

## Nuances and Perceptions of Home-based Early Childhood Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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### Abstract

*Home-based early childhood education (HBECE) describes a type of early childhood education and care (ECE) that encompasses several widely recognised philosophies and pedagogical practices. Among psychologists, counsellors, therapists, and education professionals, there has been an increasing interest in researching HBECE. The aim of this research was to gain a broader view of the specific context, nuances, and perceptions of HBECE in Aotearoa New Zealand. Four focus group online interviews, with eighteen participants in total were held. The participants were service providers, visiting teachers, educators, and parents. From the interviews we identified benefits, challenges, and the overall perception of HBECE. Benefits focused on the family type environment, relationships, continuity of care, and small group size. Participants spoke of licensing and funding changes, namely: regulatory compliance, funding, and documentation. They perceived HBECE to be undervalued within the wider ECE sector and the community at large.*

**Key words:** Group size, continuity of care, home-based ECE, personalised learning, flexible childcare.

### Introduction

Home-based early childhood education (HBECE) is distinct from centre-based early childhood education (ECE). The term "home-based education and care" was first developed in the 1970s to reflect the provision of education and care experiences for children in a familiar home environment. In Aotearoa NZ, HBECE is provided by an educator in their private home for one to four children. According to the Education Research Office (ERO) (2018), a key factor in the success of HBECE is the personalised service it provides.

Parents often prefer HBECE for its home-like environment, convenient location, small group size, consistent care, flexible hours, affordability, and emphasis on fostering strong interpersonal relationships (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020; Tonyan et al., 2017). These factors are not only essential for supporting families; but for some, HBECE is the only viable option, especially for those living in rural or isolated areas where centre-based services are limited or inaccessible.

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Being the sole educator or adult with a small group size within HBECE, the educator focuses on just a few children and families each day, creating consistency (Ang & Tabu, 2018) and providing additional time to engage one-on-one with children (Layland & Smith, 2015; Wright, 2004). Consequently, HBECE is often selected by parents as more suitable for their infant child due to the smaller space and group size within a family environment (Tonyan et al., 2017). Layland (2012) highlights how the child's voice, interests and any additional needs become more evident due to the smaller group size and the presence of one responsive educator.

Burke's (2013) comparative research in ECE settings in Aotearoa and Japan emphasises the importance of one-to-one engagement, especially for children's cognitive and emotional development where secure attachment relationships are built on consistent and responsive interactions (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010). Burke further suggests that small group size is essential for delivering high-quality ECE services, as they enable individualised attention and foster close teacher-child relationships. To this end, Cortazar and Herreros (2010) argue that caregivers who provide stability and responsiveness, can effectively replicate attachment-building behaviours that typically develop within the home environment.

First-time parents prefer home-based care services because they want a nurturing environment where their children can receive individualised, one-to-one attention with no more than four infants to one adult (Boyd, 2014). In comparison, centre based ECE services generally operate on an adult-to-child ratio of 1:5 for under two-year-olds and 1:10 for over two-year-olds (Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations, 2008, Schedule 2).

The parents in Boyd's (2014) study expressed concerns about leaving their children with unfamiliar caregivers. In some cases, the educator is a relative or a family friend for example, a grandparent, an aunty, or a friend who shares the same values, beliefs, ethnicity, culture, and language as the child and their family. Such familial relationships further emphasise continuity of care and the embeddedness of cultural values, beliefs and child-rearing practices, including the opportunity to be immersed in one's home language (Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020, Tonyan et al., 2017).

Continuity of care is even more robust when the educator is related to the child/ren, as not only are kin relationships already established, but the child's own routines are less disrupted (Layland & Smith, 2015). Additionally, Layland (2012) explores how educators serve as key support persons for parents by providing professional advice and guidance about children and child-rearing. Ang and Tabu (2018) explain how support comes in different forms from emotional to practical, as well as the sharing of knowledge, information, and strategies. Educators have in-depth knowledge of individual children; thus, they are more alert to changes in children's behaviour, demeanour, or health and can respond accordingly (Layland & Smith, 2015).

Moreover, there is the opportunity for siblings to be cared for together and for children to experience small mixed-age groups (Ang & Tabu, 2018) creating a secure base and a strong sense of belonging for both the child and their family (Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020). The

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significance of such strong connections (Ang & Tabu, 2018) fosters secure attachments and relationships between the child and the educator, the child and other children, and the educator and parents (Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020; Layland & Smith, 2015).

Furthermore, engagement with the local community is encouraged as the home-based 'family' participates in excursions that involve community places, people, and events (Layland & Smith, 2015; Wright, 2004). Children and educators actively utilise community resources and services (Wright, 2004) whether it be places of interest, playgroups, the library, retail stores, or trade services. Additional relationships are formed, and children learn 'on the job' as community members share their knowledge and skills with the children, adding to their interests and skill sets.

Despite the extensive research on HBECE's benefits internationally and in Aotearoa, there is still limited research that captures the voices and everyday experiences of those involved, especially in Aotearoa. This study aims to explore how HBECE service is understood and experienced by the stakeholders. By focusing on their perspectives, it fills a gap in understanding their views, and roles they play in supporting children and families in uniquely responsive ways.

The next section outlines the methodology, including participants, ethics, data analysis, and limitations, followed by the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

## Methodology

The intention of this research project was to investigate the nuances and perceptions of home-based early childhood education and care (HBECE) in Aotearoa. The researchers aimed to explore the benefits and challenges of HBECE for teachers, children, and families by examining the different perceptions of various stakeholders involved in HBECE in Aotearoa. These stakeholders included service providers, visiting teachers, educators, and parents/caregivers.

The main research question was: What are the nuances and perceptions of home-based early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Additional research questions were:

1. What are the benefits of HBECE for educators, children, and families?
2. What are the challenges of HBECE for educators, children, and families?
3. What are the different stakeholders' perceptions of HBECE in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Utilising a case study approach, the nuances and perceptions of HBECE in Aotearoa were examined. Cohen, et al. (2018) attest that the "case study has a unique and distinctive contribution to make to educational research" (p. 390). This specific case study was located within the home-based education and care sector in Aotearoa, whereby home-based service providers, visiting teachers, educators, and parents/caregivers provided depth to the case as their experiences were investigated.

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Yin (2018) explains that case studies are a robust method that investigate contemporary real-life contexts and examine social and cultural dynamics within groups or organisations. Therefore, in the context of HBECE, a case study offers a more holistic understanding of the intricate relationships, cultural practices, and unique dynamics (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) that shape this educational approach.

Cohen et al. (2018) explain that participants' interpretations are shaped by their cultural and contextual experiences. To this end, the researchers argued that it was essential to examine situations through the varied perspectives of those involved, to consider their interactions, context, and lived experiences to understand how they made sense of their reality and the complexities and perceptions surrounding HBECE. Therefore, choosing a qualitative case study grounded in social constructivism to investigate the nuances and perceptions of HBECE in was purposeful.

### ***Method***

A focus group-based approach was employed, with open-ended interview questions to elicit participants' insights on various aspects of HBECE.

The interview questions were developed iteratively with input from lecturers at Te Rito Maioha ECNZ who were knowledgeable in HBECE. The researchers and the ethics committee of Te Rito Maioha ECNZ reviewed the interview questions to ensure their validity, relevance and clarity.

Four focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom, one for each group of stakeholders, with eighteen participants in total. Each session lasted approximately one hour and was recorded. The separation of the members of each group during these sessions ensured the participants felt safe to share their voice and that data was generated from multiple stakeholders to enable comparison of the data (Cohen et al., 2018).

### ***Participants***

Five HBECE services participated. These services were companies or sole-trader and located in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch and two provincial towns.

Focus group one comprised four service provider participants who owned their own service and one who was a service delivery manager for a large nationwide home-based care provider.

Focus group two included five fully qualified visiting teachers with full practicing certificates. These visiting teachers often had worked for many years in centres and had experience in HBECE as educators before embarking on the role of visiting teacher. The visiting teacher's role is to support educators in their homes, by providing instructional support, developmental guidance, and educational resources.

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Five educators formed focus group three. All educators had worked in HBECE for many years, and they also had their own children in HBECE.

Focus group four comprised of three parents from three different services, these parents varied in experience with HBECE and their tamariki were all under the age of four. One of the parents was using the same educator for her infant as she did for her son who had moved to school.

Once the service provider of each participated in the interview, they then recruited a visiting teacher, the visiting teacher then recruited an educator, then the educator was able to recruit parents/caregivers to participate in the study.

### ***Ethics***

Ethics approval was obtained from the Te Rito Maioha ECNZ Research and Ethics Committee. An initial Google search of home-based care service providers in Aotearoa produced a list of potential participants. Interested participants received information about the project in an email invitation. Upon receiving approval from the participants via email, they were deemed to have consented to participate. For ethical reasons, participants were all given pseudonyms, with participants identified as SP (Service Provider), VT (Visiting Teacher), E (Educator) and P (Parent).

### ***Data analysis***

An inductive approach was used to analyse the interview transcripts data, because it was important to focus on specific information for broader generalisations to be formed making sense and meaning out of data, whereby the final product is shaped by the collected data (Merriam, 1998). Cohen et al., (2018) emphasise comparison “between groups... to look for consistency, or inconsistency, similarity or difference across these” (p.318).

The data was analysed thematically, continuously revisited, and reinterpreted. This process was necessary to understand and make sense of the findings. Three themes were derived through the inductive analysis of the data. By coding participants’ interview data from the focus groups and identifying recurring patterns, the findings were then grouped into categories that reflected shared views.

## **Findings**

The benefits of HBECE discussed by participants emphasised a family type environment, relationships, continuity of care, and small group size. Challenges included regulatory compliance, documentation requirements, and government funding. The findings foregrounded how HBECE is undervalued within the education sector and broader community, a theme which is integrated within the exploration of both benefits and challenges.

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## ***Benefits of HBECE***

The benefits of HBECE fall under the themes of home-family type environment, responsive and reciprocal relationships, continuity of care, and small group size.

### **(i) Family type environment**

HBECE is underpinned by strong vision and values where the vision of creating a family-oriented, caring environment, as SP5 explained is: "... care and education in family... with one primary caregiver you know who can provide that love and that care". Moreover, SP3 reiterated that "You are going into an educator's home... that provides love and care more than anything".

Parents acknowledged this familial aspect of HBECE, often likening the educators to members of their own family. P2 described the HBECE experience as being "just like family," while P3 referred to the educators as "the second mum to my babies." Participants valued the strong connection between educators and families which promoted long-term relationships. As VT3 observed, children often maintain friendships even after they move on to other settings:

"Children from HBECE are still friends, years and years down the track... they do not lose that contact".

This familial connection was particularly important to a parent who did not have local extended family support. P1 noted that HBECE provided an "extended family" in the absence of nearby relatives, reinforcing the services' unique ability to fill an emotional and social gap for both children and their parents.

### **(ii) Relationships**

The concept of responsive relationships creating a sense of trust and security was voiced when VT3 said, we "have the one teacher, the one educator in communication with each other and then [with] the parent". VT3 shared how "building the relationships with the educator, it's so much more personal and with the parent, it's easy to give them support" creating a genuine ECE community. Relationships built upon trust and security thus fostered connections, as described by VT3 who, "feels really honoured and privileged to be in that role and have an impact on so many people's lives".

For the educators, they emphasised the deep, reciprocal relationships they formed with both children and their families. E3 highlighted the unique opportunity to become an integral part of the families' lives, stating:

"We get to be part of the family's worlds, and they get to be part of ours".

This sentiment was echoed by E5, who elaborated on the benefits of the small group size, allowing for a personalised approach to care:

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"You do get to really get to know the children and what their needs are and the things they like."

E5 also emphasised the peace of mind that this level of individualised care provided for parents:

"There is kind of a closer level of care because you do notice things... it is just you to one or three or four children."

Thus, offering additional support for first time parents who according to P3 felt "every centre overwhelmed me... how can they keep track of my baby". E4 extended this perspective, framing HBECE as a holistic form of care:

"You are not just looking after the children... but in fact you are looking after the whole family".

### **(iii) Group size**

The three parents valued the individualised care offered by HBECE. They felt reassured knowing their child was in a smaller, calmer environment, which reduced their anxiety about their child's safety and wellbeing. VT3 explained how "when it comes to the smaller ratios... that's got to be an asset to the children... they get more attention and time".

Additional benefits of small group size, continuity of care, and a family-oriented approach were identified by participants as determinants of high-quality learning experiences. Educators emphasised the importance of integrating real-life learning opportunities to align with children's daily routines and interests. E4 noted:

"It's about encouraging young children to learn with me in everyday, practical ways."

This real-life approach not only supports children's academic learning but also nurtures their social and emotional growth. The one-on-one care in HBECE allowed parents to feel confident that their child's unique needs were being met:

"I wanted one person who would know her routines, care for her, and provide interaction in a small group, not en masse" [P2].

The theme of empowerment and passion to pursue a career in HBECE emerged from interviews with the educators and visiting teachers. For educators E1 and E2 the impetus was the opportunity to have the flexibility to care for and to be able to support their own family, identified as especially important for E3 as a single parent. E2 also reiterated how "I wanted to be home for my son, and I knew I always loved children... it was something that benefited both me and my child". As VT4 said: "It allowed me to be there for my own family while doing something I'm passionate about".

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The overall findings fore front that it takes a special type of person to create the family type environment, establish and nurture responsive and reciprocal relationships and provide continuity of care for small groups of children in the context of a HBECE service. P2 shared how “the type of people who choose to do that [HBECE] are, are a different breed of, of people. They are wonderful” [P2].

### *Challenges, concerns, and changes*

The findings revealed challenges and concerns associated with HBECE that impact on HBECE’s effectiveness and reputation, specifically compliance with minimum regulatory standards, documentation requirements, and funding.

#### **(i) The status of HBECE**

The first theme identified was the undervaluation of HBECE within the broader education sector and the community. Participants felt that the distinct nature of HBECE was often misunderstood or dismissed, leading to stereotypes and a lack of recognition.

SP1 stated:

“In my opinion, I feel like we’re underrated. Nobody really understands... they just think we’re glorified babysitters”.

Whilst E3 expressed frustration with the lack of public awareness and understanding:

“People don’t really know what we’re about or what we do, so it would be nice for a bit more awareness”.

Visiting teachers also emphasised the need to advocate for the value of HBECE to demonstrate its unique advantages, such as one-on-one care:

“We want the value of the perception of home-based to supersede that... so I’m constantly advocating” [VT3].

#### **(ii) Compliance**

The second theme identified was compliance and integrity issues. Four participants highlighted concerns about inconsistent practices across the HBECE sector, referring to unregulated or poorly managed services as “cowboys.” Participants believed that these services tarnished the reputation of HBECE:

“It really is the cowboys out there that affect those of us doing things with integrity... trying to meet all the compliance” [SP3].

This negative perception, has consequences during inspections by regulatory bodies, as explained by SP5:

“They [MoE, ERO] come in looking for problems... and they won’t leave until they find one thing... even if it’s not a massive thing”.

### **(iii) Documentation requirement**

While documentation serves an essential purpose in providing accountability, participants reported that paperwork detracted from their ability to focus on meaningful interactions with children.

SP3 explained:

“They don’t want to be having to fill out forms... it takes away the joy of those ‘wow’ moments and the reasons you are in [HBECE]”.

P2 echoed this concern, noting how their carer struggled to keep up with the demands:

“She really worries about having to fill everything in and keep on top of everything”.

Despite the challenges, participants acknowledged the accountability of documentation as a safeguard:

“While it is a nightmare, it is really useful... you’ve got that paper trail to say this happened on this day” [SP5].

### **(iv) Funding**

Ten participants identified funding as a persistent and critical issue. Many felt that HBECE was treated as the “poor cousin” of the education sector, with insufficient financial support to meet operational needs. Visiting teacher VT1 stated:

“Funding is always the biggest issue... we are seen as the poor cousin of the sector”.

Educators also highlighted specific funding limitations, such as the exclusion of their own children from government funding calculations, which adds financial pressure:

“My own children are counted in the ratios but do not qualify for funding, and that makes things difficult” [E2].

The challenges identified by the participants echoed the need for increased recognition, stricter regulation to address compliance issues, streamlined documentation processes and

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equitable funding. Addressing these areas of concern are critical to ensure that HBECE provides high-quality, family-centred education and care with the respect and support deserved within the broader educational landscape.

## Discussion

Participants emphasised the importance of fostering strong relationships and delivering personalised care. This shows that one-on-one care in a home-based setting benefits child emotionally and developmentally. These findings align with attachment theory, which highlights the role of consistent, responsive relationships in promoting children's emotional security and development (Cortazar & Herreros, 2010). Burke (2013) reinforces this, noting that small group size and low educator-to-child ratios enable stronger attachment and individualised attention.

The study also found that both educators and parents preferred smaller group environments due to the ability to provide individualised attention and maintain quality learning experiences. These mirrors Burke's (2013), findings on the value of low ratios. Educators emphasised that small groups allowed them to cater to each child's unique needs in a nurturing and supportive environment, echoing ERO (2018), which emphasises the personalised nature of HBECE. Furthermore, parents in this study appreciated the individualised care reflecting Boyd's (2014) work on first-time parents prioritising individualised and nurturing environments. Layland (2012) also found that small group sizes promote belonging and trust through responsive observation.

Another significant advantage of HBECE was its flexibility. Participants valued the ability to balance professional roles with caregiving responsibilities, finding fulfilment in working from home while caring for their children. This aligns with Wright (2004), who highlighted how educators appreciate managing both personal and professional duties. Chaudry and Sandstrom (2020) further noted that this flexibility benefits families, through consistent, personalised care.

Despite its benefits, participants identified challenges such as compliance, documentation, and funding, which reflected broader concerns in HBECE. Educators noted that familiar, home-like environments supported cultural continuity and trust. Layland (2012), found that personal relationships in small group settings foster deeper emotional bonds. Ang and Tabu (2018) also highlight how HBECE supports family needs and cultural preservation. However, participants expressed concern that current regulations do not adequately support HBECE. Although ERO (2018) outlines regulatory standards, inconsistent implementation may contribute to perceived instability and lack of support. Addressing this gap could improve trust and quality assurance, making HBECE even more robust and aligned with broader ECE standards.

Documentation was another area of concern. While its importance for accountability was acknowledged, educators noted that paperwork detracted from meaningful child interactions. This supports findings by the ECE Taskforce (2011), and Layland and Smith (2015), who

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caution against administrative overload. Parents expressed empathy and advocated for simpler processes, suggesting that current systems may prioritise compliance over core HBECE values such as such as relationship-building and personalised care.

Another area of concern was inadequate funding. Participants described HBECE as the “poor cousin,” of the ECE sector, echoing Smith (2015). Educators highlighted that their own children, while included in the ratios, were excluded from funding creating a policy gap in an already underfunded system.

Underpinning the provision of HBECE are the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), which emphasise responsive relationships, holistic learning, empowerment, and family-community connections. Despite this strong pedagogical base, participants expressed frustration with societal perceptions of HBECE as mere “babysitting,” undermining its’ educational value and the professionalism of educators (Hooper, 2020; ECE Taskforce, 2011). Participants called for greater public awareness of HBECE’s benefits, particularly its emphasis on personalised approach and family integration. These insights suggest that while HBECE adheres to a structured curriculum, its value is often underappreciated by stakeholders, reflecting a disconnect between practice and perception

Hooper (2020) suggests that advocacy can enhance societal appreciation of ECE services. Participants emphasised the importance of showcasing HBECE’s professionalism to challenge stereotypes. Some described efforts to highlight HBECE’s unique strengths such as personalised learning and strong family partnerships. Ang and Tabu (2018), argue that greater visibility could improve credibility and status. This indicates that improving stakeholder perceptions could bridge the gap between HBECE’s educational value and societal recognition.

Overall, this study suggests that HBECE’s effectiveness lies in its personalised care model, small group size, and flexible work structures. Together, these features support child development and educator well-being positioning HBECE as a valuable (yet under recognised) service within the broader education sector.

## Limitations

This research study reported here is limited due to its small size and limited scope. First, the study included 18 participants from a small number of regions which may not represent the full diversity of HBECE experiences across different cultural, socio-economic and geographic context, limiting generalisability (Yin, 2018). Broader participation across more regions and a larger sample could enrich the findings and provide a more holistic understanding of HBECE practices. Second, some topics may not have been fully explored due to the study’s scope. For example, deeper exploration of stakeholder perceptions on regulations, documentation, and societal value of HBECE could have offered richer insights. Addressing these in future research may enhance understanding of stakeholder awareness and regulatory application.

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Longitudinal or follow-up interviews could provide evolving insights. Finally, a mixed-method approach might have strengthened the study's robustness.

## Conclusion

HBECE offers a personalised care model, small group size, and flexibility which together create an environment conducive to strong educator-child relationships and community connections. These attributes are particularly valued by educators and parents who appreciate the nurturing, family-like environment that HBECE provides. While these benefits were clear, significant challenges remain in public perception, compliance, documentation, and funding. The findings also revealed varying perceptions among stakeholders, educators, and parents regarding HBECE's quality and regulation. While educators and parents valued its flexibility and personalised care, there appeared to be a gap in awareness among broader stakeholders about its structured approach and adherence to *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Bridging this understanding could enhance recognition of HBECE's contribution to early childhood education in Aotearoa.

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