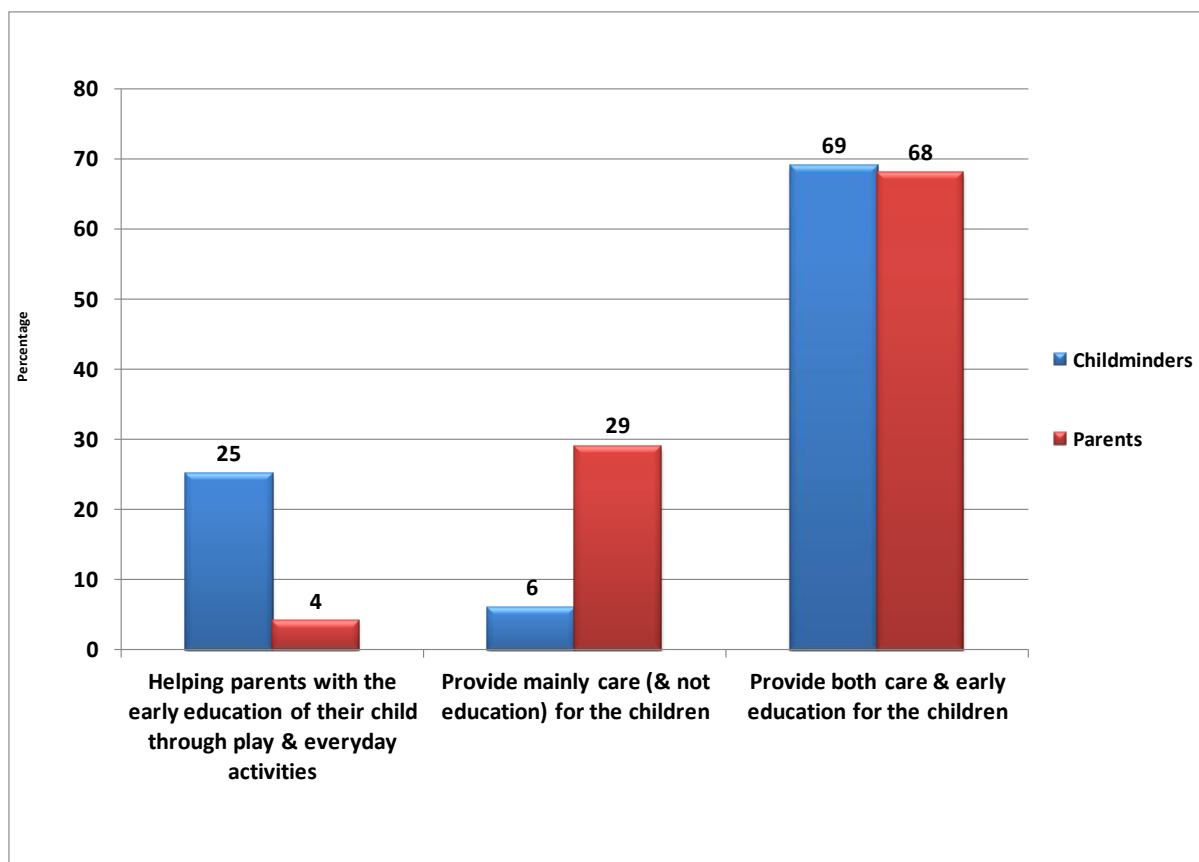
... do you know the big washing tubs that you get to put your washing in. Right, an eleven year old, an eight year old and a three year old getting inside it and pretending that they are in the teacups in Disneyland, spinning each other round in a washing tumbler. ...Those sorts of wee things I think are great, that they can come up with these things; because I wouldn't have looked at that and thought, there's Disneyland, let's go. Do you know what I mean? The simplest things... and give them a box and it's a space ship. Let them make things. I think it's great to have free play... (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

I had a thing today. I couldn't believe it, out the back, they were helping me bring the washing in and I still had one sheet (on the washing line), and they said this was the stage. Now they had been singing on the back and I was sitting watching them and it was amazing, that was the curtain and they were behind the curtain. Now isn't that fantastic? I wouldn't have thought of that...they opened the curtain. And they were... you do your ballet... amazing! Isn't it amazing...(the children involved were...) two four year olds. She was doing her ballet and then he was standing and I was like, right, you do the curtain. Isn't that fantastic? (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

5.8 A childminder's role - care or education, or both?

Both childminders and parents surveyed were asked if they felt that a childminder's role was mainly to provide care, early education or both care and early education. There was clear consensus among parents and childminders on this issue with over two-thirds of parents and childminders viewing a childminder's role as providing *both* care and early education, which reflects Leach's (2011) opinion (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Childminders' and parents' views on the role of a childminder in the care and early education of children



Childminders n=223; parents n=259

There was a difference of opinion among the remaining one-third with most childminders viewing their role as early education whereas parents viewed their role as primarily carers.

During the parent and childminder focus groups the participants were informed about the survey findings displayed in Figure 9 and the role of a childminder was explored in more

depth. Echoing the views of Leach (2011), many childminders felt their role involved providing both care and early education to children in their care, and noted that these aspects were completely interdependent.

You are educating them by letting them play; that's where they are learning, through play, and that's where ... you know your sand play, your water play with the children. That is an education (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Furthermore, several childminders were surprised that there was not a higher proportion of childminders and parents who stated in the survey that the role of a childminder involved providing both care and early education. Some offered explanations to why these proportions were not higher. For example, some suggested that survey participants perceived early education as an activity that occurs only in a formal pre-school or compulsory school setting.

They (parents) probably saw education as a structured, formal setting that maybe we aren't necessarily doing, but at the same time we are teaching these kids life skills. We are the absolute core to the under sevens... It's not formal education; you are not sitting down and saying, right now we are going to do this, now we are going to read. And you are not sitting in the classroom situation. But...the kids are learning all the time (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Other explanations suggested that parents are simply unaware that early education happens in a childminding setting.

Some parents probably think when they are sending the child to the childminder that they are just there for care. They don't spend the day with you to see what actually you do do, unless you say, look this is what I do... (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Parents' views were more mixed about the role of a childminder. Some, viewed early education as an important element of a childminder's role, while others did not and considered it important only in more formal educational settings.

**...And I certainly would want a childminder to be stimulating my children intellectually...
(Parent, Northern HSCT)**

I wouldn't be so bothered about the education side of it. See as long as they are taken care of. Because they are going to get all that anyway in nursery and school, you know, like I wouldn't be too worried about teaching them anything (Parent, Northern HSCT)

Other parents noted that while they are aware that early education does happen in a childminding setting, it is not something they had expected from their childminder when they initially decided to use one.

I know that mine (childminder) does provide early education, but it is not something I necessarily expected from her (the childminder) (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

5.9 Summary: childminding practice

- Childminders in this research had more mixed views than McGaha et al., (2011) and Child Action Inc (undated) in relation to planning: some indicated that it was an important element of childminding practice. However, many felt that planning needed to be flexible to meet the needs of children, cope with the demands of the weather, older children's routines (e.g. school collections) and facilitate free play and child-led activities.
- Childminders reported that children in their care were involved in a wide range of activities to stimulate various development areas. The most common of these were gross motor skills activities, activities that develop language skills, early literacy and numeracy and cognitive abilities, creative activities and imaginary play.
- In the interviews and KLT survey children expressed their enjoyment and happiness in participating in a wide range of activities at their childminders. These activities included baking, watching TV and playing computer games. Notably, children were less likely to report watching TV in an after-schools club than at a childminders.
- Many children enjoyed playing outside at their childminders. Key outdoor activities included football and playing with garden toys (e.g. trampolines).
- Completing homework also featured prominently for school-going children in the KLT survey and interviews as an activity undertaken at their childminders.
- Childminders supplemented children's experience to aid their development by using low-cost or no-cost facilities outside of their home when caring for children, including local parks, playgrounds and libraries.
- Childminders valued free play and reported incorporating early education and learning into their practice through the provision of free play. Free play was also seen as beneficial in encouraging and enabling children's imagination.
- For the most part both parents and childminders believed that their role involved providing both care and early education. Childminders stressed that caring and educating are interdependent aspects of their role.

6.0 Chapter 6: Findings - quality in childminding practice

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from all of the surveys, focus groups and interviews on the topic of quality in childminding practice. It specifically addresses the following questions:

- What defines quality in childminding practice?
- How quality of care in a childminding setting compares to other childcare settings
- How the features of quality influence parental choice regarding childcare
- How the professional status of childminders compares to practitioners in other forms of childcare

6.2 Features of quality

A range of features that demonstrate quality, which were used in a study of childminding in England (Fauth et al, 2011), were explored with both childminders and parents.

In the surveys parents and childminders rated a number of aspects of quality on a scale of 1-10 where 1 indicated that the aspect was not at all important and 10 indicated that it was very important. Table 12 details the results of this exercise.

Table 12: Childminders' and parents' views on the importance of features of quality childcare provision

Features of Quality of Care (ranked 1 10)	Childminders	Parents
Providing a safe physical environment	9.9	9.9
Making children feel loved	9.9	9.7
Meeting individual children's needs	9.8	9.4
Helping children develop and learn	9.8	9.5
Communicating with parents about their children's development	9.7	9.3
Teaching children to get along with other children	9.5	9.4
Caring for children in a home environment	9.4	8.8
Providing children with opportunities to make choices	9.3	8.7
Providing affordable care	9.2	8.8
Experience in looking after children	9	9.3
Preparing children for school	8.9	8.2
Sharing parents' values about child rearing	8.9	8.9
Qualifications and training in childcare	7.8	8.2
Teaching of cultural or religious values	6.9	5

Childminders n=228; parents n=258

Notably, all of the above features of childcare provision were ranked as very important by childminders and parents with the exception on behalf of parents regarding 'Teaching of cultural or religious values' (with an average rating of 5).

In the focus group discussions, parents and childminders provided more insight into how some of these quality of care features related to childminders' everyday practice.

6.2.1 Relationship with parents

As displayed in Table 12, childminders' interaction with parents was rated highly as a quality of care feature by both childminders and parents in the survey findings. For example, *'Communicating with parents about their children's development'* was given an average rating of 9.7 and 9.3 by childminders and parents respectively and *'Sharing parents' values about child rearing'* was given an average rating of 8.9 by both childminders and parents.

In the focus groups, childminders discussed at length the importance of their relationship with parents in providing a quality service. However parents were less likely to emphasise this issue in their focus groups. Childminders provided information on why their interaction and relationship with parents is important to the quality they provide in their practice. Many noted that through their interaction with parents, they can establish a child's routine and parents' care expectations. Some also commented that it is important to meet with parents before a care agreement is reached as this provides childminders with an opportunity to deduce if a parent's expectations are compatible with the service they offer.

I would ask about routine more to reassure the parent, first. Say it was a baby, or a child under a year and a half. I would sort of say, what is the pattern that you have had for the last eight months at home with the child? What is the pattern you would like to have, or this is the pattern I have. I would put them down in the morning or maybe a nap in the evening (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

For me it's the match. If I don't feel that I can communicate or feel a link with that parent straight away, I won't consider it...I've found in my experience that the children could be wonderful and the parent and you, there's something missing there and it doesn't work (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

For childminders, maintaining a good relationship with parents is not without its challenges, and many spoke of the difficulties in balancing the personal and professional aspects of the relationship.

...that's hard too because you've sort of built up a relationship with people and you do have to realise it is a business, but sometimes it's really hard because like I say, you get tears and stuff and you think... what other business would be dealing with this? (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

She (a parent) was deciding what she was paying me, it wasn't the other way around. And no matter how much you would tell her that this wasn't the way things were going, she was just setting the money on the mantelpiece (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

A number of childminders felt that these challenges could be overcome by establishing boundaries at the beginning of a working relationship between the childminder and parent. In some cases, childminders did this by developing a contract.

I think if you set your boundaries and you work your contract at the very beginning and set your standards as to what's going to happen... cause you can have some that you think... I'm glad I said that to them at the start, because you know they would have pushed it. But once they are set and you stick to it, you know, that's it and they know where they stand, and then everything's fine (Childminder, Western HSCT)

I think in your first meeting it is important that both the parent and the childminder are honest and you tell them what you are going to do and you let them tell you what they expect, so you get a good contract... (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

6.2.2 Quality interactions with children

As presented in Table 12, features of quality of care around childminders' interaction with children were rated highly by both parents and childminders, for example '*Making children feel loved*', '*Meeting individual children's needs*' and '*Helping children develop and learn*' all achieved an average rating of 9.4 or higher for childminders and parents.

In the focus groups this area was more likely to be expanded upon by parents than childminders with many noting how a good quality childminder should provide a service and facilities that are child-centred and offer a wide range of activities to children whilst engaging in these interactions with children.

... I mean you would expect... a warm, caring environment and put the children's needs as their main priority, including their safety, their emotional needs and their social needs (Parent, Northern HSCT)

...if they are going to just stay in the house all day, I wouldn't view that as quality as such, because you would be just housebound... (the childminder should be) doing different activities, taking them out (Parent, Southern HSCT)

View the facilities as well... Outdoors and indoors, the facilities for the kids (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

6.2.3 Childcare training and qualifications

Despite qualifications and training in childcare being given an average rating of 7.8 and 8.2 by childminders and parents respectively, as Table 12 suggests, both childminders and parents rated other quality of care features as more important. The focus group discussions provided insight as to why childminders and parents held these views. For example, many parents felt that a childminder's reputation, motherly experience and values were more important features of quality of care than childcare training and qualifications.

Because my childminder was a family friend, I knew that I could trust her. I knew that she had brought up her own two girls and that she was well known and came well recommended even though it wasn't through just my sister. But I wasn't looking necessarily for a whole list of qualifications (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

...attitude (and) values, are much more important than actual formal qualifications, you know. And I say that, my first childminder was trained and had her NNEB, you know, and she was very dynamic within the childminding circle and all that... but it wasn't something that I sought, actively sought, if you know what I mean (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

In addition, some childminders noted that holding specific childcare qualifications and training does not guarantee good quality childminding practice. There was also evidence to suggest that some parents did not rate training and qualifications as highly as other quality of care features due to concerns that childminders might charge higher prices for their service if they held childcare qualifications.

The qualifications don't make you a better childminder. I'm not saying you don't learn from doing the courses, because you do, you always learn something, but I don't think that it makes you a better childminder (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

They will also raise their costs. Once you have qualifications, understandably so, then you expect to be paid better as well (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

While many childminders and parents felt that childcare training and qualifications were not as important as other quality of care features, many did express strong views towards the need for childminders to hold basic qualifications, e.g. first aid and child protection.

Child protection and first aid; I think they are the most relevant courses we do and are very necessary (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

...as long as she (childminder) had the kind of basics ... as long as she had the general child protection stuff and the first aid; they would be the most important ones for me... (Parent, Western HSCT)

Despite the majority of childminders stating that childcare training and qualifications were of slightly less importance than other features of quality of care, many did identify benefits of holding these. This was reinforced by the high proportion (85%) that held the NICMA Quality First Accreditation. The majority of these childminders (81%) felt this course had been of benefit to them. In addition, as presented in Chapter 4, over half of childminders held childcare qualifications despite having no obligation to do so, which suggests that many see benefits in completing these.

The benefit of holding specific childcare training and qualifications, including the NICMA Quality First Accreditation, was explored further in the focus groups and survey, with many childminders commenting that parents have more confidence in a childminder's practice if they are aware that the childminder is taking steps to develop professionally.

(Completing the NICMA Quality First Accreditation) gained parents' confidence (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Having this accreditation shows parents that I am willing to learn (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

A number of childminders also noted their practice was enhanced as a result of completing childcare training and qualifications.

(The NICMA Quality First Accreditation) gave me lots of ideas and confidence in my setting (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT, survey participant)

It has made me look at my goals and encourages me towards good practice (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

It helps me provide a better quality of care and practice (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

6.2.4 Additional quality of care features

During the parent and childminder focus groups, a number of additional features of quality of care were identified, and one of these included flexibility. A number of childminders and parents pointed out that flexibility was a quality of care feature inherent to a childminder's role as it enabled childminders to respond to and meet the needs of children.

And I suppose flexible, just on what the parent wants, whether it be pick up times or... I think I had went and seen a nursery too, at the time, and they had said about, oh we give you the feedback and all this. So then I said to my childminder, and she said she would do it, even though she hadn't done it before, and give me like a wee written booklet for my son. So the one I went with is very flexible in terms of my wants... (Parent, Southern HSCT)

... you can find a childminder to suit whatever your needs are. Some people may not be willing to work early or later on, but you will find someone who can accommodate you (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

An additional quality of care feature identified by childminders was their adherence to childminding policy and procedures. For example, a number noted that policies and procedures provided evidence that a childminder was operating legitimately, and that by passing inspections childminders can demonstrate that their practice is of a sufficient quality.

And also showing your policies and procedures (to parents), sort of the professional side of it, demonstrates that it's not just somebody sitting at home doing this (and) that it is a professional (service) (Childminder, Western HSCT)

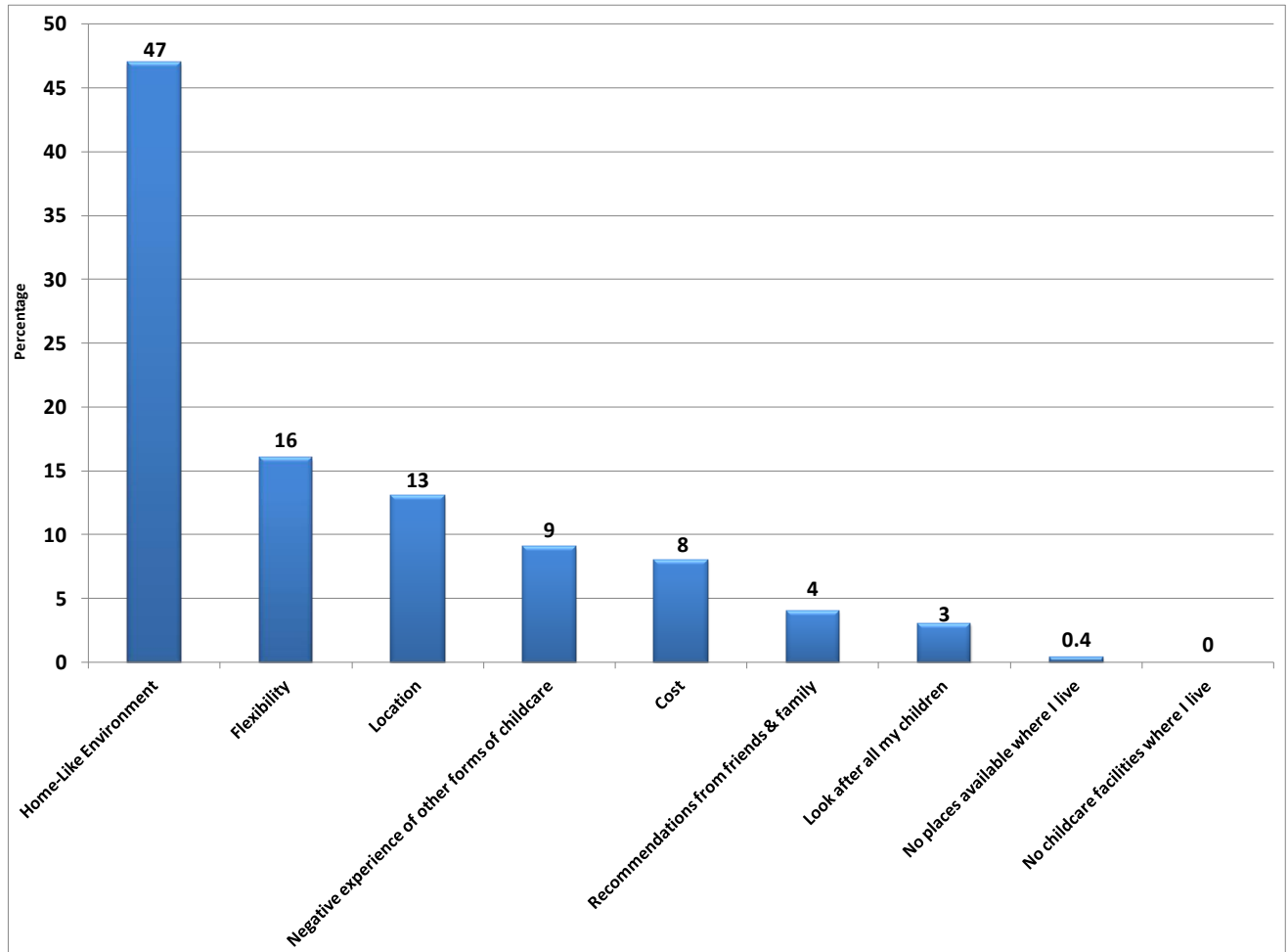
I think the inspection... and the involvement of the Early Years Team ensures that there is a standard (Childminder, South Eastern, HSCT)

6.3 Parents' motivation for choosing a childminder over other settings

In the survey, parents were asked to identify their primary reason for choosing a childminder over other forms of childcare settings. The homely environment (47%) offered at a childminding setting was the most popular reason that motivated parents to choose a childminders over other childcare settings (see Figure 10). The second most popular reason

was flexibility (16%) and this was closely followed by location (13%). Cost was the fifth most popular motivating factor with 8% of parents choosing this.

Figure 10: Parents most important reason for choosing a childminder over other forms of childcare



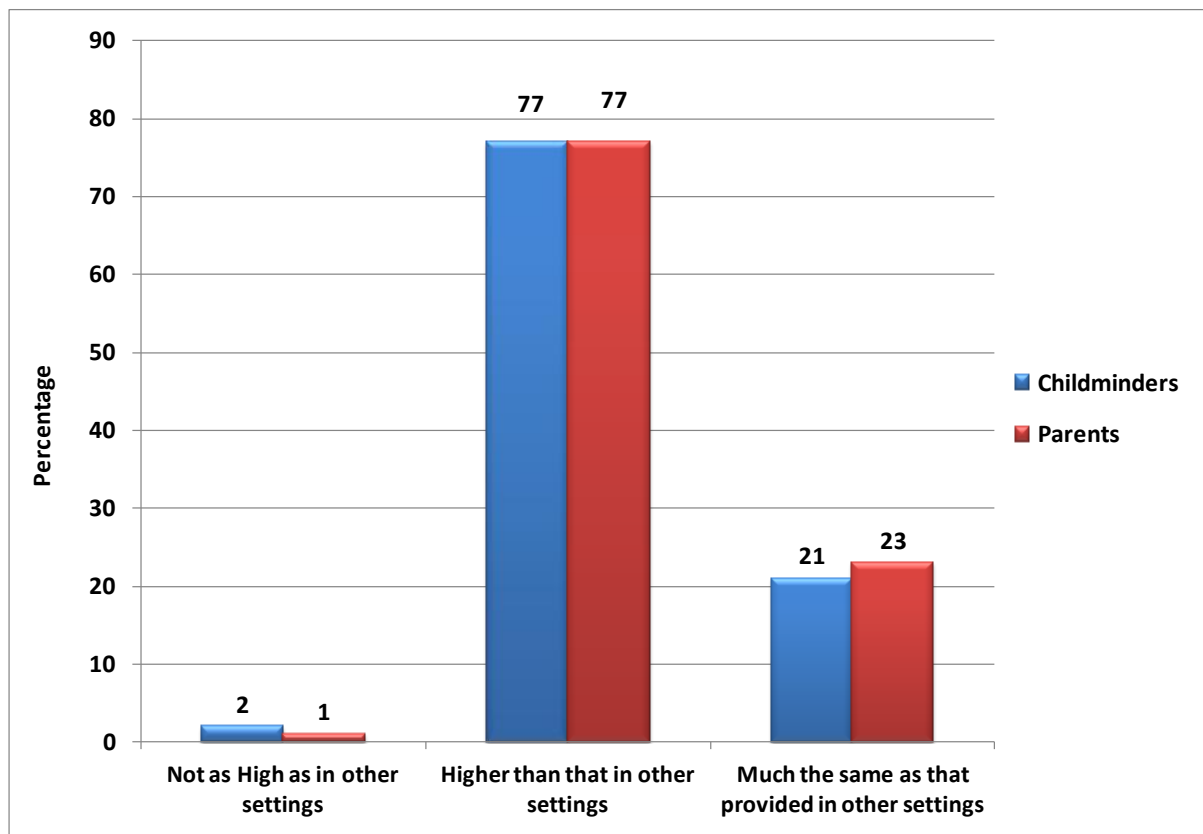
n=256

6.4 Quality of care compared to other childcare settings

Both childminders and parents in the surveys and focus groups were asked about the quality of care provided by childminders compared to other childcare settings.

In the surveys there was a high degree of consensus among both childminders and parents on this issue with over three-quarters (77%) of childminders and parents stating that the quality of care provided in a childminder's home is higher than that in other settings, as Figure 11 illustrates. The majority of childminders (72%) who had experience of working in another childcare or teaching setting concurred with the opinions above regarding quality.

Figure 11: Childminders' and parents' views on the quality of care provided in a childminders compared to other care settings



Childminders n=223; parents n=258

In the survey and focus groups, childminders and parents provided reasons on why they felt the quality of care offered at a childminders was higher than in other childcare settings. One of the most popular reasons expressed was the home-from-home setting and the

loving family environment that is offered at a childminders. This finding echoes the views presented in Figure 10, where almost half (47%) of parents stated that they chose a childminder over other childcare settings because of the homely environment. During the children's interviews, they frequently expressed how they liked the homely feel of their childminders.

I did want to move from the crèche situation to a childminder because I did want the home environment, and I did sort of get a sense that this (crèche) is a bit like a school for a very young child. And I wanted something a bit more homely (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

A childminder offers a different setting to a day nursery and it is a home based setting but I feel we offer just as good care if not better than a nursery as we can provide a more realistic setting to everyday life. Also siblings can be placed together in the same setting with different age groups (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT, survey participant)

When we go to (childminder's name) it feels like going home (Boy, 6, Northern HSCT)

Childminders and parents also reasoned that the quality of care at a childminders is higher than in other settings because of the one-on-one attention that children receive, and how care can be tailored to meet children's specific needs as a result of this interaction.

I personally prefer a registered childminder because it is one person; she gets to know your child so well, there is not a turnover of staff, it is not somebody different taking them to the toilet each time and they develop a relationship with that childminder (Parent, Western HSCT)

... the relationship that we build up with the kids... I had one wee boy that was being bullied that nobody picked up on, but I knew every day when he came out of school and just by his general attitude that he wasn't happy... and I sort of said to his Mum, I think there could be something wrong at school. If I hadn't known that child as well as I did, it wouldn't have been picked up. And it certainly wouldn't have been picked up on in nursery (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Parents also noted that the personal bond between a childminder and children in their care is likely to be stronger than that in other settings. This bond was evidenced by a number of children.

The more personal touch of one mother in a home with a group of small children was as close to what my girls would experience at home with me (Parent, Northern HSCT)

(I am happy at my childminder's)... because my childminder treats me like I am her own (KLT respondent)

Because I like my childminder... and sometimes I love her (Girl, 4, South Eastern HSCT)

Linked to the above point, many parents and childminders felt that the more motherly form of care offered by a childminder and their maturity linked to quality of care being higher than that offered than that in other childcare settings.

...as a mature person with experience, they (childminders) can sort of tell if there is an issue, you know, medically or whatever, or physically wrong with your child (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

And it is only until you have been in the situation, maybe reared your own or started to rear your own, that you have any idea what is required. So I know my childminder has children my kids' ages and older and she has been through all the personal needs, social needs, homework needs (Parent, Northern HSCT)

Echoing the findings presented in Figure 10, a number of childminders and parents felt that the flexible service offered by a childminder resulted in a higher quality of care because flexibility helped ensure that the needs of parents and children were met by the childminder.

... a childminder I felt was more flexible and would take them if they had a sore throat. In fact my last childminder would have taken them if their arm was falling off, you know (Parent, Northern HSCT)

Childminders are more flexible to parents' needs and thus mould around their lifestyle and how that can change (Childminder, Northern HSCT, survey participant)

A number of respondents noted that childminders offered continuity of care (one person caring for the same child) in their practice and there was evidence from the children's interviews that they benefited from this consistency.

A childminder provides consistency in comparison to multiple carers in crèche setting (Parent, Western HSCT, survey participant)

One of the ones I looked after, I had her... from she was six weeks old. You know most of the children I have had, I've had right from birth, so you don't get that in a day nursery. One person... (in a day nursery) they are all different staff (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

I feel happy because I know who looks after me when school finishes (KLT respondent)

6.5 Professional status of childminders compared to practitioners in other childcare settings

Despite the findings above on the high quality of care perceived to be provided by childminders as opposed to other settings, it was felt by both childminders and parents that childminders did not have the same professional status as other childcare professionals. There were a number of reasons for this, and a common view expressed by parents was that childminders are not required to hold the same level of qualifications as other childcare professionals and do not offer a specialised service to children based on age.

I think the day nursery they have to do like NVQs, they are maybe more creative, more artistic. They are more specialised or something in each of the classrooms, in each of the age groups. And as I say, they seem to have a lot more time to focus on activity, whereas a childminder just doesn't because she has to be all things (Parents, Belfast HSCT)

Others offered that there was a perception amongst the public (who do not use childminders) that childminding is a low skilled profession, and is a way for 'stay at home mums' to make money.

I think probably people's opinion of a childminder is... unless you are using them... that's an easy job. Stay at home all day, or you drive about in the car or you can go to tots (mother and toddler groups) (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

I think most childminders are doing it when their own children are young and I would say no (childminder's status is not the same as other childcare professionals) (Parent, Southern HSCT)

...people think you can pop off shopping whenever you feel like it, or go away for a day (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

In addition, some felt that the existence of unregistered childminders was having a detrimental effect on the status of the childminding sector in Northern Ireland.

(Childminders' status is not the same as other childcare professionals)... probably because you do get unregistered childminders too, that kind of takes away from that professional kind of status (Parent, Southern HSCT)

Unregistered childminders give registered ones a bad name (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

6.6 Summary: quality in childminding practice

- Quality in a childminding setting is a multi-faceted concept comprising of the provision of a safe physical environment, childminder's interactions with children, childminder-parent interactions, flexibility and childminders' adherence to policy and procedures. In the focus groups, childminders were more likely to state that the relationship they have with a parent is fundamental to providing a high quality service and parents were more likely to point towards the physical setting offered by a childminder and the child-centred elements of their practice.
- Childcare training and qualifications are not of primary importance to parents and childminders in regards to the quality of childminding practice, though they were felt to be of benefit in terms of continuous professional development.
- Parents and childminders stated that the quality of care offered in a childminding setting was higher than that offered in other childcare settings. The reasons for this included: the unique home-like environment offered; the development of secure attachments and; individualised care and flexibility.
- These findings support the views of Leach (2011) who maintains that the 'ordinary-ness' of the home environment and its everyday activities has a bigger positive impact on children compared to more structured settings. Leach (2011) attributes this impact to secure attachments between the childminder and child, and there was evidence of these attachments in childminding settings.
- Parents' primary reason for choosing childminding over other forms of childcare was the homely environment offered.
- It was felt that childminders do not hold the same professional status as other childcare professionals. Reasons for these views included: childminders are viewed as stay-at-home mums; childminding is considered an easy job; childminders are not required to hold any specific childcare training or qualifications and; the existence of unregistered childminders undermines the professionalism of childminding.

7.0 Chapter 7: Findings - vertical grouping in childminding practice

The topic of vertical grouping was explored in the surveys, focus groups and interviews with childminders, parents and children. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, vertical grouping is the grouping of children of different ages within childcare. This means that infants, preschool children and school going children are all cared for within the same room or space, in a similar manner to a naturally occurring family. Vertical grouping tends to be a unique feature of a childminding setting as children of different ages can be cared for together. This compares to other childcare settings such as day nurseries or crèches where children of different ages tend to be separated. This chapter focuses on the benefits and challenges of vertical grouping identified in this research.

7.1 The benefits of vertical grouping

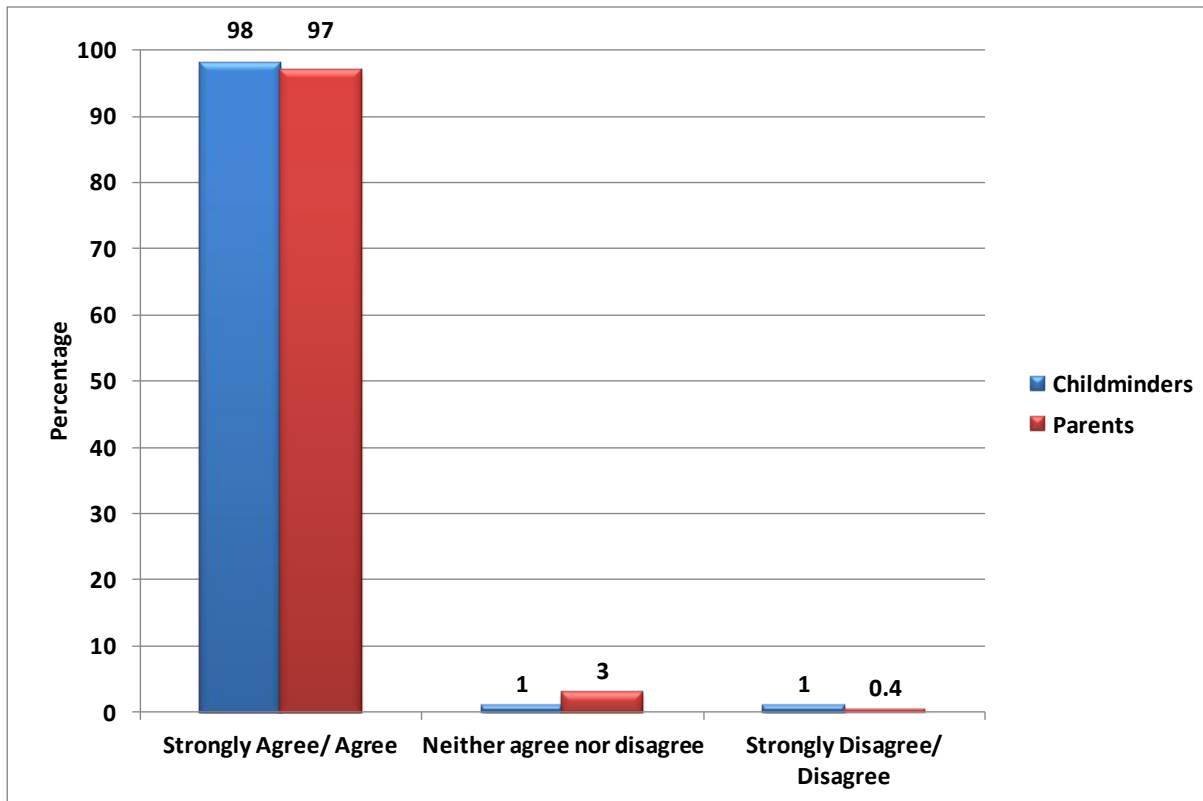
In the focus groups both childminders and parents identified a number of benefits of vertical grouping, and many of these were reflected in the survey findings. The benefits included the following:

- Promoting children's learning
- The home-like environment
- Positive role models
- Developing social skills
- Promoting friendship

7.1.1 Promoting Children's Learning

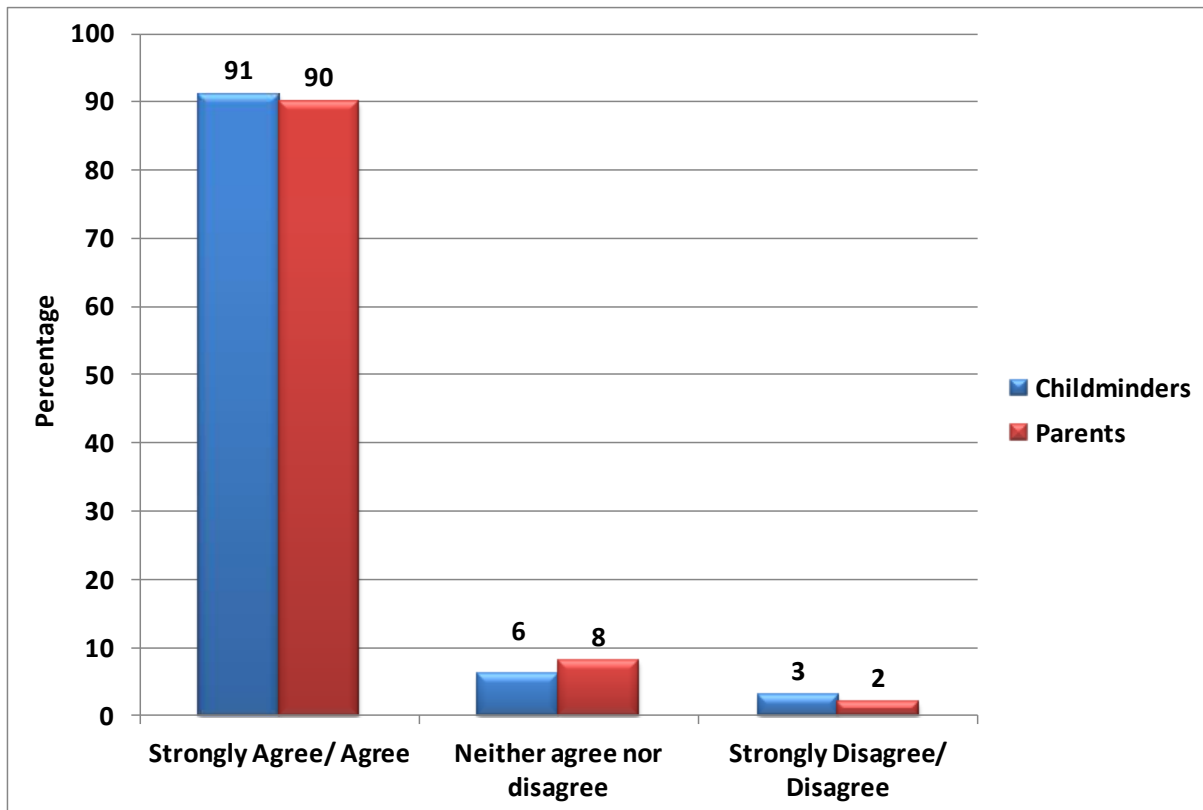
In the survey the majority of childminders (98%) and parents (97%) felt that learning was a benefit of mixed age placements (Figure 12) and that younger children learned through participating in everyday tasks with their childminder (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Younger children learn a lot from older children (e.g. attempting more difficult tasks as they try to imitate older children)*



Childminders n=229; parents n=261

Figure 13: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Younger children get to see and participate in everyday activities (e.g. shopping) from which they learn, which doesn't tend to happen in other childcare settings (e.g. day nurseries)*



Childminders n=229; parents n=261

These views were echoed in the focus groups with many parents and childminders noting that mixed age placements promoted younger children’s learning through their interaction with older children. Some also felt that this interaction promotes the development of skills that are associated with readiness to learn.

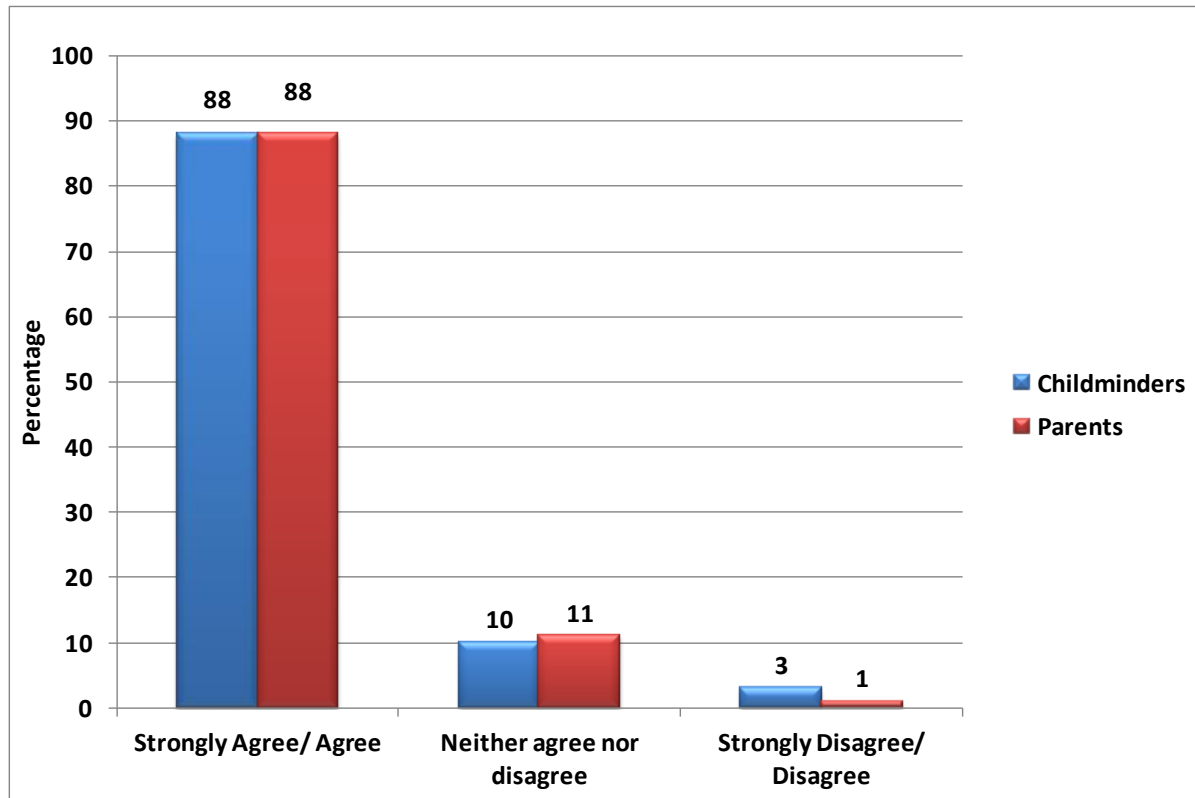
I’ve a wee three year old up at the table in his high chair, and he’ll say, where’s my homework? I have to go and get him sheets and I draw him lines out and I say, now you do an L, you know...do his name. And he’s just like... I’ll go and do a dragon, and I’ll say, right OK, you do a dragon. But that’s learning him how to hold a wee pen, his wee fine motor skills and stuff. So he is happy (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

...whenever you are at a childminders there is maybe other kids coming in from school as well, they are learning from the other children, they are learning to respect smaller children. The smaller ones idolise the big ones and they copy what they are doing (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

7.1.2 Home-Like Environment

In the survey findings a high proportion of childminders (88%) and parents (88%) stated that they felt the natural family setting of a childminders is a benefit of a mixed age placement (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *It is more like a natural family compared to settings where children are with same-age peers*



Childminders n=229; parents n=261

These views were expanded upon in the focus groups with many parents and childminders noting that children benefit from being cared for in a mixed age setting because it is similar to a family setting and therefore feels more natural. They also benefit because siblings can be cared for together. This latter point was emphasised by children in the KLT survey.

It probably makes it more like a natural family setting anyway, to have a range of ages in there (Parent, Northern HSCT)

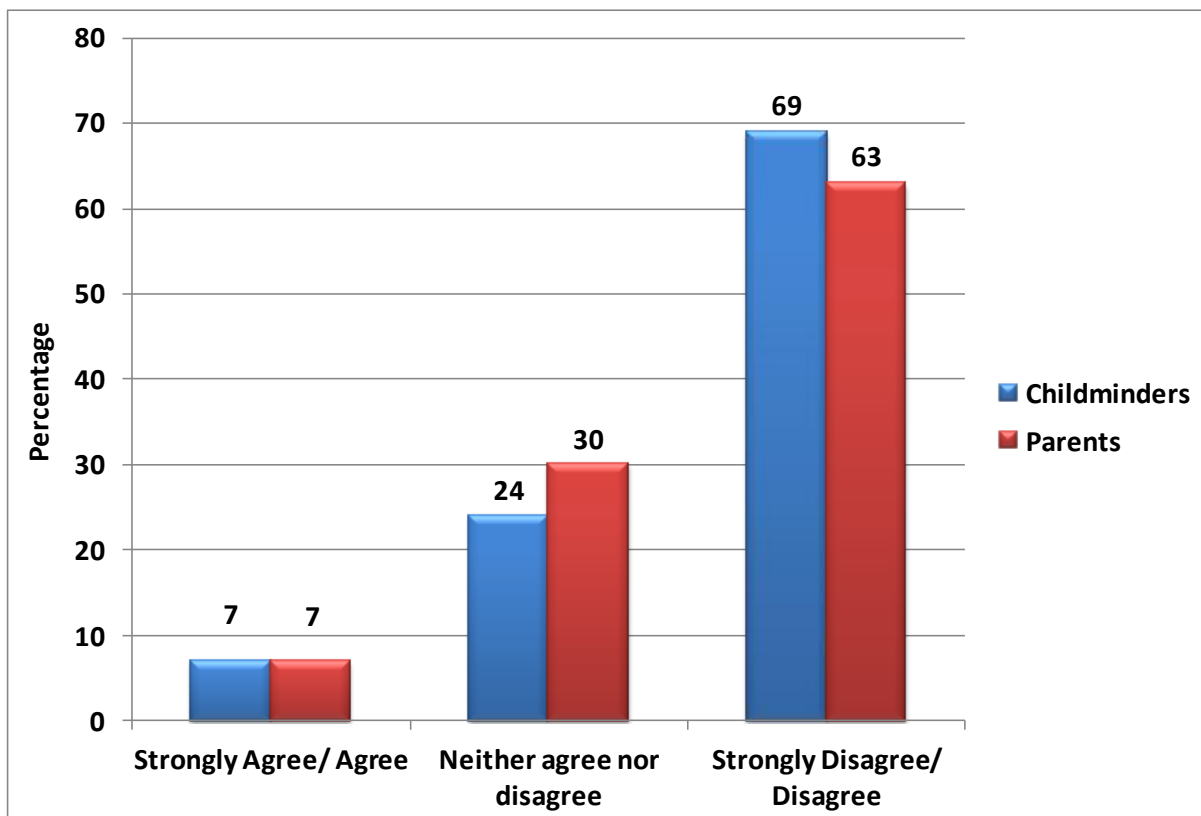
... (siblings) they are together, so it's lovely because they are together all day long, which is lovely, because they get so excited (when observing their younger sibling). She's rolling over, watch! (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

I feel comfortable because my childminder also looks after my brother and sister (KLT respondent).

7.1.3 Positive Role models

In the survey findings, many childminders and parents stated that they did not view the bullying of younger children by older children as an issue in a childminding setting (93% of both groups either disagreed or neither agreed or disagreed about the occurrence of bullying in a childminding setting - see Figure 15).

Figure 15: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Older children try to bully younger children*



Childminders n=228; parents n=260

The positive impact older children can have on younger children was further reinforced in the focus groups, with parents and childminders commenting on how mixed age placements mean that younger children can have role models in the form of older children and, as a result, older children learn how to take responsibility.

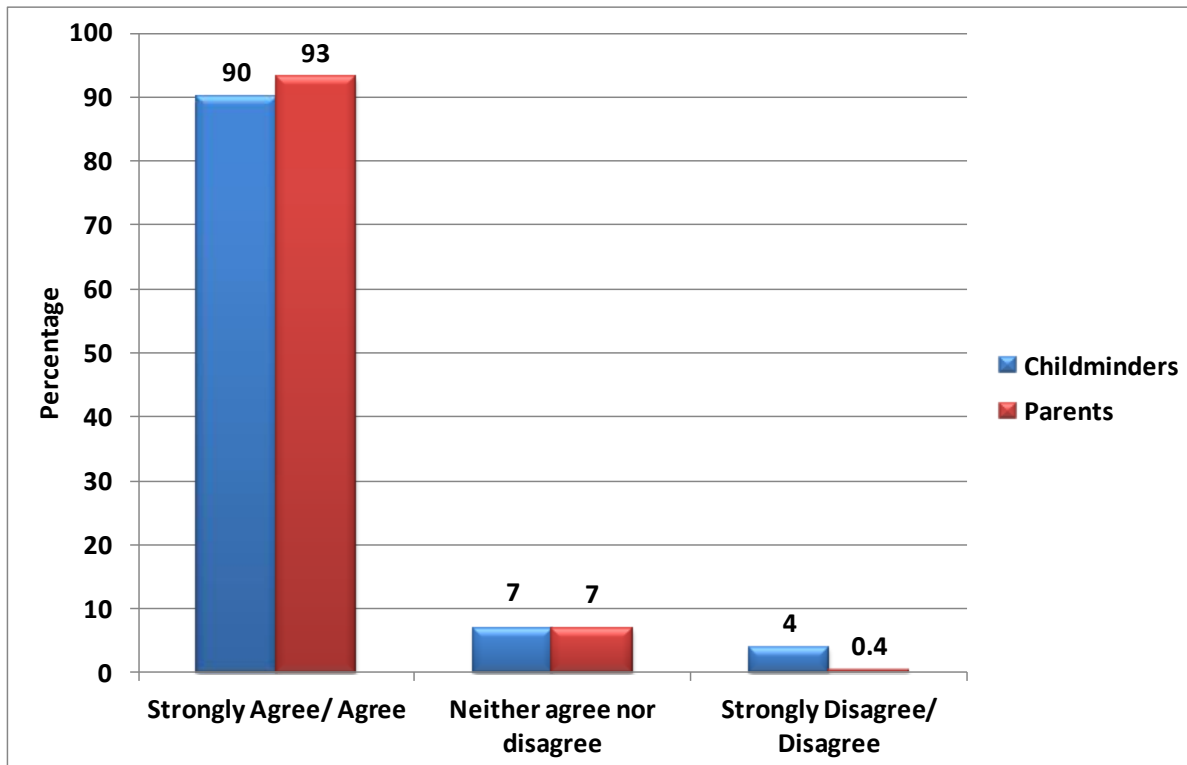
I mean Lucy talks about Zoe and Jane all the time. They are like big sisters (to Lucy), because she is with them three full days... after school, and loves them, and I definitely think it has benefitted her (Lucy). You know they believe in taking the dog round the block... one is in P7 and... put(s) Lucy in her pram and they will take (Lucy) out a wee walk, and she just idolises them. So it is a good thing as far as I can see (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Max always talks about the older children, in particular there is a wee boy (Joe) and a wee girl (Annabel)... I think she is about six and the wee boy is about five, and I think... (Annabel) would read to him (Max) and play with him. And then I think he really looks up to (Joe) and sort of copies a lot of things that he does. And (the childminder) would say that the bigger ones look after the wee ones as well, and I suppose they can help sort out disputes, you know, fighting over toys and things like that. It is just a different sort of perspective for them, instead of all of them the same age and at the same sort of level of development (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

7.1.4 Developing Social Skills

An additional benefit of mixed age placements that was identified in the survey findings and focus groups was the development of social skills. For example, in the survey findings a majority of childminders (90%) and parents (93%) stated that older children learn important social skills, such as patience, empathy and leadership, as a result of their interaction with younger children (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Older children learn important social skills from being with younger children (patience, empathy, leadership)*



Childminders n=229; parents n=261

Following on from the previous point in section 7.1.3 regarding positive role models, in the focus groups childminders and parents noted how mixed age placements help older children appreciate and have a greater understanding of the behaviours and views of younger children.

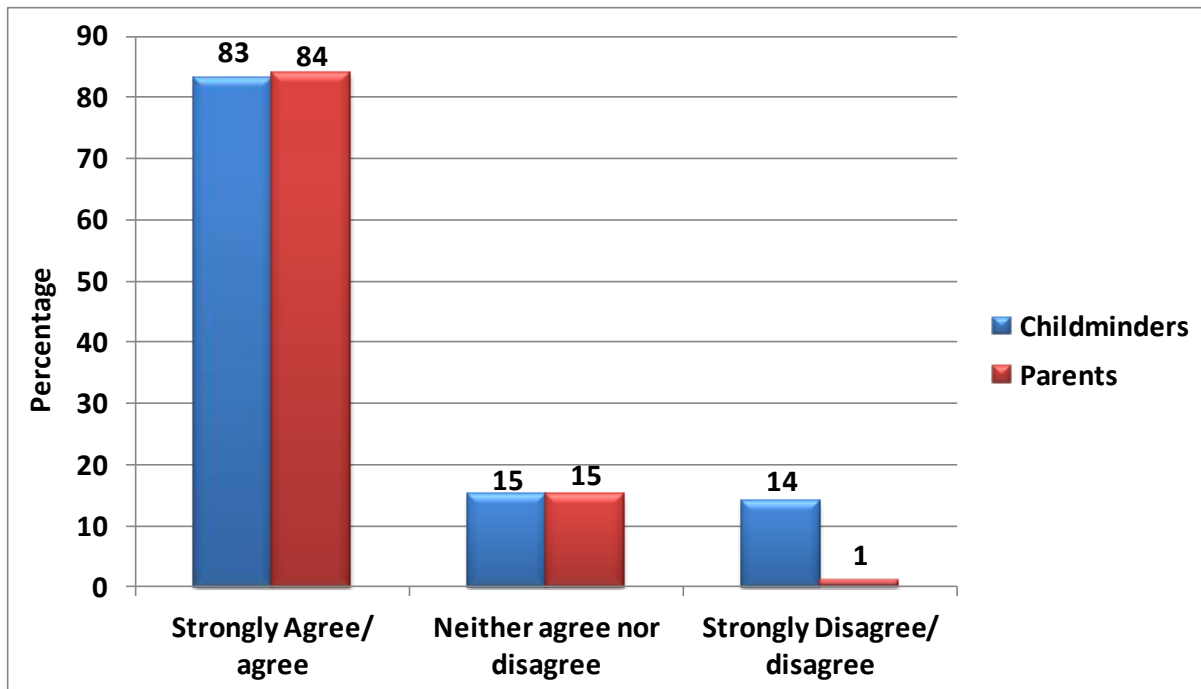
They (older children) love building towers... the little ones just roll over and they knock them down and the big ones are... aargh. We always say to them, but you used to do that. You had your turn, now it is the babies' turn. It does wind them up, but you can see them, they tolerate it, they learn. It's what babies do. And just build it again, it's nothing tragic. It is a learning curve for (...the older children) (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

... two of mine have been in school with kids their own age, so for that period of time before and after school, you know, it is developing their social skills to look at the needs of others (Parent, Northern HSCT)

7.1.5 Promoting Friendship

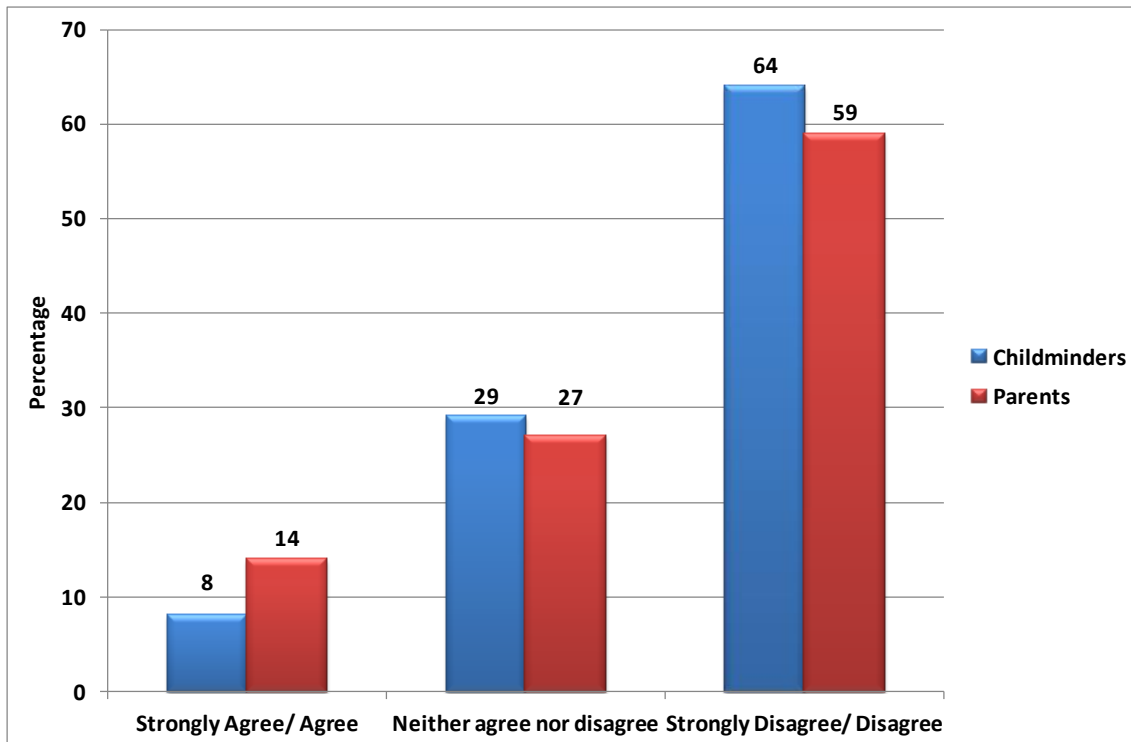
In the survey findings childminders and parents noted that a benefit of a mixed age placement is that children have a wider range of friends in terms of age and ability (Figure 17). Children’s enjoyment of playing with children of different ages was also reinforced by those who did not see older children’s potentially rough behaviour as a challenge in a childminding setting (Figure 18).

Figure 17: Childminders’ and parents’ views on the attitude statement- *All of the children have a wider range of friends in terms of age and ability*



Childminders n=229; parents n=261

Figure 18: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Older children are too rough for younger children*



Childminders n=227; parents n=260

The promotion of friendships in mixed age placements was echoed in the interviews and focus groups. For example, there was evidence from the children's interviews that the older children liked interacting with and helping the younger children, particularly the babies and toddlers. In addition, some parents felt that younger children gain confidence by playing with older children, for example by being introduced to and participating in new games.

I had a ten year old today playing with a two and a half year old, a three year old and a four year old. And do you want to know what? I never heard him laugh so much in my life. They were playing on the space hoppers and they had a great time. They really did (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

I would help put on their coat and get a few things for (the childminder) sometimes. Or help them put their seat belt on and just hold their hand and stuff (Girl, 11, South Eastern HSCT)

...my best thing going to (childminder's name)... I think it is when me and Ben (aged 4-5) are playing that game, because it's a really fun game and it's really fun. You only need two balls, two players (Boy, 8, Northern HSCT)

I would say that my boys probably came on leaps and bounds in terms of their confidence outside, particularly for outside games, because they were mixing with my childminder's own children who were also participating in those games. And I would assume that the younger children that have gone into her house have gained from the examples of my boys and the games that they would be playing. They thrive on that. They come on leaps and bounds and they try to copy and they try to sit and pretend to read, even if they can't, because they see the older ones doing it. And I think it is great (Parent, Western HSCT)

7.2 The challenges of vertical grouping

Vertical grouping is not without its challenges. Challenges and potential drawbacks were explored in the focus groups and interviews as well as through the surveys. Drawing from the literature review (Chapter 3), childminders and parents were asked to rate their levels of agreement with a number of attitude statements that focused on challenges. The challenges included the following:

- Logistical issues such as dealing with school collection times and nap times for younger children
- Having adequate and appropriate equipment to cater for the needs of all age groups
- Managing the behaviour of all children

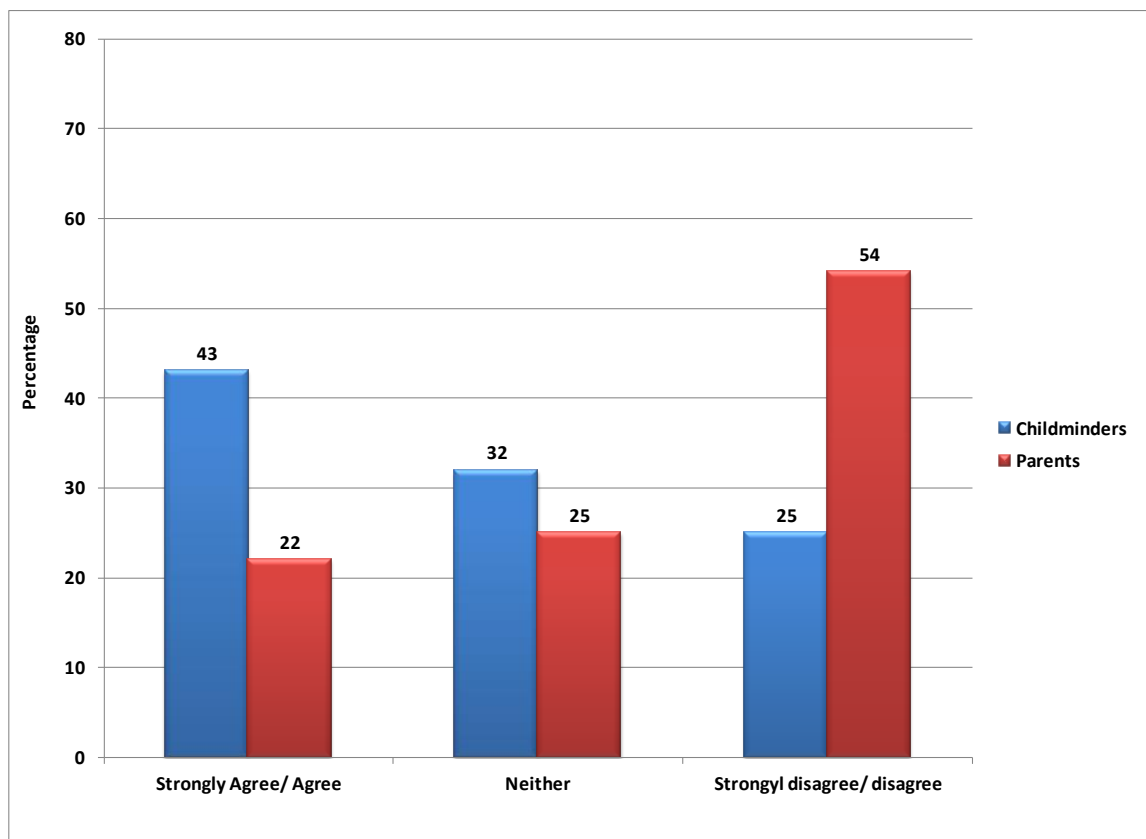
In each attitude statement presented in Figures 19-21 and 23, which describes a potential challenge associated with caring for mixed age groups, childminders were 11-28% more likely to either select strongly agree or agree than parents. These findings may reflect

childminders' higher level of direct experience of vertical grouping challenges. Parents are perhaps unaware of what occurs at a childminders on a daily basis. Alternatively, parents may be reluctant to acknowledge that the care environment that they have chosen for their child has some drawbacks.

7.2.1 Logistical issues

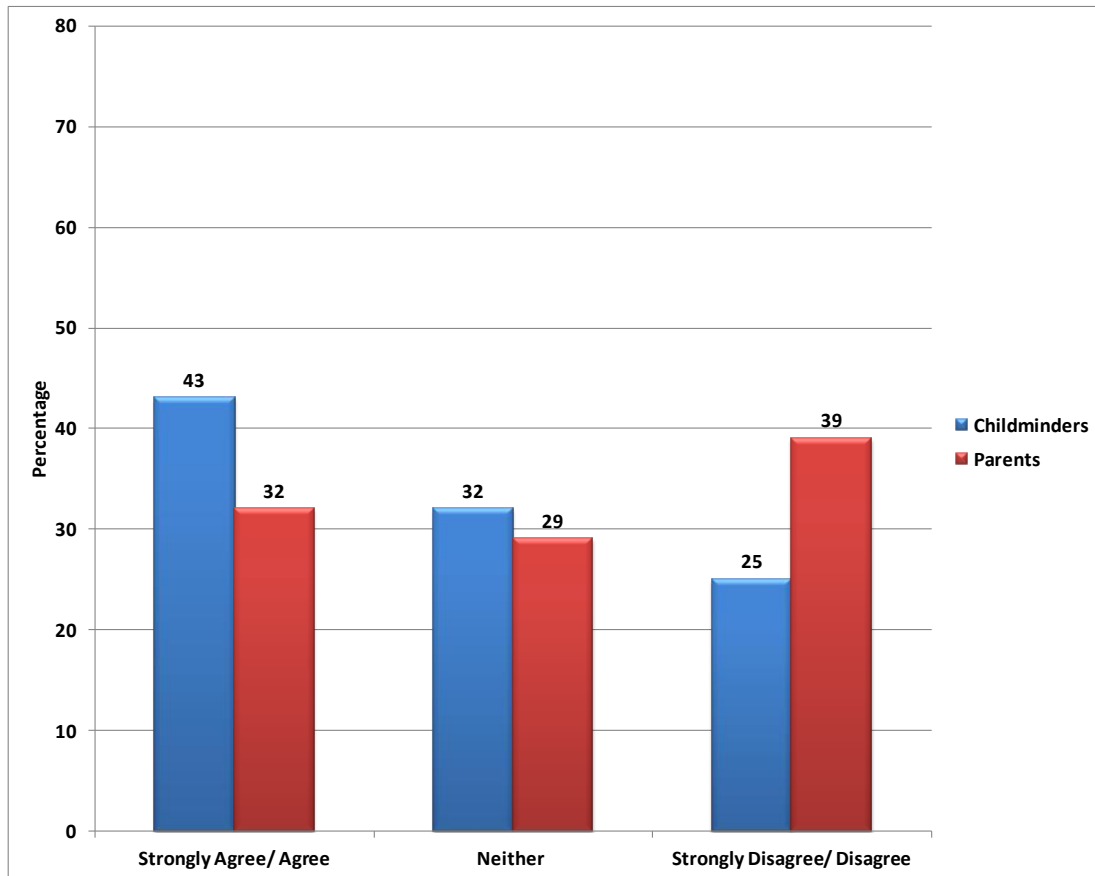
Logistical issues such as accommodating the routines of babies and toddlers, including their meal and nap times, and ensuring prompt collection of school-age children was clearly identified by childminders as a bigger challenge than it was for parents as Figures 19 and 20 illustrate:

Figure 19: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement: *Younger children are forced to sit in the car for long periods of time when school pickups for older children are being done*



Childminders n=224; parents n=261

Figure 20: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement: *Younger children have nap time interrupted for school pick-ups*



Childminders n=224; parents n=260

During the focus groups parents and childminders expanded on logistical challenges. For example, some noted that catering for the needs of older children, i.e. through school runs, can prove disruptive to the routines of younger children and conversely the needs of younger children can disrupt the activities of older children.

...I know (my child) was drinking a bottle in the car during the school runs and stuff. To me that was such a special time that she should have been sitting at home in comfort with a wee blanket, that idea, rather than sitting in the back of a car. I hated it (Parent, Western HSCT)

...you know young babies need fed more often and it is maybe feeding time and (the older children) are wanting you to read them a book, or you are trying to plan to go out to the park or whatever but you have to do it round (the baby's) sleep (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

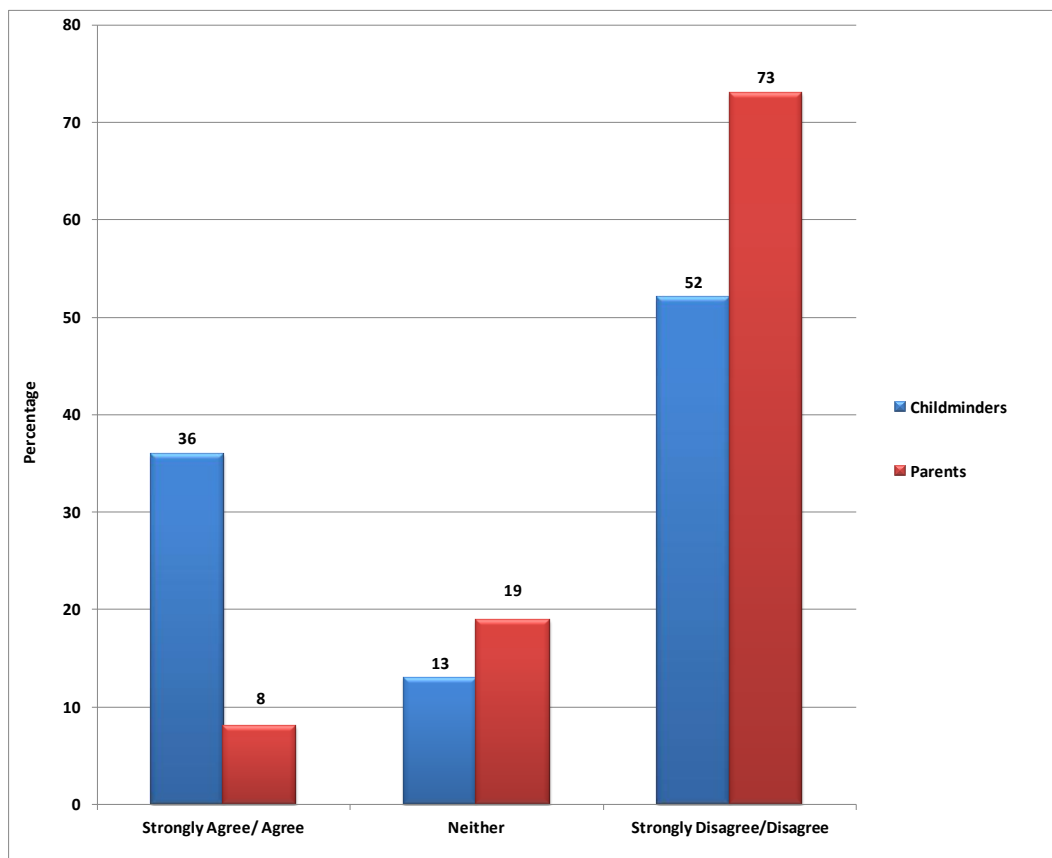
Some children commented that they disliked waiting in cars while other children were being collected from school.

I don't like waiting in the car...because sometimes (the childminder) ... goes to get Owen or Sam (from school)... and we have to sit in the car for a wee while (Girl, 4, South Eastern HSCT)

7.2.2 Activities and resources to suit all ages and abilities

Accessing age appropriate activities and resources that meet the needs of all children was identified by a minority as a challenge linked to vertical grouping. The survey findings indicate that again this was a challenge more clearly identified by childminders (36%), rather than parents (8%), as Figure 21 shows.

Figure 21: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement: *there are less toys or equipment to suit all age groups available at a childminders compared with other settings*



Childminders n=229; parents n=260

During the focus groups all three groups of respondents (childminders, parents and children) discussed the issue of the availability of appropriate toys and equipment at a childminders. Some mentioned the need to have a greater range of toys or equipment to suit all ages.

If you've a wider range of children you do have to have toys to suit all different ages. You've to work out things... If you are doing activities it has to be age appropriate so you have to have a big range of different activities to suit (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

...I was just conscious of my boys complaining about there being nothing to do and being stuck in the garage with the DS or whatever, girly stuff... (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

(The childminder) doesn't have any toys for our age (Girl, 11, South Eastern HSCT)

Others noted that it was very difficult to stimulate all children in a mixed age setting because of the wide variety of ages. As a result, some felt that this compromised the provision of early education, while others noted that it can lead to children feeling bored.

Because they are all different ages, they are all at different learning stages and one person cannot educate... what will interest a four year old, will not interest an eleven year old (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

When I put her in (to childminders) at the start, she was the youngest and then the next one to her was about eight, and she was only twenty months when she went in... I think (she) found it a bit boring...Whereas I think if there had been a wee girl there her age, even a wee boy, she wouldn't have been so clingy to me (Parent, Western HSCT)

Older children also expressed feelings of boredom in both the KLT survey and the interviews. Sometimes the children felt bored because of a lack of activities. Other times it was due to there being no other children of a similar age to play with or because of a lack of age appropriate resources.

I feel unhappy because when you finish your homework you have nothing to do (KLT respondent)

She doesn't have any toys for our age (see Figure 22) (Girl, 10, South Eastern HSCT)

Figure 22: One child depicts feeling bored at their childminder's (Girl, 10, South Eastern HSCT)



Some children commented that they felt lonely at their childminders because there were no children of a similar age to play with or if other children were involved in activities that they could not participate in.

(I am unhappy at my childminder's)...because I am the oldest and there is nothing for me to do but watch TV or play outside by myself as my brothers just play with their friends but my childminder is a really nice lady all the same (KLT respondent)

...I always am trying to do stuff and (my sister) is always doing her homework and I don't have anything to do and I've no one to play with... (Girl, 11, South Eastern HSCT)

7.2.3 Managing behaviour

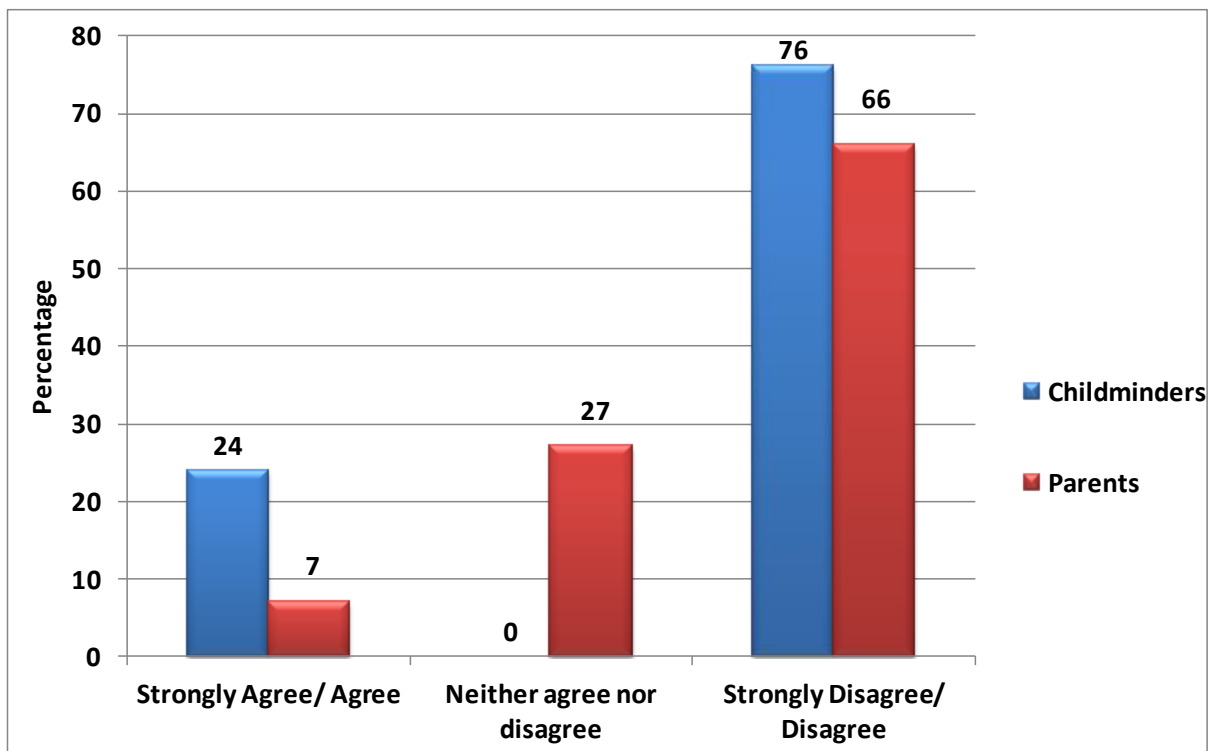
Managing behaviour was a challenge identified by mainly childminders in the focus groups. Some noted that when children are cared for in mixed age settings, older children can become quite domineering of younger children. In addition, some older children can even adopt babyish behaviour in order to gain attention from childminders. Childminders (24%)

were more likely to identify this as a challenge in the survey findings compared to parents (7%), although overall the proportions were relatively small (see Figure 23).

...sometimes an older one will get the younger one to do lots, like treat them as a little slave. You kind of have to watch things like that so that they don't....use the wee ones (Childminder, Western HSCT)

...(older children) think it (younger child) is getting all the attention, and I suppose they do sort of (revert) into acting like a wee one (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Figure 23: Childminders' and parents' views on the attitude statement- *Older children become more babyish when they are with younger children*



Childminders n=228; parents n=261

Others noted that the behaviour of younger children can be frustrating for older children, especially when the younger children disrupt their games and activities.

Whenever they are playing... take three or four year olds and the baby that is crawling, it is over and pulling down their Lego and their tractors and wee sheep all set up. You know they are at a different stage of play and the baby just comes in and wrecks all (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

This challenge was reiterated during the children's interviews, with some noting that younger children were annoying.

They (younger children) just answer you back and they're like, no, you can't play with this. And they run around screaming after each other. And one time they were playing with a ball and I went out and they kicked it at me and I picked it up and they were like, no, no, no! We are playing football, you can't play (Girl, 11, South Eastern HSCT)

Childminders and parents commented that older children can introduce and expose younger children to activities that are not suitable for their age group, for example rough play or early exposure to electronic games/devices. Notably, in the survey findings this was more likely to be identified as a challenge by parents (14%) compared to childminders (8%) (see Figure 18).

Or maybe them fighting... you know when they wrestle or something like that there. You know the older ones think it is appropriate to wrestle with the four year old... you have to be really observant that they are not going to get carried away. And you really just have to say, listen, no, because somebody could get hurt (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

... my two year old wants ... (a DS) now, he's like, where's the DS, where's the DS? And he is up on the settee and he is squeezed in between the rest of them (older children) because he's watching to see what they are playing. I know the childminder ... is quite strict with it, an hour maybe, I don't know what the time limit is. But she doesn't let them use it in the mornings or there's certain things she only allows them to do. But as I say, the two year old is learning fast... (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

7.3 Solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping

During the focus groups, childminders discussed ways in which the challenges of mixed age placements could be overcome. A range of potential solutions was identified, one of which included better planning.

Well it just goes back to the planning. You make sure you have something that will suit all of them (the children) (Childminder, Belfast HSCT)

...if you have younger ones and older ones; the older ones want to go and kick football and you have to watch the wee ones and keep them with you, but yet they want to go off and do the same thing. So sometimes outings can be a wee bit daunting. You need to pre plan pretty well (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Some childminders noted that receiving help from an assistant helped to overcome the challenges of caring for mixed age groups.

Although I was fortunate because... the Trust allowed ... my husband (who) was used for occasional emergency care (to be registered)... it was wonderful because then if I'd one in his cot and he (husband) was at home, that child could sleep on while I nipped round to the school and got the run (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

A number emphasised the importance of setting clear boundaries so that children are aware of acceptable behaviours in their setting.

I would step in and say, now, no Jimmy, you can't do that. But they have to learn then, from us, and then he will learn not to do that to the little one... (Childminder, Western HSCT)

There was also evidence to suggest that childminders who experienced problems associated with mixed age settings sought help or support from agencies or organisations.

Well I had one situation of a brother and sister... with just totally inappropriate behaviour. And I spoke to the (HSCT) Early Years (Team), and they were fantastic. So it is nice to know you have someone and you can always contact the social workers and they were really, really good because I had sort of exhausted whatever avenues I could go down (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

Others suggested that financial assistance and toy libraries would help to overcome resource challenges associated with vertical grouping.

Further funding for childminders would help with buying equipment and enhance the setting to the best standards for the children being cared for (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

Toy libraries to be provided to all childminders (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

7.4 Do the benefits of vertical grouping outweigh the challenges?

In the survey the majority of both childminders (79%) and parents (84%) stated that the advantages of vertical placements outweighed the disadvantages.

Childminders and parents were asked to provide reasons as to why they felt the way they did in relation to vertical placements. Broadly similar themes emerged from both childminders and parents. These themes included:

- It is similar to a home setting and reflects the family model
- It is a more natural environment whereby older children learn important social skills e.g. patience, tolerance, helpfulness, responsibility, communication
- Children learn to respect those of different ages and abilities which will help them cope with everyday life when older
- Older children enjoy helping out with younger children
- Siblings can be kept together
- There is less pressure for children to conform to age expected 'norms'

7.5 Summary: vertical grouping

- Parents, childminders and children identified many benefits associated with vertical grouping.
- One of the main benefits was the promotion of learning, with a majority of childminders (98%) and parents (97%) stating that children learn a lot from older children. These views on the promotion of learning in mixed age placements were echoed in the focus groups.
- A high proportion (88%) of both parents and childminders noted that mixed age settings have a family feel more commonly associated with a home, and children benefit from this natural environment. Linked to this, children noted that they liked spending time with siblings at their childminders.
- Older children acting as positive role models, the development of social skills such as patience, empathy and leadership, and the promotion of mixed age friendships were all additional benefits of mixed age settings identified by the respondents.
- In the survey findings childminders were more likely than parents to identify challenges associated with mixed age placements.
- One of these challenges involved the logistics of catering for the needs of different age groups, i.e. scheduling younger children's nap times around school pick-ups (43% of childminders identified this as a challenge compared to 22% of parents).
- Not having enough resources to meet the needs of different age groups was another challenge more likely to be identified in the survey findings by childminders (36%) than parents (9%). However, in the focus groups and interviews this issue was raised by all groups of respondents, including children.
- There were mixed views from childminders and parents on behavioural challenges of mixed age settings.
- Childminders identified the challenge of older children being domineering of younger children and childminders (24%) were more likely to identify the challenge of older children becoming more babyish as a result of being around younger children compared to parents (7%) in the survey findings. In addition, childminders and children were more likely to note that younger children can disrupt the activities of older children.
- Although behavioural issues, such as older children bullying and being too rough around younger children, were identified only by a small proportion of childminders

and parents in the survey findings, in the focus groups some respondents did express concerns about older children exposing younger children to age inappropriate activities (e.g. electronic games/devices).

- Solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping included improved planning and having access to a wide variety of resources and activities. Some childminders' views echoed those of Child Action Inc (undated) when discussing the importance of planning when caring for children of mixed ages.
- Overall, the benefits of mixed age settings were seen to outweigh the challenges because they are similar to a home setting, they promote learning and the development of social skills, different age groups (including siblings) can enjoy being together and there is less pressure for children to conform to age expected 'norms'.
- Childminders (91%) and parents (90%) also felt that children learn from participating in everyday activities with their childminder.

8.0 Chapter 8: Findings – support and development of childminding practice

8.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the research findings in relation to developing childminding practice through two main vehicles:

- Childcare training courses
- Professional support and advice

The chapter also examines ways in which childminding practice in Northern Ireland might be enhanced and outlines childminders' views on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which, as noted previously, was established in England to provide coherence in terms of quality throughout the childcare sector.

8.2 Childcare training courses

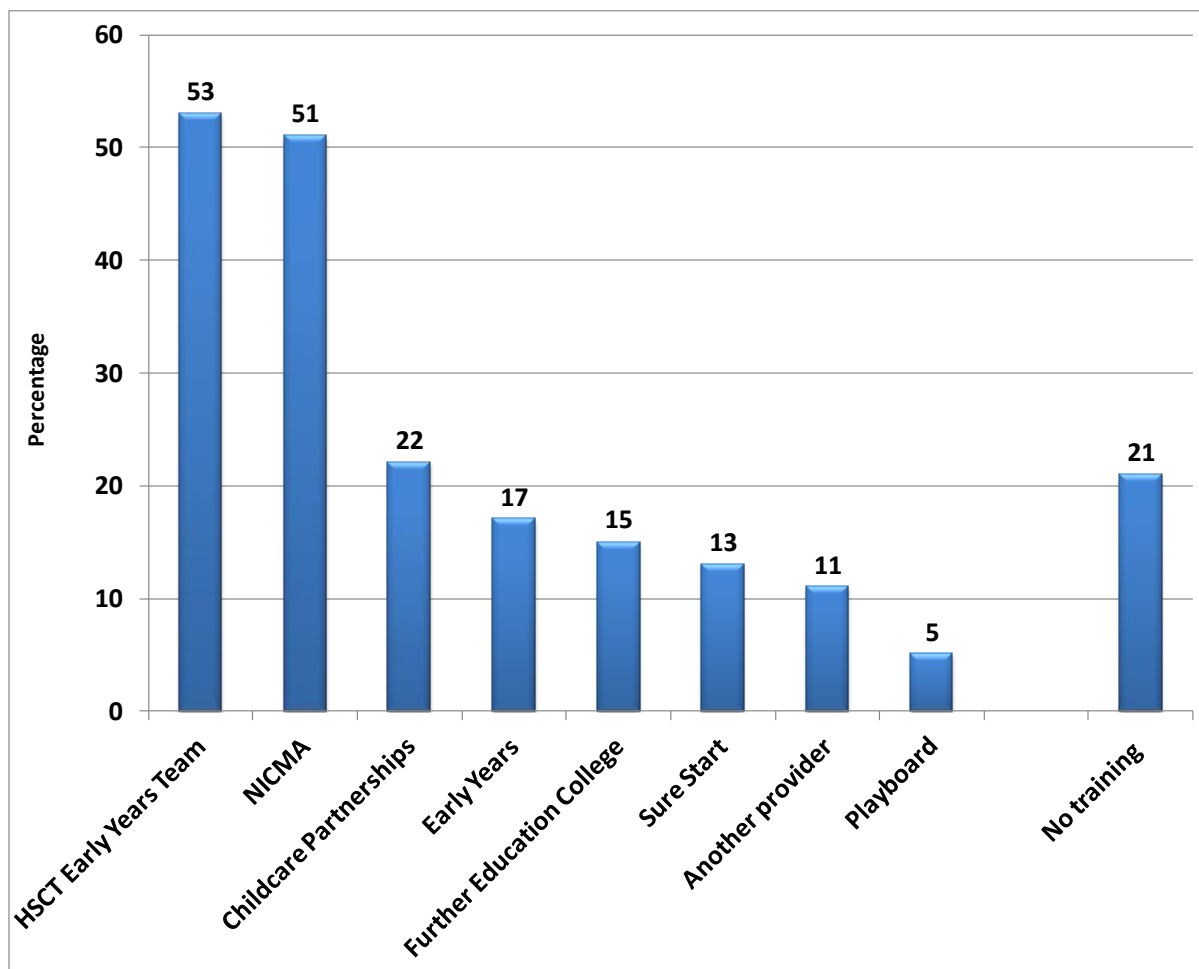
There is a variety of training courses and, correspondingly, different levels of qualifications available for those working in childcare (see appendix 5 for more information on childcare qualifications). These range from courses such as the 'Introduction to Childcare Practice' to NVQs to Degrees in Early Childhood.

This research looked at sources of training provision, access to training courses and associated barriers.

8.2.1 Sources of training provision

Childminders source training from a range of providers across Northern Ireland. The two main sources were the HSCT (Health and Social Care Trust) Early Years Teams (53%) and NICMA (51%). Figure 24 illustrates the full range of training sources identified. Over one-fifth of childminders ($n=48$) had not accessed any childcare training.

Figure 24: Childminders' sources of childcare training



n=224

As Table 13 below shows, regional disparities exist across the HSCT areas in terms of those not accessing training, with childminders in the Northern HSCT three times more likely not to have accessed training than those in the South Eastern HSCT (31% compared to 10%).

There was also some discrepancy across age groups, with childminders aged 61+ years twice as likely not to have received childcare training compared to their younger counterparts.

Table 13: Breakdown of childminders that have not accessed any childcare training by HSCT area and by age category

Trust	% not accessed childcare training	Age Category	% not accessed childcare training
Northern	31	40 years and under	24
Belfast	24	41-60 years	17
Western	22	61+ years	50
Southern	19		
South Eastern	10		

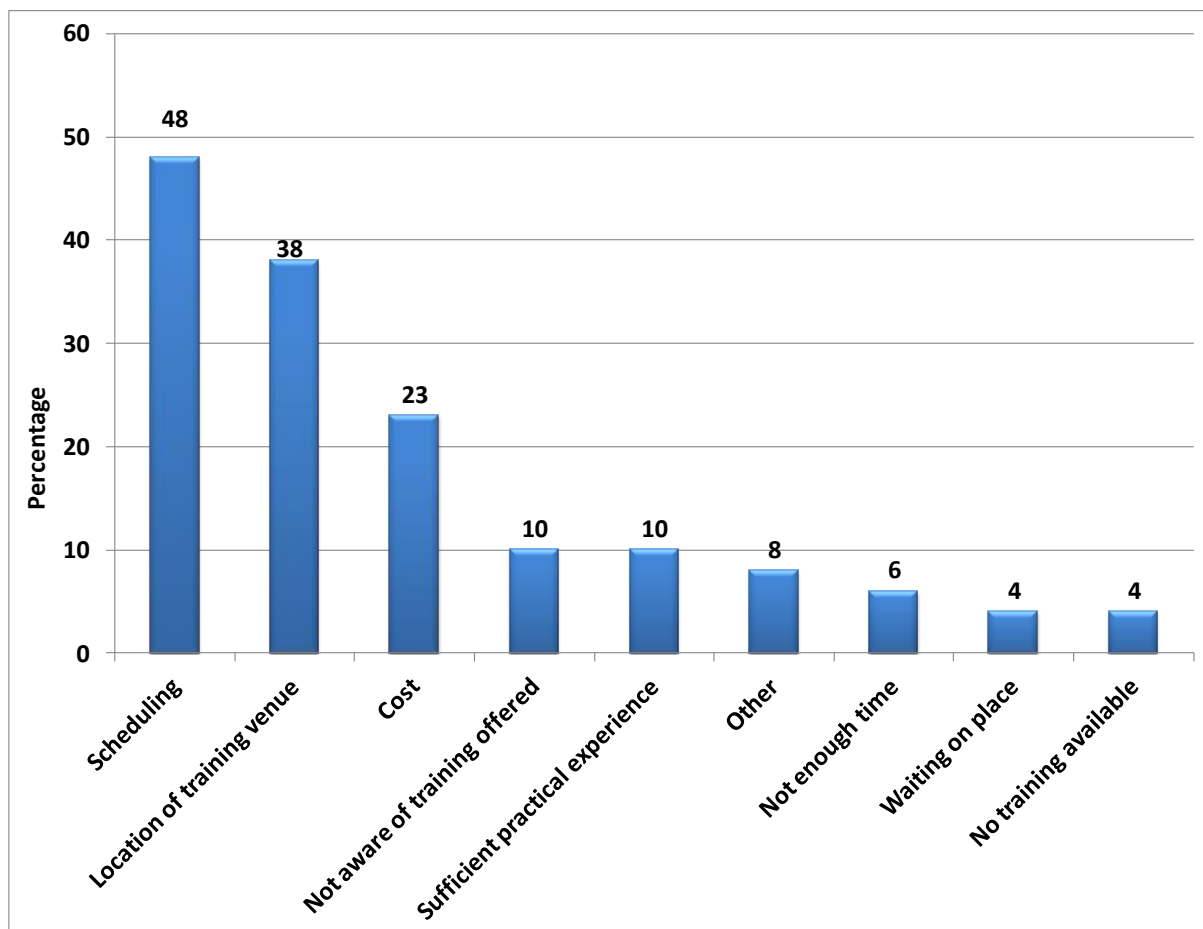
n=48

8.2.2 Access to training courses

The childminders' survey revealed that whilst the majority (79%) had accessed childcare training courses, over one-fifth (21%; *n*=48) had never accessed any relevant childcare training (see Figure 24 for sources of childcare training). The potential barriers to accessing such training were explored in both the surveys and the focus groups with childminders.

Figure 25 shows the range of barriers identified by childminders in the survey.

Figure 25: Reasons why childminders had not availed of childcare training



n=48

The main barriers, i.e. scheduling (48%), location (38%) and cost (23%) were also highlighted in the focus groups discussions.

Because a lot of courses are during the morning or that type of thing, and you are thinking... I'm a childminder. I work from nine to five... well sometimes from seven to six, you know (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

...there's not enough courses in your local area. You are talking maybe Belfast or they are... nowhere near at hand (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

And they are expensive; you have to pay it out of your own pocket (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

More funding is needed for training as some childminders can't afford to pay for some of the training... (it) can be expensive (South Eastern HSCT)

I actually think the correspondence between (training providers and) childminders is really bad, because I go to some courses and my friends... (who are) registered childminders, they have never heard of them, you know. So not everybody gets notification of different things happening... (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Having spoken to other childminders, the availability of training is limited and not well advertised (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

Other barriers identified in the survey included, childminders feeling that they already had sufficient practical experience (10%), not being aware of training offered (10%) and insufficient time to commit to training (6%).

I have been childminding for 24 yrs so feel training is not necessary (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT, survey participant)

I didn't get notice of that (training course) (Childminder, Western HSCT)

I work 10 hrs a day and have a diploma and degree in Community Youth Work so don't have enough hours in my day for further training (Childminder, Western HSCT, survey participant)

Poor availability was an issue. In some cases, this arose because childminders felt they had been made aware of training and qualifications only after other members of the childcare sector (i.e. nursery staff), and as a result courses were fully booked when they tried to register.

The Western Area Childcare Partnership that do all the courses in our area, we find in Strabane anyway when we get our letters... all these courses...they had already started, and when we rang round to say we were interested, all the places were gone (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Some felt that the content of training courses was only relevant to those that provide group childcare, e.g. day nurseries, and not childminders, and this acted as a deterrent.

The fire safety course, even though it was all people... childminders, nurseries and stuff, the person instructing the course was going on about being in a warehouse or these things. And we said, well we are not in a warehouse, you know, it is a completely different situation. So that's not necessarily relevant (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

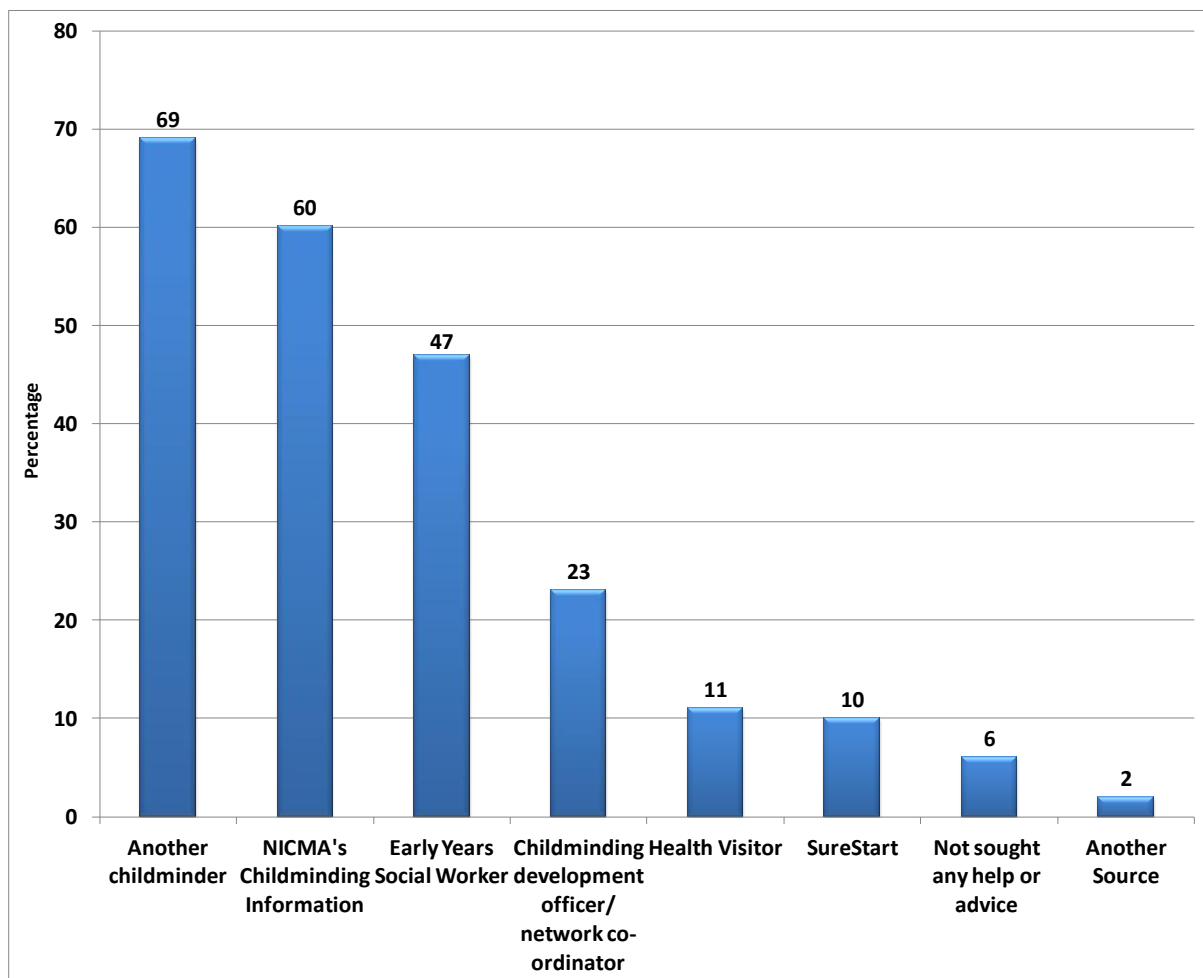
8.3 Professional support and advice

This section explores the professional support and advice that is accessed by childminders. Early Years Teams within the HSCTs provide information, advice and support to registered childminders as well as those considering becoming a registered childminder. Voluntary organisations such as NICMA (Northern Ireland Childminding Association), Early Years, The Organisation for Young Children and Playboard are all membership organisations, providing advice and support for those working in the childcare sector, but only NICMA is specific to childminding as opposed to other forms of childcare. NICMA also facilitates 7 childminding networks that are attached to SureStart programmes.

8.3.1 Sources of support

A range of sources of support and advice in relation to childminding practice was identified by childminders in the surveys. The two main sources of support were peer support from other childminders (69%) and NICMA (60%). Less than half (47%) cited the Early Years Teams within HSCTs as sources of support. Figure 26 illustrates the full range of sources of support and advice for childminders.

Figure 26: Childminders sources of help or advice with childcare practice



n=230

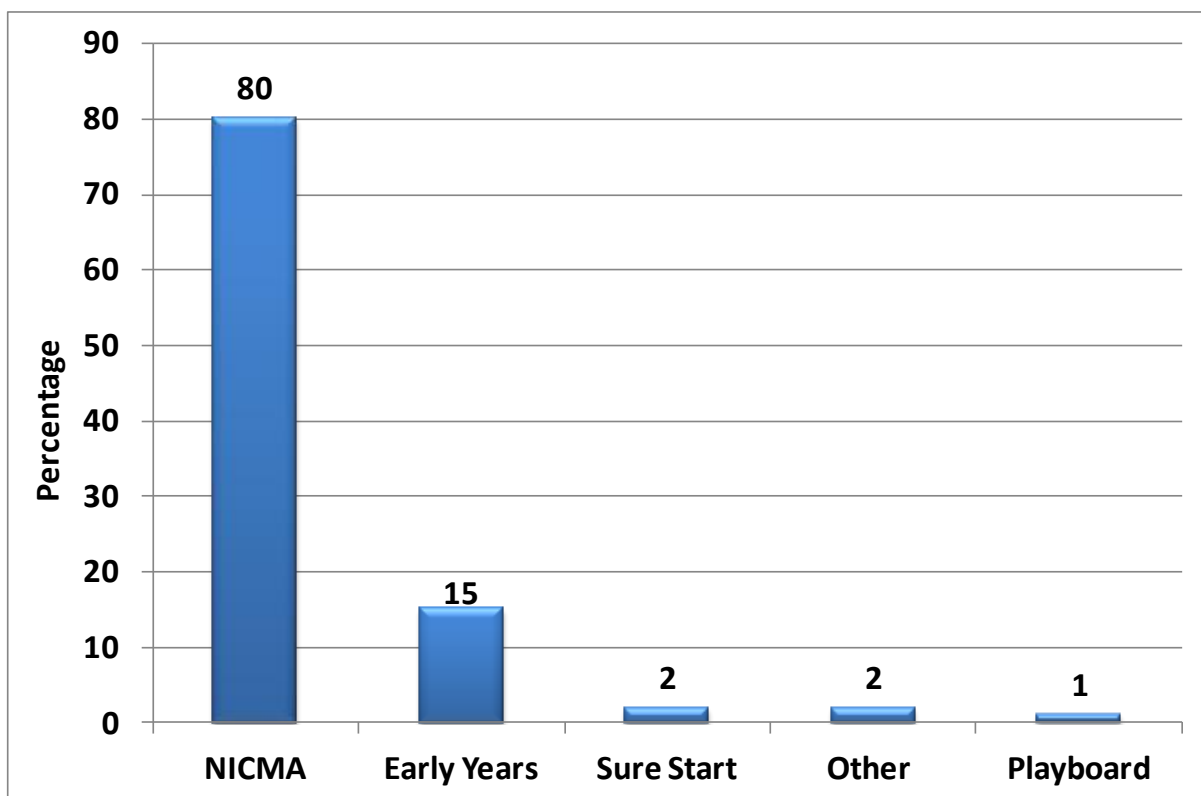
The survey findings (presented in Figure 26) were echoed in the focus groups, with many childminders identifying peer support and NICMA as important sources of help or advice. In the focus groups, childminders also identified representatives from the HSCTs (e.g. Early Years Teams, health visitors) as important sources of help or advice. In the focus groups, a number of childminders identified Morten Michel as a source of advice or support with childcare practice. Morten Michel is one of the UK's childcare insurers. Childminders who have insurance policies through Morten Michel spoke of receiving newsletters, magazines, training manuals and purchasing educational resources from the company's online shop. However, the main motivation for using Morten Michel was that it offered childminders cheaper insurance than NICMA.

I was with NICMA for years and I thought last year... and it was actually the Social Services came out and said look, you do realise that these guys are half the price. I thought well last year I did go; I thought I'll do it for a year and then if I felt I want to access NICMA's training, I would go back to them this year. But I've been managing the very best without them (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

8.4 Membership of childcare support organisations and local networks

Childminders are often members of support organisations. As Figure 27 shows, 80% of the childminders who participated in the survey were members of NICMA and 15% were members of Early Years - the Organisation for Young Children, whilst 1% were members of Playboard.

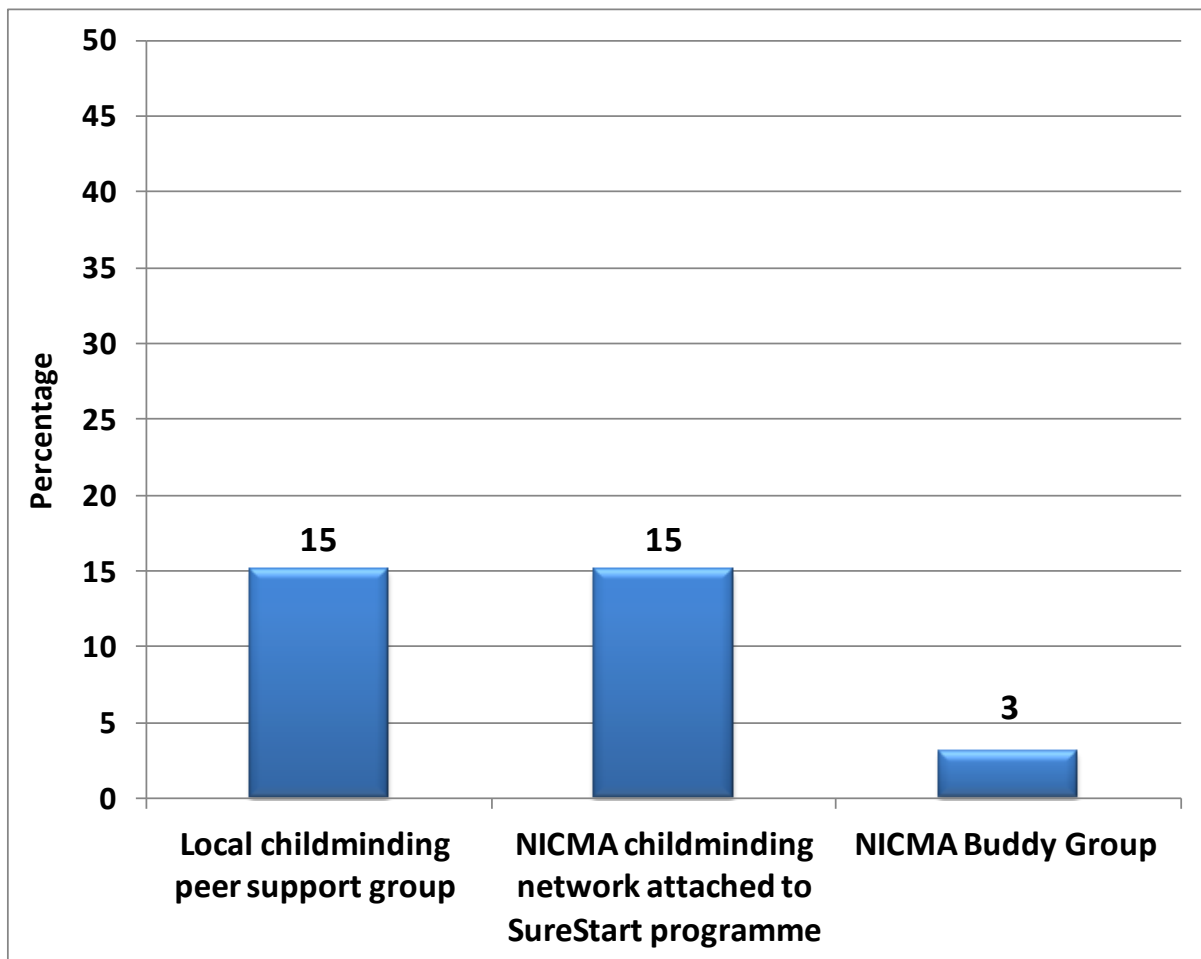
Figure 27: Membership of childcare/ early education organisations



n=229

In contrast, as Figure 28 shows, membership of local childminding support groups and networks was low amongst childminders, with only 15% being members of either local childminding peer support groups or NICMA childminding networks attached to SureStart programmes and only 3% were members of a NICMA Buddy Group. The drawbacks and benefits of participating in childminding support groups were explored in the childminders' focus groups.

Figure 28: Membership of childminding networks and groups



n=229

8.4.1 Drawbacks to support groups

Barriers to involvement in support groups and networks were identified by childminders in the focus groups. These included a perceived lack of confidentiality as childminders were

worried that their clients may be discussed or that other childminders would gain a competitive advantage.

And then you are afraid...that it becomes nearly a... a criticising or a slagging of parents... and yes it does happen, and... it does annoy you at times (as) if you go to a support meeting and you have had maybe a parent who decided... och I forgot to pay this week... or whatever. You do be annoyed and you be very, very hurt as well because you've knocked your pan in all day and you go to those meetings and maybe it only takes something very simple for somebody for to... and the next thing I would be afraid that it would be out of here before you know. So believe it or not, confidentiality...I wouldn't be asking other people (for support)... so I wouldn't because of the small town thing (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

I just think is it because childminders don't want to sit and talk about... their business in case, does it affect them? (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Childminders also commented that support groups and networks can be too formal and that governance of the groups tends to be poor.

You were going and the support was nice and then the next thing was, and it is our AGM and we need a chairperson, a treasurer and a secretary. And everybody ran for the hills, because it was too formal. And we were the same; we enjoy going for the chat, a cup of coffee, but everybody has too much to get involved, and the next thing was, it fell apart. (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Well you see (name of support group) folded; there was a chair person put in who just ran it like (with) military precision...(Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Others noted that support groups can have cliques and that these cliques can deter childminders from joining.

If they (childminding support group attendees) are keeping a seat, you daren't sit on that seat. They'd eat you! (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Our wee group has got a little bit cliquey because nobody new has joined us this long time and we all know each other inside out. We know each other's husbands, we know each other's children, ... We know each other very well and we know where each one of us lives, because we know each other that well... (but) we do try and welcome them (new childminders) in (Childminder, Western HSCT)

In addition, some stated that their inconsistent work patterns and a lack of time acted as barriers to their involvement in support groups and networks.

I find things like when people want to get together and have groups and toddler groups and all the rest... my day is never the same twice in a week; I can't commit to say I'll go to this group and then I'll come to you for coffee and then we'll do that and we'll do that. My day changes all the time. I can't commit to that. So it is me and the kids and that's it. And I can't say, well I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

8.4.2 Benefits of support groups

Despite childminders' involvement in support groups and networks being low, a number did identify benefits of support groups. For example, some felt that support groups provided a good opportunity for sharing good practice and learning and offloading challenges amongst their peers.

...(networks and support groups are) always a good sounding ground, and if you'd had a bad week or you'd had a bad experience, most of us have all dealt with something... try this, and there is no doubt, the support group, when I used to go, it was really good for that. And particularly if you are starting out... there's no doubt it is a very valuable tool (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Some expressed views that support groups and networks can be useful in accessing more formal support and advice, for example some support groups invite guest speakers to meetings.

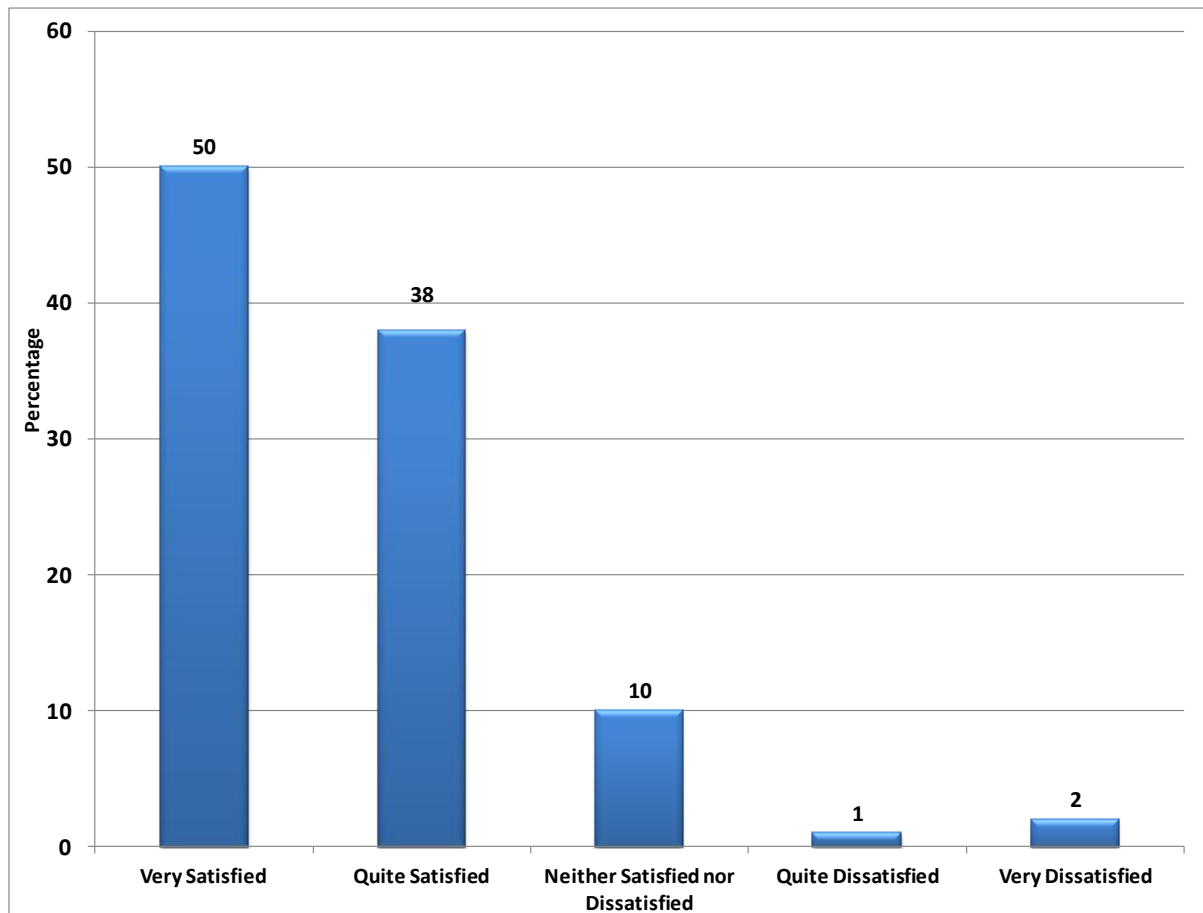
...then occasionally they might do a course, like the first aid course, or some of the other courses. And they do have evenings where they bring speakers to talk to you about different things. And I mean they are very informative and they are informal so it is enjoyable (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

In some cases, childminders noted that involvement in groups and networks can reduce the isolation associated with being a self employed lone worker.

It's good even to get out sometimes yourself. You get cabin fever. I talk about cabin fever by Friday sometimes, if you haven't got out. Because you are in your own home, your own four walls, and it is nice, never mind for the kids... it really benefits the kids, the mother and toddler groups, but it benefits your own head too (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

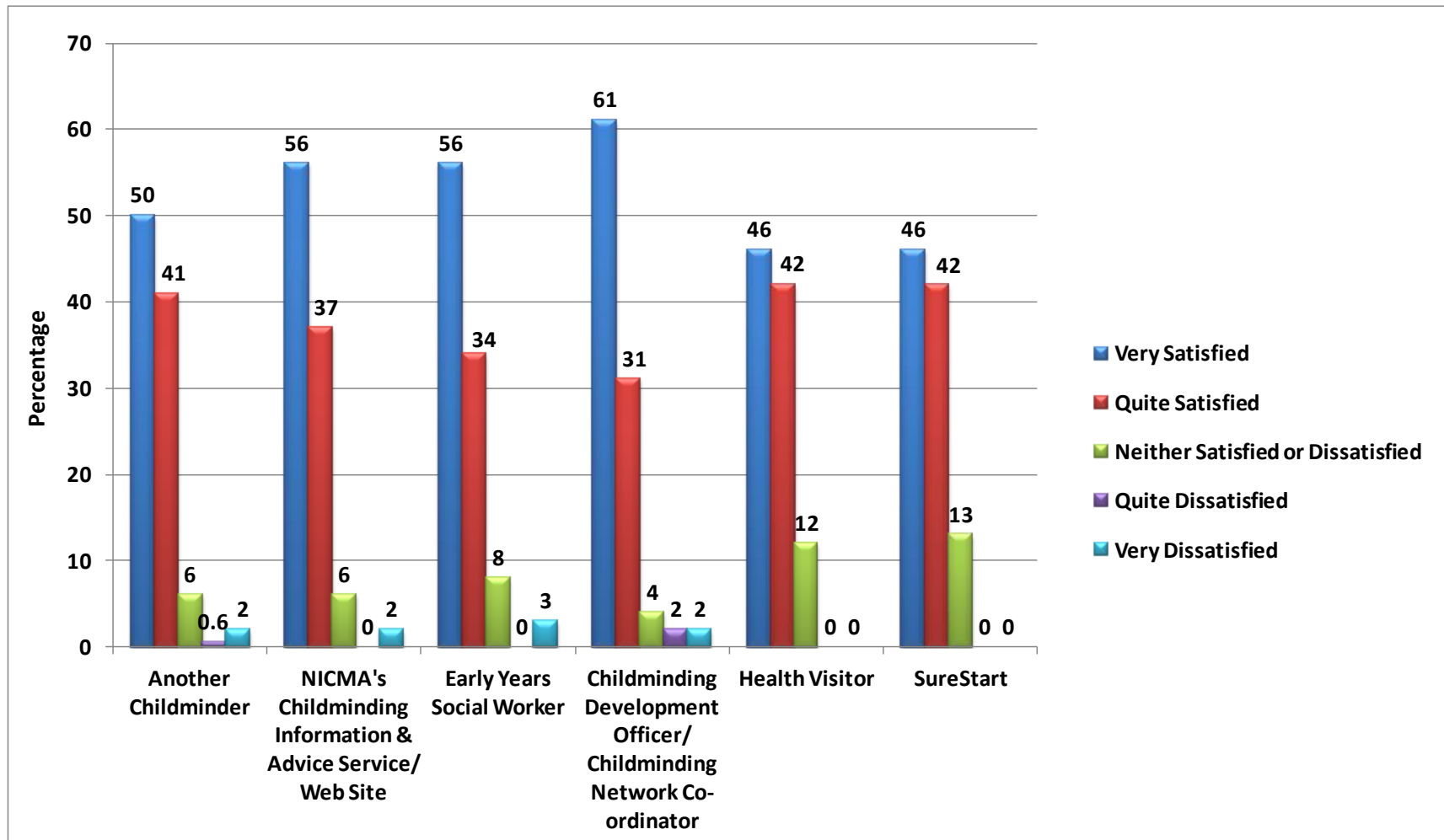
Overall childminders stated that they were either very satisfied (50%) or quite satisfied (38%) with the overall support they had received in relation to childminding practice (Figure 29).

Figure 29: Childminders' satisfaction levels regarding practice support



n=220

Figure 30: Childminders' satisfaction levels for different sources of help and advice with childcare practice



n=220

Figure 30 compares levels of satisfaction across different providers of help and advice in relation to childcare practice. Childminders were more likely to state that they were 'very satisfied' (61%) with support received from Childminding Development Officers/ Childminding Network Co-ordinators. However, overall satisfaction levels towards the different providers were mainly positive.

There were several reasons for these high levels of satisfaction, for example many noted that useful information was received from support providers on the role of a childminder, sector news, policies and procedures and forthcoming development opportunities.

I have used NICMA website to keep myself informed with news, events and policy, procedures... (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

My own Early Years Team Social Worker keeps me abreast of changes in policy, upcoming (events) I might be interested in... (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

I am part of SureStart childminding network, I receive information booklets every month (newsletter) informing me of upcoming events... (Childminder, Western HSCT)

Others noted that their problems were dealt with promptly and effectively by support providers and that they felt reassured because their support providers were easy to access.

When I required help and advice with certain behaviour I was given the help until the matter was resolved (Childminder, Southern HSCT)

I had a payment issue a few years back with a family and NICMA helped me through every step of it, through the small claims court and if I had not had their support I would have found it very stressful (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

Knowing somebody is only a phone call away is a great reassurance. I have always had clear answers to my questions and concerns (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Those childminders who were dissatisfied felt that they were isolated from support because of the HSCTs lack of resources and because they were not NICMA members.

Early Years seem too busy and there is a lack of social workers. Many childminders have opted for other insurance (providers) than NICMA and therefore have no support. NICMA do not offer a service to those who don't buy their insurance and I think this is unfair (Childminder, Belfast HSCT, survey participant)

Very little support available unless you pay for it by becoming a NICMA member and even then there are no support groups who meet daytimes in my area (Childminder, Northern HSCT, survey participant)

8.6 Enhancing childminding practice

In response to the survey question, *'in what way could the quality of childminding practice be further enhanced?'*, there was a very strong response from childminders that the issue of unregistered childminding needed to be addressed. Unregistered childminding practice was further explored in the focus groups with childminders and parents.

Parents were asked why they felt that other parents used unregistered childminders. A variety of reasons was offered such as a lack of local registered childminders.

Because they (parents) can't get anybody else. Well that was my experience. And my childminder would have been looking after mine while she was unregistered, going through the registration process... I should know better, but I had literally nobody else (Parent, Western HSCT)

Some noted that unregistered childminders may offer more flexibility. It was felt, for example, that they are less likely to have contracts or they undercut the costs of registered childminders, and some parents linked this to unregistered childminders having more lenient stipulations around holiday pay.

It's maybe a cheaper option, there is no contract, you know, maybe holiday pay isn't required (Parent, Northern HSCT)

Others felt that registration does not guarantee quality and there is, therefore, little incentive to use registered childminders.

Given my experience of a registered person, I haven't really seen much benefit...There hasn't been any real guarantee of a quality thing, to be honest (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

A number noted that some parents are unaware of the registration process and that unregistered childminding is illegal practice.

Whenever I initially started looking for childminders, I was just asking around my friends, asking around people local and stuff. I didn't realise that you phoned social services and asked for the register (Parent, Belfast HSCT)

Some childminders were concerned that if greater emphasis is placed on childcare training and qualifications this may deter potential childminders from completing the registration process. This in turn may lead to more unregistered childminders.

I think as well that if there's a lot of pressure put on childminders to get certain qualifications, I think it will push more underground and you'll have more unregistered childminders (Parent, South Eastern HSCT)

8.7 Solutions to unregistered childminding practice

During the focus groups, childminders were asked to suggest ways in which they thought the problem of unregistered childminding could be addressed. Several potential solutions to this issue were suggested such as more effective enforcement of the law.

It is against the law. So to me they should be brought to court (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT)

In addition, some felt that making childcare qualifications a mandatory component of registered childminding practice may deter parents from using unregistered childminders who are unqualified.

I think that's where the qualifications come into play too... I think if it was stressed that you had to be qualified to look after the child... I'm not saying big qualifications, like just... even if you did those courses and things like that (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

Some childminders suggested that more support should be given to unregistered childminders in order to encourage them to become registered.

...and they (unregistered childminders) would have a fear. So if there was even somebody that they could go to (at) the health centre and speak to one of the health visitors or somebody and say, ...can you help me out here and help to make a phone call for me, because some people don't have that confidence (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

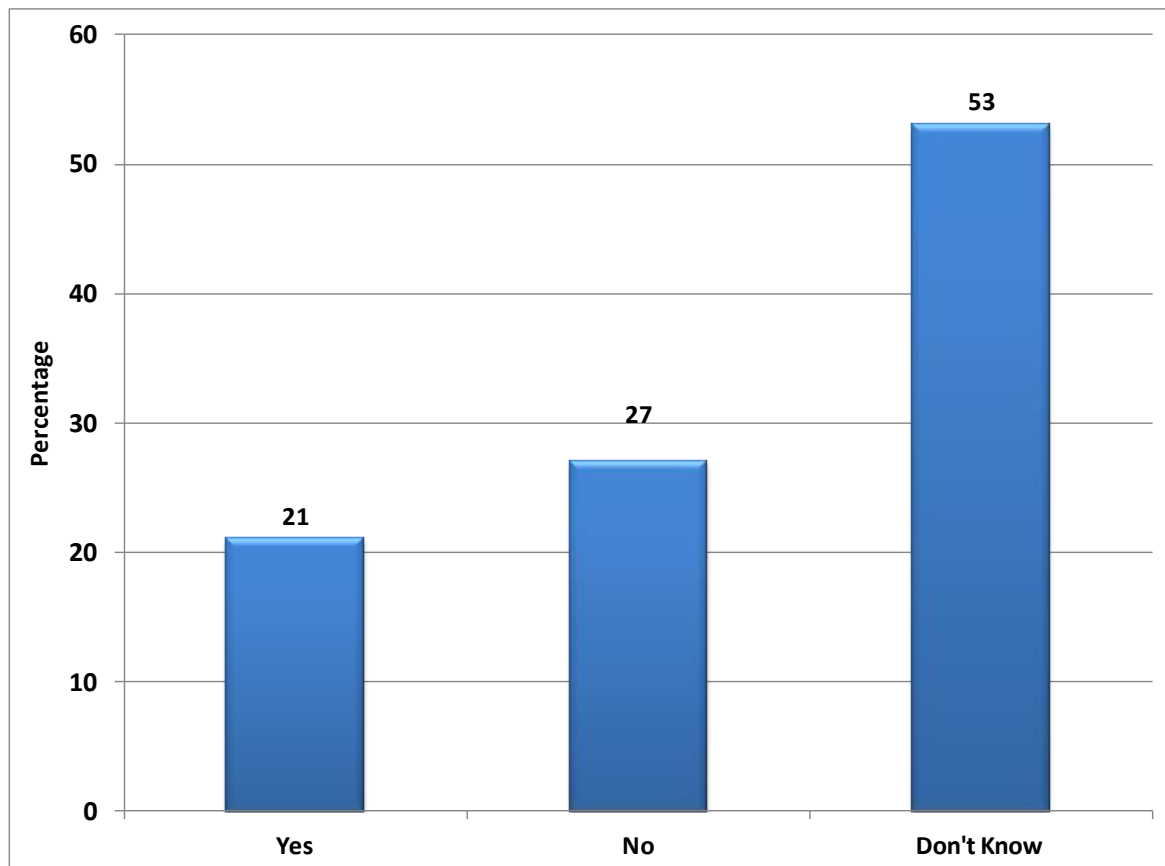
A number identified that health visitors should take a more proactive role in ensuring children are cared for by a legal carer.

Because these parents need to take responsibility. It is their child. They bring them into the world...my suggestion was that perhaps when the health visitor is doing the preschool check... they say, right, Mum ... and you are going back to work...Who are you leaving your baby with?... And they will have a list of the registered childminders (Childminder, Northern HSCT)

8.8 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Childminders surveyed were asked if a set of statutory standards for early childcare providers similar to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, should be introduced to Northern Ireland.

Figure 31: Childminders' views on whether the Early Years Foundation Stage should be introduced to Northern Ireland



n=223

As Figure 31 shows, over half of childminders (53%) stated that they did not know. Many of those who responded this way indicated that they did not know what the EYFS was or did not have enough information about it to give an opinion.

More than one quarter (27%) of childminders did not feel that there was any need for the introduction of a set of statutory standards for early childcare providers similar to the EYFS. Reasons included the following:

- It would compromise the unique home-from-home benefits of a childminding setting
- Childminders are not educators
- It would be too restricting and children can learn through free-play
- It would result in extra paper-work for childminders
- There is already sufficient training available without having standards similar to EYFS

These points are exemplified by the following quotes from childminders:

Childminding should be home based care and too many regulations make it difficult to continue that level of care (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT, survey participant)

I think children learn through play and when they start nursery at 3 yrs it is time enough to go by a curriculum (Childminder, Northern HSCT, survey participant)

I think there is too much paperwork. Every year there are changes which I think wouldn't encourage you to become a childminder (Childminder, Northern HSCT, survey participant)

Over a fifth (21%) of childminders felt that there should be something similar introduced in Northern Ireland. Reasons for this included the following:

- To improve standards
- To enhance the status of childminders as professionals in care and education
- To benefit children
- To improve the planning and implementation of activities

These points are expressed below:

Firmer set of duties and obligations for the childminder to follow would raise standards (Childminder, South Eastern HSCT, survey participant)

It is important that childminders are professional and portrayed as professional in their area of work (Childminder, Western HSCT, survey participant)

I firmly believe the first 3-4 years are crucial in a child's success at school. All childcare providers should want to fully support/complement parents in this especially children... (Childminder, Western HSCT, survey participant)

It would give childminders something to work towards and make planning easier and interesting (Childminder, Northern HSCT, survey participant)

8.9 Summary: childminding development

- Childminders main sources of childcare training were the HSCT Teams and NICMA.
- One fifth of childminders had not accessed childcare training, and discrepancies were identified according to geography and age. Childminders from the Northern HSCT and those aged 61+ were more likely not to have accessed childcare training.
- The main barriers which prevented childminders from accessing childcare training were scheduling, location and cost.
- Childminders identified a range of sources of support, e.g. peer support, NICMA and Early Years Teams from the HSCTs.
- While peer support was important to many childminders, membership of childminding networks and support groups was low which suggests that many childminders engage with their peers informally for support. Childminders identified confidentiality concerns and poor governance as key barriers to their involvement in childminding support groups and networks.
- Overall childminders were satisfied with the practice support that they had received.
- Addressing unregistered childminding was considered a key way to enhance childminding practice in Northern Ireland. Actions identified to address this issue included a public education campaign aimed at parents and a greater enforcement of the law.
- Awareness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was low amongst childminders. Those that were aware of EYFS had mixed opinions about the introduction of an equivalent set of standards for early childcare providers in Northern Ireland, with 21% stating that it should be introduced and 27% stating that it should not.
- These findings and reactions to the idea of a set of standards similar to EYFS reflect the debate in the literature about the education-care divide/continuum within early years provision as outlined by Lindon (2006), Adams and Adams (2011) and Laing (2011).

9.0 Chapter 9: Summary of key findings, conclusions and recommendations

This research represents the first ever study of childminding practice in Northern Ireland which looks in detail at issues such as quality in childminding practice and the benefits and challenges of vertical grouping (i.e. children of different ages being cared for together). The study also provides a profile of childminders in terms of age, gender, qualifications held and access to training and support.

As outlined in Chapter 1, this study had two overall aims, namely:

- To explore issues of practice and quality within childminding in Northern Ireland.
- To ascertain the impacts on children of vertical grouping.

In addressing the study's specific objectives, the findings relating to each have been summarised under the following key headings:

Features of childminding practice

- Objective 1 - What does childminding practice in Northern Ireland look like?

Quality in childminding practice

- Objective 2 - From the perspectives of childminders, parents and children, what does quality look like and how does it manifest itself in childminding practice?
- Objective 3 - What would help to enhance the quality of childminding practice from the perspectives of childminders and parents?
- Objective 4 - To what extent do specific childcare qualifications matter to both parents and childminders in terms of their views on quality and practice?

Vertical grouping in childminding practice

- Objective 5 - What is the impact of vertical grouping on children from the perspectives of childminders, parents and children themselves?
- Objective 6 - What are the challenges to providing and using vertical grouping?
- Objective 7 - To what extent are the impacts of vertical grouping an influencing factor in motivating parents to choose childminding over other forms of day care?

Support and development of childminding practice

- Objective 8 - What are the benefits of having specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- Objective 9 - What are the barriers to achieving specific childcare qualifications for childminders?
- Objective 10 - Does Quality First Accreditation (from NICMA) benefit childminders? If so, how? If not, why not?

Using the summary headings above, the remainder of this final chapter presents the key findings of the research, the resultant conclusions that can be drawn from these and recommendations for improving childminding practice, including implications for relevant policy development.

9.1 Profile of childminders

9.1.1 Summary of key findings

- The research found that there is no typical childminder in Northern Ireland. Whilst the majority are white females, they vary in terms of age and religion, experience and qualifications held.
- With the exception of those qualified at diploma/degree level, childminders in this research are better qualified than the general population. They are also less likely to have no qualifications than the general population - 16% have no general qualifications compared to 29% in the most recent census (NI Census, 2011). Older childminders (aged 61+) tend to be more likely not to have any qualifications following the trend in the general population (NI Census, 2011).
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are not required to hold any specific childcare qualifications but over half of those participating in this research do. Again, older childminders are much less likely to hold childcare qualifications. Childminders in the Belfast HSCT area are more likely to have no childcare qualifications compared to those based in the Western HSCT.
- Childminders in Northern Ireland are very experienced with almost two-thirds of research participants having more than 4 years experience as a childminder. Half

have experience of working in another early years or educational setting prior to becoming a childminder.

- On average, childminders in this study are being paid to look after 4 children from 3 different families. As childminders generally are registered to care for 6 children, this suggests that, on average, childminders have 2 free places to fill (although childminders' own children may be taking up these places). 11% of childminders surveyed provide care for children with special needs.
- Many childminders work on average 7.3 hours per week day. One-third of those surveyed work later than 6pm, two-thirds before 8am and 12% provide care overnight.

9.1.2 Conclusions

- Childminders in this research have demonstrated that childminding is a purposeful and permanent career choice and is not a short-term or temporary job.
- Although there is no obligation on childminders to hold *specific childcare qualifications*, more than half do, which is evidence of their dedication and commitment to a chosen profession and career path.
- However, there are gaps in relation to the holding of qualifications, particularly for older childminders. They may be very experienced but they may also be missing out on new developments regarding caring for children, which could have an impact on their work.
- A relatively high proportion of childminders care for children with special needs. Such childminders may require specialised training on specific conditions in order to fully meet the needs of the children they care for.

9.2 Features of childminding practice

9.2.1 Summary of key findings

- Childminders in this research had more mixed views than McGaha et al., (2011) and Child Action Inc (undated) in relation to planning. Some indicated that it was an

important element of childminding practice. However, many felt that planning needed to be flexible to meet the needs of children, cope with the demands of the weather, accommodate older children's routines (e.g. school collections) and facilitate free play and child-led activities.

- Childminders reported that children in their care were involved in a wide range of activities to stimulate various development areas. The most common of these were gross motor skills activities, activities that develop language skills, early literacy, numeracy and cognitive abilities, creative activities and imaginary play.
- In the interviews and Kids Life and Times (KLT) survey children expressed their enjoyment and happiness in participating in a wide range of activities at their childminders. These activities included baking, watching TV and playing computer games. Notably, children were more likely to report watching TV in a childminding setting than in an after-schools club.
- Many children enjoyed playing outside at their childminders. Key outdoor activities included football and playing with garden toys (e.g. trampolines).
- Completing homework also featured prominently for school-going children in the KLT survey and interviews as an activity undertaken at their childminders.
- Childminders supplemented children's experience to aid their development by using low-cost or no-cost facilities outside of their home when caring for children, including local parks, playgrounds and libraries.
- Childminders valued free play and reported incorporating early education and learning into their practice through the provision of free play. Free play was also seen as beneficial in encouraging and enabling children's imagination.
- For the most part both parents and childminders believed that their role involved providing both care and early education. Childminders stressed that caring and educating are interdependent aspects of their role.

9.2.2 Conclusions

- The degree to which childminders reported planning daily activities, the range of activities they indicated undertaking and their reported use of other facilities, such as libraries and parks, to engage children, suggests that childminding practice is an intentional effort to help develop children's abilities, skills and capacities.

- Childminders' role as both carers and co-educators with parents clearly suggests that childminders are working in line with recommendations from the Nutbrown Review (2012), which stressed the importance of facilitating learning in an early years setting, and are also supporting the educational development of school-aged children.
- Given the dependence on local amenities, any future and recent cutbacks (including those that have resulted in library closures) may have a detrimental impact on both childminders and the children in their care.
- In order to facilitate free play, childminders require access to a wide range of resources or the use of open-ended resources (e.g. art and craft materials). Lack of, or limited access to, such resources (as well as a lack of knowledge of how to use them) may mean, that some children being cared for by a childminder are less likely to participate in, and benefit from, free play.

9.2.3 Policy and practice recommendations

These findings provide a clear message to policy makers about the important role childminders can play in the early education of children. Current and future opportunities targeting young children's development, such as the Get Involved in Your Child's Education programme from the Department of Education, should acknowledge this role and be extended to include other significant adults in a child's life, such as childminders.

1. We recommend that the Department of Education initiates a public education campaign aimed at parents to raise their awareness, and recognise the potential value, of the everyday early education development that happens in a childminding setting. Parents need to be more aware that children can learn valuable skills at home and at their childminders *before* their formal education begins. This could be achieved through the distribution of leaflets, posters and billboards in public places such as doctors' surgeries, libraries, public transport spaces and pre-school settings.
2. Childminders should be trained to work with open ended resources in order to facilitate free play more effectively in their settings.

9.3 Quality in childminding practice

9.3.1 Summary of key findings

- Quality in a childminding setting is a multi-faceted concept comprising of the provision of a safe physical environment, childminder-child, childminder-parent interactions, flexibility and childminders' adherence to policy and procedures (including the inspection process). In the focus groups, childminders were more likely to state that the relationship they have with a parent is fundamental to providing a high quality service and parents were more likely to point towards the physical setting offered by a childminder and the child-centred elements of their practice.
- Childcare training and qualifications are not of primary importance to parents and childminders in regards to the quality of childminding practice, though they were felt to be of benefit in terms of continuous professional development.
- Parents and childminders stated that the quality of care offered in a childminding setting was higher than that offered in other childcare settings. The reasons for this included: the unique home-like environment offered; the development of secure attachments and; individualised care and flexibility.
- These findings support the views of Leach (2011) who maintains that the 'ordinary-ness' of the home environment and its everyday activities has a bigger positive impact on children compared to more structured settings. Leach (2011) attributes this impact to secure attachments between the childminder and child, and there was evidence of these attachments in childminders' settings.
- Parents' primary reason for choosing childminding over other forms of childcare was the homely environment offered.
- It was felt that childminders do not hold the same professional status as other childcare professionals. Reasons for these views included: childminders are viewed as 'stay at home mums'; childminding is considered an easy job; childminders are not required to hold any specific childcare training or qualifications and; the existence of unregistered childminders undermines the professionalism of childminding.

9.3.2 Conclusions

- More reflective practice can be encouraged through specific childcare training which may in turn raise the quality of care provided.
- The lack of mandatory specific childcare qualifications for childminders is a barrier to raising the status of registered childminding and the existence of unregistered childminders undermines attempts by registered childminders to prove the quality of their work to the general public.

9.3.3 Policy and practice recommendations

1. These findings suggest that more needs to be done to raise the profile and status of childminding, in particular around the professional aspects of the role and the care features that are associated with high quality in a childminding setting, e.g. the homely environment, the experienced workforce, personal relationships and the child-centred flexible approach.
2. In order to enhance the profile and status of childminding, the DHSSPS, the HSCTs and associated relevant structures such as Childcare Partnerships and voluntary sector organisations such as NICMA, need to raise public awareness of:
 - a. the high quality of care offered in a childminding setting
 - b. the prevalence of childcare qualifications amongst childminders in Northern Ireland
 - c. the high level of experience held by childminders (65% have more than 4 years childminding experience)
 - d. the range of activities childminders provide that contribute to children's learning and development
 - e. the homely environment of the setting and the potential for secure attachments being formed between the child and childminder.
3. Greater support also needs to be given to childminders by the HSCTs, NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships in managing their relationships with parents so that the benefits for children of being in a mixed age setting are optimised.
4. We recommend that the HSCTs make inspection reports available online to ensure greater transparency and so that parents can make an informed decision regarding

their choice of childcare.

5. Given the introduction of the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care (DHSSPS, 2012) during the course of this research and its aim of raising the quality of care provided to children we recommend that the impact of the Standards is evaluated across the full range of childcare settings in Northern Ireland.
6. The forthcoming childcare strategy is due later in 2014 and needs to take account of this research, its findings, conclusions, policy implications and recommendations. Childminding, as it provides the greatest number of childcare places in Northern Ireland, needs to be more explicitly recognised in this strategy.

9.4 Benefits and challenges of vertical grouping

9.4.1 Summary of key findings

- Parents, childminders and children identified many benefits associated with vertical grouping.
- One of the main benefits was the promotion of learning, with a majority of childminders (98%) and parents (97%) stating that children learn a lot from older children. These views on the promotion of learning in mixed age placements were echoed in the focus groups.
- A high proportion (88%) of both parents and childminders noted that mixed age settings have a family feel more commonly associated with a home and children benefit from this natural environment. Linked to this, children noted that they liked spending time with siblings at their childminders.
- Older children acting as positive role models, the development of social skills such as patience, empathy and leadership, and the promotion of mixed age friendships were all additional benefits of mixed age settings identified by the respondents.
- In the survey findings, childminders were more likely than parents to identify challenges associated with mixed age placements.
- One of these challenges involved the logistics of catering for the needs of different age groups, i.e. scheduling younger children's nap times around school pick-ups (43% of childminders identified this as a challenge compared to 22% of parents).

- Not having enough resources to meet the needs of different age groups was another challenge more likely to be identified in the survey findings by childminders (36%) than parents (9%). However, in the focus groups and interviews this issue was raised by all groups of respondents, including children.
- There were mixed views from childminders and parents on behavioural challenges of mixed age settings.
- Childminders identified the challenge of older children being domineering of younger children and childminders (24%) were more likely to identify the challenge of older children becoming more babyish as a result of being around younger children compared to parents (7%) in the survey findings. In addition, childminders and children were more likely to note that younger children can disrupt the activities of older children.
- Although behavioural issues, such as older children bullying and being too rough around younger children, were identified only by a small proportion of childminders and parents in the survey findings, in the focus groups some respondents did express concerns about older children exposing younger children to age inappropriate activities (e.g. electronic games/devices).
- Solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping included improved planning and having access to a wide variety of resources and activities. Some childminders' views echoed those of Child Action Inc (undated) when discussing the importance of planning when caring for children of mixed ages.
- Overall, the benefits of mixed age settings were seen to outweigh the challenges because they are similar to a home setting, they promote learning and the development of social skills, different age groups (including siblings) can enjoy being together and there is less pressure for children to conform to age expected 'norms'.
- Childminders (91%) and parents (90%) also felt that children learn from participating in everyday activities with their childminder.

9.4.2 Conclusions

- All participants (adults and children) in this research could readily identify several benefits of vertical grouping. However, challenges of vertical grouping are more readily identified by childminders and children than by parents. Perhaps this is because childminders and children experience firsthand both challenges and

benefits whereas parents are not physically present in the childminding setting. There is a consensus among parents and childminders that the perceived benefits of vertical grouping far outweigh the associated challenges and drawbacks.

- Childminders may need to be provided with more support in order to mitigate the challenges of vertical grouping so that the benefits can be maximised for the children in their care.

9.4.3 Policy and practice recommendations

1. These findings show children benefit from being cared for in mixed age settings. As vertical grouping is a characteristic unique to childminding settings, the public awareness campaign mentioned previously should also include this unique feature of childminding. This should focus on the many benefits of vertical grouping identified in this research, for example:
 - a. Opportunities for learning
 - b. Mixed age friendships
 - c. Older children becoming role models
 - d. Development of social skills
 - e. Siblings being cared for together
2. We recommend that in the promotion of childminding as a form of childcare, NICMA should emphasise the benefits of vertical placements to parents.
3. We recommend that current training for childminders provided by NICMA, the Childcare Partnerships and Further Education Colleges incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping, for example, by recommending the use of open-ended resources and activities and weekly planners.
4. As some older children reported experiencing loneliness and boredom as a result of being cared for in a mixed age setting, we recommend that childminders are encouraged to include and listen to the voices of these children in the development of their weekly planners and associated activities.

9.5 Support and development of childminding practice

9.5.1 Summary of key findings

- Childminders main sources of childcare training were the HSCT Teams and NICMA and many of the childminders had taken up training opportunities.
- One fifth of childminders had not accessed childcare training and discrepancies were identified according to geography and age. Childminders from the Northern HSCT and those aged 61+ were more likely not to have accessed childcare training.
- The main barriers which prevented childminders from accessing childcare training were scheduling, location and cost.
- Childminders identified a range of sources of support, e.g. peer support, NICMA and Early Years Teams from the HSCTs.
- While peer support was important to many childminders, membership of childminding networks and support groups was low which suggests that many childminders engage with their peers informally for support. Childminders identified confidentiality concerns and poor governance as key barriers to their involvement in childminding support groups and networks.
- Overall, childminders were satisfied with the practice support and advice that they had received.
- Addressing unregistered childminding was considered a key way to enhance childminding practice in Northern Ireland. Actions identified to address this issue included a public education campaign aimed at parents and a greater enforcement of the law.
- Awareness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was low amongst childminders. Those that were aware of EYFS had mixed opinions about the introduction of an equivalent set of standards for early childcare providers in Northern Ireland, with 21% stating that it should be introduced and 27% stating that it should not.
- These findings and reactions to the idea of a set of standards similar to EYFS reflect the debate in the literature about the education-care divide/continuum within early years provision as outlined by Lindon (2006), Adams and Adams (2011) and Laing (2011).

9.5.2 Conclusions

- The large proportion of childminders accessing childcare training is an indication of the interest childminders have in their profession. However, some barriers associated with accessing training seem insurmountable for childminders which may prevent a significant minority furthering their career. Some 11% of childminders care for children with special needs and therefore it is crucial that they are equipped to meet these specific needs. However, the lack of specific childcare qualifications and lack of take up of training opportunities among some childminders raises concerns that some childminders may be caring for children with special needs without having appropriate skills and knowledge.
- The high levels of satisfaction among childminders with the levels of support offered is encouraging to those in the HSCTs and NICMA and is an endorsement of the quality of peer support among childminders in Northern Ireland.
- However, the isolation felt by some childminders (and especially non-NICMA members) suggests that more could be done to enhance support for all childminders in Northern Ireland.
- NICMA's Quality First Accreditation has been of benefit to childminders in terms of giving parents confidence in their practice and providing the childminders with new ideas.

9.5.3 Policy and practice recommendations

1. While the actions outlined by Bright Start, i.e. the development of the childcare workforce, are to be welcomed, if these are to be achieved there is a need for cross-departmental cooperation where DHSSPS, DE and OFMDFM act together in terms of the development of childcare and early education practice and for DEL to be involved in workforce development. The development of the workforce within childminding needs to be adequately and appropriately resourced with relevant and accessible training, addressing the barriers identified in this research. We recommend that OFMDFM ring fence funding for this purpose.
2. Training providers should explore the provision of modules/units in specific areas as well as full courses leading to qualifications.
3. As previously mentioned, it is vital that current training that exists for childminders incorporates content which specifically attempts to overcome the challenges of vertical grouping. The Childcare Partnerships should devise a training course focusing

on this aspect of childminding practice. This course should:

- a. Include definitions of vertical grouping.
 - b. Highlight the benefits of vertical grouping which include the promotion of learning, the homely feel of a mixed age setting, positive role models, the development of social skills and the promotion of mixed age friendships.
 - c. Highlight the challenges of vertical grouping which include logistical issues when caring for different age groups, not having enough resources to meet the needs of different age groups and behavioural challenges such as older children becoming more babyish around younger children and younger children disrupting the activities of older children.
 - d. Identify solutions to the challenges of vertical grouping, such as improved planning, open-ended resources and activities.
4. Training for new and existing childminders should emphasise what quality in childminding practice looks like and how best to achieve this.
 5. The status of childminding and indeed childminding practice is likely to improve through a higher proportion of childminders completing specific childcare training and qualifications. However, training providers need to take greater cognisance of the barriers identified in this research to childminders accessing training. For example, training by all providers should be organised at a time that is convenient to childminders (i.e. after 7pm or on weekends) and an appropriate number of spaces must be made available. These barriers need to be addressed if the key first actions of the Bright Start programme are to be achieved, i.e. the development of the childcare workforce.
 6. As childminders would be unwilling to charge more for having higher qualifications, for fear of losing business, other incentives need to be considered if they are to be encouraged to develop professionally. For example, free or discounted training, vouchers for free play resources, discounts on insurance.
 7. Older childminders need to be encouraged and incentivised to take up training opportunities, perhaps by involving them in the provision of training so that they can share their vast experience with their younger peers. This could be done through a buddy system where new childminders are linked with more experienced childminders who can act as a mentor.
 8. In order to encourage a higher uptake of childcare qualifications amongst childminders, we recommend that training providers and support organisations provide a platform for qualified childminders to share their experiences of

completing qualifications and how they have incorporated this learning into their practice effectively. We recommend that these knowledge sharing opportunities take place at information sessions for prospective childminders, at the NICMA AGM and as part of childminding training programmes and support groups.

9. Childminders who are caring for children with special needs need to have access to appropriate training in order to meet these children's specific needs.
10. We welcome the intention to have an advertising campaign within the Bright Start action plan to promote the benefits of registered childcare to parents. However, we also recommend that there should be an education campaign led by the DHSSPS, HSCTs, the Childcare Partnerships and NICMA in relation to childminding aimed at the following:
 - a. Current and prospective unregistered childminders – to highlight the fact that such practice is illegal and to reinforce the benefits of being registered.
 - b. The general public - to highlight the professionalism of childminding, what it entails and communicate the quality features of childminding practice.
11. We recommend that there should be more robust enforcement of the law regarding unregistered childminding by the DHSSPS and HSCTs.
12. Despite childminders' membership of support groups being low, there is evidence to suggest that childminders do see value in participating in these networks (i.e. opportunity to share good practice and support networks can help reduce isolation). We recommend that NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships address the barriers identified in the research to childminders' participation in these groups. For example, NICMA and non-NICMA members should be offered guidance in establishing and running support groups with the assistance of support workers from NICMA and the Childcare Partnerships.
13. A high proportion of childminders who completed the NICMA Quality First Accreditation found this course of benefit. We recommend that NICMA promote the benefits identified in the research of undertaking this course. For example, it gave parents confidence in childminders' practice and provided childminders with new ideas.
14. We recommend that NICMA consider offering different levels of membership, for example, 'comprehensive membership' might cover insurance and support, whereas 'basic level' membership might cover support needs only. This may enable those childminders who do not wish to purchase insurance from NICMA to still access support in order to develop their practice.

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