

France's registered childminders: many roadblocks to professionalization.

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Abstract:

France's registered childminders ('assistantes maternelles agréées'), most of whom are employed by private citizens to provide childcare in their own homes, are the leading source of formal daycare for children under the age of 3, which is an exception in Europe. However, they encounter various obstacles to their professionalization. This article takes a look at the registered childminder's profession through an analytical framework grounded in sociological profession theories. It demonstrates that, despite no longer being a part of the informal sector, registered childminders have low levels of social recognition and are still afforded little autonomy.

Key words: Profession, registered childminder, social recognition, autonomy.

Introduction

Registered childminders ("assistantes maternelles agréées") are the leading source of formal daycare for young children in France. They provide daycare services to children under the age of 6, mainly those not yet enrolled in school (from 3 years old). To be able to practice, a childminder must receive a specific accreditation from their local mother-and-child wellness authority ("Protection maternelle et infantile"/ PMI), which also conducts inspections during the accreditation period and is responsible for renewing accreditations. The accreditation specifies the number of children the childminder is authorized to care for, which is capped at four. Registered childminders undergo 120 hours of compulsory initial training, two third of which must be completed within six months of receiving accreditation, and the other third within three years. As determined by their status and/or the terms of their accreditation, daycare services will be provided either in the registered childminder's own home, in a family daycare center ("crèche familiale") or at a Registered childminders' house ("Maison d'assistante maternelle"/ Mam).

The quantitative preponderance of this daycare solution is atypical in Europe. Only a few other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Germany) provide a significant level of individual daycare, but not to the same extent as France (European Commission/EACEN/Eurydice, 2015).

That means that the current debates on professionalization in the early-childhood sector pertain first and foremost to registered childminders. Indeed, when the French president announced a nationwide poverty prevention and eradication strategy in September 2018, it included a "training plan and new standards for 600,000 early-childhood professionals to promote children's language development and language learning before they begin nursery

school". France's 312,400 currently employed registered childminders make up more than half of that number.

The position occupied by registered childminders among the various early childhood professions remains a singular one. Long ignored by sociologists, this line of work has been the subject of a growing body of research since the late 1990s. This research has shed light on registered childminders' working and employment conditions and on how these have evolved (see Mozère, 2001; Devetter, 2012). The terms "occupation," "career," and "profession" are generally considered to be interchangeable in these works. Certain studies even raise the issue of registered childminders' "professionalization" (Alberola, 2009; Brougère et al., 2001; Aballéa, 2005). The definition of these terms is often implicit and mainly refers to registered childminders' training (Fagnani and Math, 2012 in particular), with little or no reference to international literature which has conceptualized the term "profession."

Against this backdrop, this article will seek to analyze professionalization for France's registered childminders through an analytical framework derived from sociological theory of the profession. While diverse, the competing currents in sociological theory coalesce around the idea that not any line of work is necessarily a profession, the latter being distinguished by the social recognition and autonomy which it confers. This theoretical model can be used to shed light on the complex nature of registered childminders' professionalization, which is understood as the process by which this line of work could become a profession.

This study draws on the empirical research which has been conducted on registered childminders, whether this is quantitative (data on the number of registered child minders, their qualifications, and their wages) or qualitative (making use of ethnographical studies, discourse analysis, or surveys of registered childminders, institution officials, or parents). Accompanying these secondary analyses is a study of how this line of work is regulated (an analysis of the rules

governing the registered childminder's line of work, applicable labor law, and training requirements). The method we have selected grounds itself in profession literature to establish a series of professionalization indicators (part 1) against which registered childminders' degree of professionalization will be assessed on the basis of existing data (part 2).

Theoretical framework: Identifying professions and the process of professionalization

The concepts of the profession and of professionalization have been conceptualized using a range of approaches in earlier literature, and applied to the early-childhood field, which has some specific characteristics. An analysis of this earlier work brings out two synthetic professionalization indicators which are relevant to this study of registered childminders' status in France: their levels of social recognition and autonomy.

The concept of the profession in sociological literature

The extensive body of existing sociological literature on the concept of the profession offers three separate main approaches.

The "traits-based" approach seeks to isolate the characteristics that set a profession apart from a job or an occupation. Using this approach, Greenwood (1957) identifies five traits: the existence of a profession-specific body of knowledge and of an authority that is recognized by "clients" and by the State, regulation and oversight of members; the existence of a professional code of ethics, and the development of a professional culture made up of values and standards, supported by a professional association. Other scholars focus on a narrower set of factors. For example, Wilenski (1964) points out two essential criteria: autonomy and the service ideal.

The functionalist approach, which was developed in the United States beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, additionally highlights the interactions between professions and society. According to Parsons, the leading figure for this approach, professions are defined based on the importance of their social function, which justifies the protections and autonomy which they are afforded. Professionalization is therefore the process by which a line of work serves an essential function for society (Parsons, 1955).

The third approach focuses on power relationships and takes a critical look at professions' claim to serve society. Professions set themselves apart from occupations through their ability to oversee their work and to structure the market for the services they provide (Johnsson, 1972). According to Freidson (1970), a monopoly or oversight over one's own work is therefore the leading characteristic of the ideal-typical profession. Like the traits-based approach, the power relations approach leads to the determination of a professional hierarchy, but one that is based on a different criterion. According to this approach, some professions come close to ideal-typical status but have not established sufficient cognitive authority to be able to control discourse on their work.

These works have led to a definition of the ideal-typical profession. To achieve it is not an obstacle-free process in the early-childhood sector.

Obstacles to professionalization in the early-childhood sector

According to Etzioni (1969), there are "semi-professions" which are defined by a shorter training period, less legitimacy of status, less access to communication, less specialized literature, and a lower level of autonomy in regard to supervision and societal oversight. Members of "semi-professions" are often employed by female-majority bureaucratic organizations. They have a lower degree of autonomy than those in professions because the

associated body of knowledge is largely drawn from other lines of work (Simpson and Simpson, 1969). The early-childhood sector possesses these characteristics, which are common to all of the "caring" professions.

In addition, the early-childhood professions are characterized by three specific issues when it comes to profession-based recognition: being equated with mothering, the role of emotions, and the authorities' approach to their professionalization.

These occupations are frequently equated with mothering, denying the existence of profession-specific skills. Early childhood education and care services (ECEC) are still viewed in many countries as mothers' work (Peeters, 2008) and the "maternalistic" discourse is very common (Mc Gillivray, 2008).

This view is inextricably connected to the highly-gendered core of their workforce and to low wage levels. This makes asserting a professional skill set that sets ECEC providers apart from women's "natural" skills all the more necessary in order to signal the boundary between their work and mothering. According to Campbell-Bar, Georgeson, and Selbie (2015), these "boundaries" require a university degree, profession-specific terminology, shared values, and a dress code.

The connection with emotions is also a central and much debated component of the early-childhood professions' skill set. According to Hochschild (1983), "emotional work" plays a greater role in service and care-based professions, and rests heavily on women. Osgood (2010) draws on this to call for professionalization in the early-childhood sector to be re-conceptualized to promote emotional work as being central to the sector-specific practices which must be boosted through training.

However, this is not the approach that has been adopted by government authorities. Since the late 1990s, the increasing attention paid to ECEC on the political agenda, as

encouraged by the Organization for economic cooperation and development (OECD) through its series of Starting strong reports (OECD 2001, 2006, and 2009), has gone hand-in-hand with greater expectations for ECEC providers through professionalization. These approaches which claim to be grounded in evidence-based practice or based on "what works" (Allard and Ricky, 2017) are thus presented by various scholars as contrary to ECEC providers' autonomy (Urban, 2008). They are claimed to show a lack of understanding of the complexity of the required skills: the importance of relations with other providers in building the professional skill set for the early-childhood sector (Balduzzi, 2011); of using reflective practices (Schön, 1983; Jarvis, 1999), meaning the ability to reflect critically on the practices used; negotiation skills (Urban, 2008), and the complex nature of work that requires the provider to build relationships simultaneously with parents, children, and other providers, and thus make several relationship networks work together (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

This has resulted in a discrepancy between the complexity of the skills put to work by early-childhood providers and their low level of autonomy when it comes to defining these skills. The professional skill set for these professions appears to be positioned in a triangular relationship among government authorities, academia, and the early-childhood sectors, each of which has its own specific values, priorities, and approaches (Havnes, 2018). Input from those who have the most direct role in using the practices are said to play only a minor role in determining applicable standards. It is also said that there is a considerable difference in levels between the area where the body of knowledge is produced (scholarly research), imparted (training), and applied (practice), and tensions among these (Urban, 2008).

This literature allows to identify professionalization indicators which are applicable to registered childminders.

Indicators of the existence of a profession

Based on this analysis of the existing research, the various indicators identified can be classified into two categories: social recognition, a concept that draws on the functionalist approach; and autonomy as this refers to strength of position in power relationships, particularly in regard to the other lines of work in the field and to government authorities and the body of knowledge specific to the traits-based approach.

- 1) Social recognition: this is measured by legal recognition, working conditions, and social representations.
- 2) Autonomy: this is measured by members' oversight over entry into the profession, their independent ability to set standards and determine profession-specific values and knowledge, in particular through reflective working practices, by the degree of collective organization, and by power relationships with other lines of work and influence on government authorities.

What follows is a study of registered childminders' professionalization level on the basis of these two analytical perspectives.

Case study: an analysis of professionalization for registered childminders in France

A methodological application of the analytical framework defined above shows that despite the progress that has been made over the past 40 years in terms of improved legal recognition for this line of work, registered childminders do not meet the characteristics of a profession for most indicators.

A low level of social recognition

There is no equivalence between the existence of a formal legal framework for a line of work and the level of social recognition. A line of work can have a legal framework and still be only poorly recognized, while in theory an informal activity could be held in high esteem by the public.

However, in modern developed economies, where formal wage employment has been generalized, an informal activity will necessarily be at the lowest level of social hierarchy. Therefore, coming from the informal sector is a prerequisite for the registered childminder's work to gain social recognition as a profession. But this social recognition has not been sufficient as these women's work continues to be made largely invisible.

A historic exit from the informal sector through government action

In France, the registered childminder's job grew out from the role of the wet nurse, who, at certain times in history, was called to fulfil a widespread demand for children to be breastfed outside their parents' home (Mozère, 2001; Tirmarche-Issemann, 2011). For a long time, they were sidelined from the large-scale effort to organize salaried employment and recognize entitlements, and the subsequent rollout of security coverage. Their job was an informal one, according to the definition provided by the International Labour Office for this type of working relationship. Informal jobs are those whose employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits (ILO, 2018). These workers belonged to this last category.

France's registered childminders are the last among in-home workers, who have historically made up a very vulnerable, mainly female and particularly low-paid proportion of

the working population (Battagliola, 2008), to receive legal protections. French law of May 17, 1977 on registered childminders marked a real turning point. It provides for several sections of the French labour code to apply to the working relationship between parents and the registered childminder and institutes a guaranteed wage that is calculated on the basis of the French minimum wage ("Smic") and paid for each child, thereby legally lifting registered childminders out of the informal sector.

Informal employment nonetheless remained widespread: in the 1980s, there were only 135,000 registered childminders while the census showed 258,000 women to be employed in that line of work (Cartier, 2015). However, the creation of a family benefit, Aid for families employing a registered childminder ("Aide à la famille pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agréée"/ AFEAMA) under the French law of July 6, 1990, lifted that obstacle as parents are not entitled if they continue to provide informal employment (Tirmarche-Isseman, 2011). An increase to that aid beginning in 1992, along with the creation of a tax write-off for childcare expenses, added to that incentive. As a result, France's number of registered childminders rose continuously for a period of more than 20 years, until 2014.

However, this foothold in the formal sector remains a fragile one as it remains dependent on considerable government financial prop-ups to families. This characteristic appears to be shared throughout the personal service sector in France (Credoc/DGE/DNLF, 2015). At the end of 2018, there was a social movement among childminders named the "pink jackets", protesting against a reform of unemployment benefits which would harm childminders who get an allowance when one of the parents removes their child. It highlights the vulnerability of childminders to a weakening of the social security net in times of budgetary constraint.

Indeed, the French government played a major role in bringing this occupation out of the informal sector. Nevertheless, some of the activities and responsibilities performed by

registered childminders have ambiguous social status as the boundaries between the in-home setting and their employment have not been clearly established.

Work made invisible

Several analyses describe registered childminders' work as "invisible" (UImann, 2012; Chavaroche-Laurent, 2012), meaning that some or all of the tasks and responsibilities they perform are not perceived as employment that requires specific skills.

Like those in other early-childhood-sector professions, most registered childminders - 99%- are women (Devetter, 2012). A significant proportion of them are also mothers (only 14% became registered childminders before having children of their own, Devetter, 2012). In the past, the mother's role has been a major contributing factor toward registered childminders' decision to enter this line of work, whether this type of employment serves as a work-family reconciliation tool that allows them to care for their own child while being paid (Alberola, 2009) or is an occupation they "settle for" after a life accident, whether profession-related or not (Devineau, 2018; Cartier, 2015; Devetter, 2012; Alberola, 2009).

By working in their own home, where they may also care for or have raised their own children, registered childminders are unable to create the boundary between work and family life that is required in order for an occupation to constitute a profession (Alberola, 2009). Indeed, only 2% of registered childminders with private-citizen employers work at a Registered childminders' center (Mam) (Amrous and Borderies, 2017), meaning outside of their home, along with an additional 5% who are employed by family daycare centers ("crèches familiales") and work both out of their home and at a family daycare center (Unterreiner, 2017). Childminders belong to the category of "feminised jobs in the private sphere", a concept

designed by Ledoux (2011), which captures both the feminine and the domestic nature of these activities.

Research that has looked into the opinions of parents who employ a registered childminder shows that this family-centered and domestic aspect, "like being at home," is what is most highly appreciated and sought after (De Ridder and Legrand, 1995). However, if this aspect is a positive one insofar as it reassures parents in regard to the affection their child will be receiving during the day, it also creates a lack of consideration from parents, with studies on this issue showing that parents do not treat their employee like a real professional (Alberola, 2009). That being said, recent research has shown that their working conditions have significantly improved since the 2000s: they are better trained, informed about their rights, and less hesitant to negotiate their work and resigning conditions if they perceive that the employer-employee relationship is not going well (Cartier, 2015).

The invisibility of the registered childminder's profession is thus strongly linked to working and employment conditions. Their working time, in terms of both work day length and number of hours, is specific to this profession and falls under an exception of the French labour code, as does the method used to calculate their hourly wage. This calculation is based on France's gross minimum hourly wage ("Smic") per child (0.281 times), which requires the registered childminder to care for several children at once in order to earn a living wage. Wages also vary as determined by the number of hours worked (Tesson, Bideau and Besacier, 2010) and have been referred to as "piecework earnings" (Bosse Platière, 2008).

In light of the above, while French government authorities have brought a certain legal recognition for the registered childminder's profession, it is not a profession that is recognized as such on all levels of society. Moreover, this professional group is given a low level of autonomy.

A line of work with low autonomy

France's registered childminders have a limited level of autonomy within the early-childhood sector as they are dependent on government authorities and on other areas for the determination of their body of knowledge as well as for access to this profession (through accreditation). However, not only do they have more autonomy on a day-to-day basis than other women from the same social background, but reflective practices and standards appear to be emerging from their (sometimes partially) collective work.

A non-specific body of knowledge that is defined outside of the professional group

A professional group's identity is built around having its own degree, as members share a common experience of earning it and an official framework that describes the required skills. The educational facilities that award the degrees are also places where research is conducted and where the skills specific to the profession are established and developed. The lack of a registered childminder's degree and of any degree requirement to join this profession is an obstacle to professionalization for this line of work.

In order to boost professionalization, the legislative and regulatory framework that sets training requirements for registered childminders has been gradually reinforced (French law of July 12, 1992; French law of June 27, 2005; French decree of October 23, 2018). A "common core of skills and knowledge" which must be imparted by initial training and against which registered childminders must be assessed upon completion of training was defined in 2018. In theory, initial training, which is the responsibility of each of France's "départements" (or sub-regions) should focus not only on health and hygiene issues (Beaujoin, 2016) but additionally

cover the specific characteristics of the registered childminder's profession, the registered childminder's role, and their positioning among the various available daycare solutions, as well as the child's basic needs. This new guidance is intended to help training programs meet the objective of constituting a shared basis for the training of early-childcare professionals (Giampino, 2016).

Keeping pace with these legal reforms, there has been an increase in training- and skills-related expectations, both from registered childminders themselves and from the mother-and-child wellness authorities (PMI) which are in charge of accreditations and oversight. Indeed, the proportion of degree holders is higher among registered childminders with PMI accreditation than among applicants whose accreditation has been denied, a sign that these authorities view a degree as a positive resumé item (Vozari, 2014). Nonetheless, registered childminders still rarely use their training as a way to assert their legitimacy when dealing with parents (Tirmarche-Issemann, 2011) in a context in which holding a degree is not among the criteria parents use when selecting a registered childminder (Bouve, 2007; Fagnani and Math, 2012).

In regard to ongoing training, while demand for training from registered childminders (Devineau, 2018) is low, which can be partially explained by complexity of access, a recent increase in the number of applications has been observed (HCFEA, 2018). This observation is corroborated by the extent of expectations which registered childminders place on training, with 74% of them agreeing that training is important in order to be employed in this occupation (Tirmarche-Issemann, 2011, p. 134).

In this way, government authorities, which were responsible for lifting registered childminders out of the informal sector, also set training requirements and required content. This creates a dependent relationship between registered childminders and these authorities. At

the same time, registered childminders occupy the bottom rung of the early-childhood sector profession ladder.

On the bottom rung of the early-childhood sector profession ladder

The majority of France's registered childminders seem to be members of the working class, as determined by their level of education, their family's social origin, or their spouse's line of work (Unterreiner, 2017). Various studies have shown that registered childminders enjoy a much greater degree of autonomy and freedom in doing their job than the unskilled workers with whom they associate (Avril and Cartier, 2014). They do not have "a boss always looking over their shoulder" (Mozère, 1995), they do not have productivity objectives, and do not perform repetitive tasks if their working day is compared to that of women with comparable qualifications employed in retail or industry. For these members of the working classes, "[while it also helps to make the profession invisible], the domestic space constitutes (...) a social resource" (Ibid.). They can use it to generate income (Ibid.) while enjoying autonomy and considerable freedom to plan their days. That being said, registered childminders make up the only early-childhood-sector job besides parental home-based childcare providers ("auxiliaires parentales") with no degree requirement. The degree hierarchy does however appear to structure the early-childhood sector (Oberhuemer et al., 2010).

One could assume that the individual nature of their work sidelines childminders from an actual hierarchical relationship with the more highly-qualified jobs in their sector. However, the more highly-qualified professionals play an extensive role in registered childminders' training and oversight, through the PMI authorities (mainly pediatric nurses), or at Registered childminders' centers ("Relais assistantes maternelles"/ Ram, which are often run by early-childhood educators). The PMI authorities, which grant the required accreditation for this line

of work, are placed in a position of oversight over registered childminders. Vozari (2014) analyzes this relationship as a class-based one, between middle-class women and women who are almost all members of the working classes. This means symbolic domination, as accreditations are awarded based on applicants' adherence to middle-class values on women's emancipation or on finding the right balance between authority and consideration for a child's feelings. There also seems to be a certain level of ambiguity among evaluators when it comes to registered childminders' mothering role (Ibid.). While references to mothering skills remain in practice (Vapné and Kushtanina, publication pending), these skills are not sufficient to secure accreditation (Mozère, 2001). A growing expectation has recently been found, one that is used as a selection criterion, that the registered childminder will take a step away from their own role as a mother: applying for accreditation for the sole purpose of being able to continue to care for the applicant's own children can now result in the application being denied (Vozari, 2014). In any case, the PMI childcare experts' position of government-conferred authority shows registered childminders' low level of autonomy as they play no role in their selection and only a marginal one in their training, while these are decisive criteria for any line of work.

Indeed, Cartier (2015) described the registered childminder's profession as being in a "double subordinate relationship," both with the PMI authorities in charge of issuing accreditation and providing oversight, and with parent employers, despite the fact that registered childminders have displayed real skills in negotiating and in asserting their rights when dealing with the latter. Registered childminders are simultaneously dependent on the State authorities that govern their line of work and on demand for childcare services in their local area. This dependency on market conditions is a negative among the characteristics of this line of work, as the best-established lines of work do tend to provide their members with some level of protection from market forces (Parsons, 1955).

However, some collective working and professional group organization practices have been observed, drawing towards greater autonomy for this line of work.

An increasingly collective organizational setup

Due to its individual and home-based nature, the registered childminder's profession faces obstacles to collective organization. While individual practice is not an insurmountable obstacle, it has been demonstrated by a large number of private-practice professions (doctors, lawyers, etc.) that it is a hindrance to greater exchanges among professionals on their practices (Devineau, 2018). Moreover, registered childminders are at an additional disadvantage of having to deal with multiple employers, with whom informal arrangements may take precedence over worker's rights (Bloch and Buisson, 2003).

Currently, the only regulatory institution on which registered childminders are represented is the department-level joint advisory board ("commission consultative paritaire départementale"). The board is made up of representatives drawn from the department-level council ("conseil départemental"), registered childminders, and licensed foster parents, and is required to be consulted prior to any decision to cancel an accreditation, as well as on training programs and accreditation assessments.

In addition, registered childminders have had their own labor organizations since the 1970s, which were helped along in their development by the French law of May 17, 1977. Indeed, these unions and associations boasted a good membership rate by the late 2000s (Alberola, 2009). Tirmarche-Issemann (2011, p. 81) views their existence as "an assertion of a collective identity" for registered childminders. Moreover, the government authorities consult these groupings when a reform is under consideration, and some of them have been incorporated into the sector's advisory taskforces. For example, since it was created in 2017,

the Professional registered childminders' and foster parents' union ("Syndicat professionnel des assistants maternels et assistants familiaux"/ SPAMAF) has had a seat on the High Council for Families, Children, and Senior Citizens ("Haut conseil de la famille, de l'enfance et de l'âge"/ HCFEA), a consultative body that advises the French government on family policy.

Moreover, not all registered childminders work in isolation. Indeed, according to Avril and Cartier (2014), 20% of registered childminders report getting help from a third party when they need to accomplish difficult tasks while 30% report having work-related meetings. A qualitative study from these researchers confirms that invitations are made by early-childhood professionals (with municipal early-childhood departments, PMI offices, Registered childminders' centers (Ram), independent professional associations, etc.). Registered childminders also meet up informally at parks, when picking up children at school and waiting for them to come out of the classroom (Ibid.), at the games and toys library (Brougère et al., 2001), or during training (see Beaujoin, 2016 as an example). Registered childminders can use these interactions to share a wide variety of information on their rights, on their relations with their employers, and on their practices.

Additional opportunities to interact and provide structure to registered childminders as a group have been brought at the behest of the government authorities: family daycare centers ("crèches familiales") (Ministerial decrees of 1971 and 1975), Registered childminders' centers (Ram) from the late 1980s, and Registered childminders houses (Mam) in 2010. Rams are set up to provide information to parents and registered childminders and to act as facilitators (Aballéa, 2005). Sector professionals (Ram facilitators and managers, partners from France's Family Benefits funds, PMIs, and local authorities) recognize that they play a role in supporting registered childminders' professionalization (Alberola, 2009). Registered childminders also see Rams as places to acquire skills, information, and advice from the on-site facilitator and other registered childminders with whom they coincide (Ibid.). Moreover, "The RAM offers the use

of an area that is different from the home with opportunities to engage in a different type of activity (water games, group events, etc.)" (Ibid., p. 75). Finally, parents "seem to have realized that RAMs support registered childminders in their professionalization" (Ibid.). Parents who are familiar with these facilities may visit a RAM when looking to hire a new registered childminder and make RAM use one of their selection criteria, as those who go regularly are perceived as professional and offering the ideal childcare solution by combining one-on-one care with opportunities to socialize as part of a group.

As an exception to the rule by which registered childminders provide daycare services in their own home, Registered childminders' houses (Mam) were set up by the French legislature (French Senate, 2016) as a "working arrangement that will boost professionalization and change parents' -and society's- attitudes." Two to four registered childminders employed by private citizens, meaning four to sixteen children, can come together to work outside their home. "The end goal is to provide a wider variety of daycare solutions and practices, in particular by lifting the home standard requirements (which are an obstacle to accreditations), thereby making the line of work more attractive and increasing the potential number of slots" (Alberola et al., 2012, p. 9). In this way, these three locations, once again rolled out and overseen by French government authorities, could facilitate the development of "bottom-up" professionalization momentum through reflective practice-based working groups.

Finally, the Internet (forums, blogs, etc.) has been playing a growing role in the creation of a professionalization support community (Havard Duclos, 2018). In the future, it may become a critical source of building blocks and a conveyer of professional knowledge and of a reflective position on the profession, which registered childminders generate, rather than simply receive, in a top-down fashion, from government authorities or from other lines of work that are higher up the ladder.

In light of the above, registered childminders' level of professionalization appears subdued, both in regard to their social recognition and to their autonomy.

Conclusion

This study has shown international literature on the profession to be relevant to an analytical framework of the contributing factors to registered childminders' professionalization process. Conclusions of the final assessment of their professionalization on the basis of indicators related to social recognition and autonomy are mixed. While registered childminders' professionalization process was initiated "in top-down fashion" (by the State-determined legislative and regulatory framework) and is beginning "from the bottom up" (through collective professional organization and skill development), the obstacles persist.

First and foremost, the registered childminder's job is not always thought of by these women as a profession with long-term career goals. Indeed, wanting to become and then becoming a registered childminder is a particular stage over the course of their life (Unterreiner, 2017). Whether it is by choice or due to a set of constraints, entering and then leaving this occupation is intrinsically linked to non-career-related factors, in particular to the role these women play within their family. This results in high turnover rates, which limits registered childminders' ability to organize professionally in the long term, hence the importance of family daycare centers, Mams, Rams, and registered childminders' associations and unions.

Finally, while the working conditions can appear attractive when compared with the other jobs for which unskilled blue-collar working women can be hired, wage levels are relatively low. It should be noted that the hourly wage per child is lower than the French minimum wage ("Smic"). As a result, registered childminders are forced to care for more children at once and/or work longer hours in order to earn a living. They are also highly

dependent on geographical location, meaning local supply and demand, as registered childminders' level of training has little impact on their earnings (Fagnani and Math, 2012).

In addition, recognition for these women is based more on how they are perceived as a person than on their professional skills, posing a further obstacle to professionalization. On the one hand, as no qualifications are required per se, accreditation is awarded on the basis of personal traits rather than on professional skills (Bosse-Platière et al., 2014). On the other hand, families are more likely to select a registered childminder on the basis of his/her connections with the local community than on his/her level of training. Having strong ties to a community, or rather being recognized as having such ties, affords a level of "home turf advantage" (Retière, 2003) and provides access to resources belonging to the "established," as termed by Elias and Scotson (1965). Moreover, while working out of the home allows for a certain degree of professional autonomy, it also inevitably encroaches on private life, yet again blurring the divide between work and family life.

In addition, the registered childminders who are the most committed to the professionalization process are the ones who complete additional training (Cékoïa Conseil, 2017), go to the games and toys lending library (Brougère et al., 2001) or use the Ram (Alberola, 2009).

This shows recognition by society at large and "bottom-up" professionalization to be essential. A framework has been provided for this line of work over the past few decades through "top-down" professionalization, but registered childminders are currently dependent upon government authorities on the one hand and upon parents on the other. As a result, this study calls for more specific research to be done in order to analyze how generational turnover and the development of more collaborative working practices are affecting registered childminders' professionalization. The question of the connection between the more or less

formal interactions among registered childminders themselves or between them and other early-childhood-sector professionals, and the content of their professional standards and their collective reflective working practices, is worth of undergoing further investigation in the French context.

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