

Report on childminders study group 2014-2018

Helen Butcher and Richard Eke were able to draw on research and innovation funding arising from the successful bid, initiated by Richard Eke, for funding to provide education and training leading to the recognition of individual trainees of Early Years Professional Status for successful candidates. The funding was targeted on issues related to training to teach the Early Years Foundation Stage with a twin focus on kindness and professional education. The theme of learning to be kind underpinned two types of provision, sessions organised by (what is now) UWE Bristol's Department of Education. The first was a series of seminars for members of the early years team with an offer extended to early childhood partners from Bristol and South Gloucestershire on the theme of '*Thoughtful Children*'. These sessions were used for both data gathering and dissemination of recent research and theorising to early childhood professionals. A second seminar series, '*More Thoughtful Children*' followed a year later amongst which was a presentation by Butcher and Eke that included material gathered during the previous seminar series.

Childminders were included amongst the invitees to these sessions, in addition a series of childminder specific sessions were organised with the assistance of a local authority childminding specialist. In these sessions childminders were invited to discuss and develop their perceptions of the roles and responsibilities accepted and adopted by childminders.

In the course of participant led dialogues a number of thematic itineraries were followed some of which were recurrent adopting common iterative restatements:

- Some ways in which childminding impacts on family life
- Opportunities for meeting with fellow childminders
- Reported remarks of children.

Some ways in which childminding impacts on family life

DBS checking for other adults in the family who may, from time to time assist with childcare. Childminders reported that although their husbands (all our participants were women) were often registered to act as childminders and were DBS checked they were reluctant to supervise playful activity with young children alone and with sole responsibility. Childminders reported how sad it was that their partners were reluctant to engage in playful activity with young children, when they were absent, because their partners were 'lovely with young children'.

There was a consensus that the children were often delighted when husbands returned home and they were able to 'climb over them' and give and ask for hugs. 'It is such a shame that they feel unprotected unless I (female childminder) am present to vouch for their conduct, even though they are registered and hold DBS clearance'. This was a matter for regret since some young children seemed to take a special pleasure in the company of older males. Their own children also reported to enjoy the company of the enrolled children and to engage in playful activities with enrolled children even though there could be a considerable age difference.

Childminders also spoke of the burden of planning for and reporting on the learning of the young children they worked with. The researchers felt this may well be a reflection of the conscientiousness of childminders in general and the group they were working with in particular. When the data reported here was gathered these childminders voiced concerns about the need to be able to demonstrate their active engagement with evidencing their work with children's learning referencing the expectations of the early years foundation stage. They reported that although they were always ready to report this to parents, they found parents eager to collect their children and head for their homes. They also felt the need (when data the dialogues occurred) to be prepared to demonstrate their capacity for planning and recording to outside agencies (e.g. LEA/Ofsted) although the application of published frameworks to childminders was, at the time, unclear.

The framework for inspection and the EYFS were utilised by these childminders as conversational reference points. They discussed what good evidence would look like in terms of effective planning and recording of young children's learning. They reported the maintenance of highly individualised records of planning and recording for each child in their care. They discussed how Ofsted might regard their evidence and what needed to be continually maintained in order to demonstrate that they complied with published requirement.

Through such conversations they showed their capacity for group self-monitoring, becoming, in effect, experts on self-surveillance. The time demands of these activities were reported by some as if having a day's work caring for children and then feeling obliged to do another half days work on recording and planning, It seemed as if the degree to which they felt it necessary to self-regulate meant that but for the joy of working with young children and the satisfactions of knowing children for a sustained period of time, they would not find childminding a worthwhile activity.

Opportunities for meeting with fellow childminders

The group reported two key forms of meeting with fellow childminders, one was seen as being of direct benefit to themselves as childminders, and thus of indirect benefit to the children they worked with these were adult focussed meetings sometimes organised by local authority representatives providing updates of curriculum, inspection, or local opportunities.

The other kind of meeting was the observed side of the coin, being of direct benefit to children and indirect benefit to childminders, these meeting were often organised between two or three childminders to enable children to enjoy outside spaces and opportunities for broader socialisation. The childminders made reference to 'forest schools' provision and 'preparation for school' where children would need to socialise within larger numbers of pupils. The broader range of environmental and social experience was seen as of direct benefit to children. It also provided informal opportunities for childminders to exchange knowledge of useful resources, for example helpful websites, and of useful worthwhile playful activities. It also provided opportunities for moderating their perceptions of children's learning through direct shared observation of young children in action.

Reported remarks of children

Childminders reported dialogues with young children about relationships within the childminding group broadly similar to those reported by Hussain (e.g.201x) about whom they liked and whom they loved. They also observed that they were lucky because it was if they had *two mummies*, the childminder and their real mummy at home. There were some fleeting references to young children's kindness towards each other but no sustained conversation on this theme.

Conclusion

The researchers felt privileged to have been party to these dialogues with childminders who came from a variety of backgrounds. As meetings progressed and seemed to become increasingly recursive, revisiting particular themes with further illustration, or sometimes referencing illustrations from earlier meetings the researchers attempted to clarify what was useful about meeting at a university. The opportunity to talk to each other and hear about other childminders experiences seemed to be a recurrent theme.

The researchers asked about the specifics of opportunities provided by a university, including access to scholarly research activities and publications, perhaps agreeing a focus for debate and discussion at subsequent meetings. The childminders articulated a strong preference for the free-flow dialogue that had been developed, and which they clearly enjoyed. The researchers found it difficult to identify where the university was adding value for these childminders and since there seemed to be a consensus on this point it was agreed that the researchers would invite the childminders to any future large early childhood meetings with which they were involved. On this basis it was agreed to put aside any plans for further university-based meetings of the group.

Richard Eke and Helen Butcher, January 2019