Family Child Care Providers' Experiences with Professional Learning and Program Improvement

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Abstract

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The care and early education that children receive when they are young profoundly impacts their future as well as the future of society at large. Children in care outside of their homes, whether in child care centers or family child care settings, should have access to learning and development experiences in the care of individuals who have learned to provide quality care. This qualitative study explored professional learning experiences of 12 family child care providers in Washington State and their experiences with professional learning and early childhood education program quality. Findings provide insight into how they understood the relationship between professional learning, program quality, and their wellbeing as educators.

Keywords: family child care, early childhood program quality, early childhood educators, professional learning.

Introduction

Children cared for outside their own homes may be enrolled in preschool or child care center programs or may spend the day in family child care (FCC) programs, although not all children have access to high quality early childhood environments nor highly trained child care providers. High-quality early care and education (ECE) experiences for young children have been consistently associated with long-term social, health, and economic benefits for individuals and society. And higher levels of teacher or care provider qualifications have been associated with higher quality early learning settings (Barnett, 2003; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Burchinal et al., 2000; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carroll, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Although, not all providers experience high-quality professional learning.

High-quality early care and education (ECE) experiences promote long-term social, health, and economic benefits for individuals and society at large, however providing high-quality early learning programs is complex work that requires specific knowledge and skills (Hustedt & Barnett, 2011; Heckman, 2011; Campbell et al., 2014; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011; Barnett, 2003; Sluss & Minner, 1999; Ritblatt et al., 2013). Learning to provide high-quality early learning programs that lead to positive outcomes for children does not *just happen*; it requires specialized professional learning on the part of child care providers (Dwyer, Chait, & McKee, 2000; Ackerman, 2005). Pursuing an understanding of how to help ECE providers improve quality in their programs through professional learning that meets their needs is of critical concern (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011; Ritblatt et al., 2013; Ackerman, 2005, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2004; Heckman, 2011).

It is critical that early childhood educators have access to professional learning that helps them develop and improve the quality of their programs in ways that improve children's learning and development outcomes. State policy leaders play active roles in improving the quality of early childhood learning programs by upholding licensing and quality standards, by setting minimum professional learning qualifications for early childhood educators, and by ensuring that these educators have access to relevant and effective professional learning opportunities. Therefore, links between program quality and professional learning are incredibly important to state professional development systems, supports, and policies.

Quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) are a primary lever that state policy leaders across the U.S. have used to improve quality in ECE programs statewide. Recently, some states, Washington State included have revised their QRIS framework title to read quality *recognition* and improvement system. By either name, these policy and professional learning frameworks are designed "to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education settings (Mitchell, 2009, p. 4)" so that families have the opportunities and information necessary to choose quality care for their children. These systems of quality rating, or recognition, aim to 1) inform parents and guardians about what to look for in quality care so that parents shift their choice toward higher quality programs and 2) incentivize educators to improve their practices and thus the quality of their programs. QRIS policies delineate quality standards and professional development ladders, offer incentives, provide learning and financial support to educators, and create ways to share information with parents about program quality (Lugo-Gil et al., 2011; Iruka & Forry, 2018). A QRIS can serve as a state's overall early childhood education program accountability system (Schaak et al., 2012) and can be the primary, or sole, method in a state for measuring and improving the quality of care that young children

receive. QRIS policies have been a key method through which policy makers have focused on improving quality and learning outcomes (Douglass & Klerman, 2012; Garner & Parker, 2016) and include several common elements: ECE program standards, accountability measures, program and practitioner support, financial incentives, as well as parent and consumer information sharing strategies (Kelton et al., 2013). Specifics of these rating systems vary across states but tend to focus on the ECE provider or teacher's years of experience and training, the learning environment and interactions, child outcomes, and the specific experience of children within the setting (Kirby et al., 2015; Garner & Parker, 2016).

"Quality" in child care programs has become an umbrella term, in some cases without a clear, consistent, empirically supported definition. Differences in quality could be related the services provided, the outcomes of the programs, or inadequacies of measurements (Hagekull & Bohlin, 1995; Lamb, 2006; Rusby et al., 2013). Assessing quality in child care programs involves measures of program structures and processes (Cryer & Clifford, 2003) that reflect dominant ideologies because “quality” is both value-laden and culturally referent. Aspects of quality and the measures used to observe and describe them Despite efforts to develop universally applicable definitions of quality, many in the field have cautioned against the universality of child development and child rearing practices (Garrity et al., 2021; Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011). Reinke, Peters, and Castner (2019) observed that the concept of quality child care in QRIS are based on Anglo-American ideologies and cultures about education, families, and children.

QRIS policy and program frameworks have faced critique that that they narrowly define what "quality" is in ways that privilege dominant cultural groups, further marginalizing less dominant cultural groups, often including people of color, immigrants, and multilingual

individuals (Reinke et al., 2011). The metrics used to measure quality have been scrutinized. Concerns have been raised about the cultural relevance of both the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms et al., 1998) and the Classroom Assessment Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (La Paro & Pianta, 2003), common measures of quality used in QRIS (Garrity et al., 2021; Barnes-Najor, Thompson, Cameron, et al., 2020). Quality is experiential and interpreted differently by different providers, parents, and children. Standardizing quality in high-stakes policy frameworks can further marginalize already marginalized groups and reduce diverse knowledge, perspectives, and ways of knowing (Reinke, Peters, & Castner 2019). In the context of the present study, administrators at the Washington State Department of Children and Families revised the QRIS process of ascribing quality; the program was rebranded a quality *recognition* system, rather than a rating system. This change, described in more detail through providers descriptions below, involved additional opportunities for providers to offer input about their program and a deemphasis on standardized measures of quality.

Acknowledging these critiques, improving early learning programming through quality standards and professional learning incentives has shown signs of success, particularly for children growing up in families with low incomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Though these efforts have proven challenging because early childhood education programs vary widely and are difficult to standardize, especially between child care center-based and FCC programs. FCC programs and center-based child care programs have distinct differences that impact both how their quality is assessed and how their providers are prepared. Although FCC programs are available and highly utilized in all states, not all states include FCC programs in their QRIS. As of 2018, 36 states included family child care programs in their quality assessment and provider

training frameworks (Buell et al., 2018), up from 24 states in 2013 (Kelton et al., 2013). FCC have lower rates of participation in QRIS, when participation is voluntary (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2015) and are likely to have lower ratings when they do participate (Garrity et al., 2021).

Determining how much and what kinds of professional learning should be required to provide high-quality ECE programing remains one of the most vexing questions in early learning policy (Barnett, 2011) for providers in any setting. In implementing QRIS to improve program quality across state ECE systems, policy makers and state early childhood education agency leaders face the acute challenge of ensuring access to and incentives for professional learning opportunities that improve program quality, without raising professional learning requirements too high for providers to reach (Zaslow et al., 2012). These considerations are especially acute for FCC providers because on average, these providers tend to have less formal education and training than child care center-based providers and their programs tend to have lower quality ratings. The present study aims to inform these critical policy considerations by investigating how family child care providers in Washington State are accessing, experiencing, and applying professional learning to improve the quality of their learning environments for young children.

Family Child Care Context in Washington State

Washington State is served by approximately 2,800 licensed family child care programs set within urban areas, small towns, agricultural communities, and urban centers (Child Care Aware, 2023). Licensed FCC providers in Washington State vary widely in terms of their education background, years' experience, and beliefs that their own professional learning is relevant to improving the quality of the programs they offer. The State of Washington has invested heavily in early childhood education policy and programming, was an early adopter of

the statewide QRIS, “Early Achievers.” Connected with expansion of the QRIS program, the state increased education requirements for licensed early learning programs. Family child care providers' work has been heavily influenced by this program. Understanding their experiences may be informative for agencies and organizations in Washington and other states interested in exploring how to increase investments in ECE provider workforce development. In this section, I describe the data sources, participants involved in the study and then detail the data collection and analysis procedures.

The study takes place at a time when massive challenges and changes have drastically influenced how FCC providers participate in professional learning, and in the workforce more broadly. In the four years preceding the onset global COVID-19 pandemic all licensed ECE providers were required to meet increased education requirements. Policy makers and state ECE agency leaders invested in high-quality early learning programs, enacted quality improvement initiatives, and raised education requirements for early childhood educators in service of higher quality programs. These efforts have measurably improved the quality of child care programs and the qualifications of providers, yet in the six-year period following implementation of the state’s Early Achievers QRIS, the state experienced a net loss of 1,100 licensed child care programs. In a five-year period, the number of family child care programs decreased by 20% (Child Care Aware, 2023); one in five family child care providers has responded to quality improvement efforts and increased education requirements by leaving the field or rescinding her license. The decline in the number of family child care homes has begun to stabilize in recent years. Statewide, the number of family child care programs has increased by over 500 in the in the last two years, with declines continuing in particular counties (Child Care Aware, 2024).

As quality improvement efforts and education requirements have sharply increased in Washington State along with the cost of and demand for FCC programs, FCC providers have been leaving the field. Increased education requirements specifically affect FCC providers compared to their center-based peers because they tend to have more educational needs to meet the state education requirements due to having less formal education than their center-based peers. In 2019, all currently licensed family child care providers were given a mandate to earn the 12-credit "initial certificate, or equivalent" by 2024 (Washington State Administrative Code, 110-300-0100). Significantly, home based family child care providers tend to work longer hours than do their center-based peers, which adds to the challenge of accessing approved professional learning opportunities that allow them to maintain their license and improve the quality of their programs.

Finding and accessing professional learning opportunities that support quality improvement can be challenging for early childhood educators, particularly FCC providers who tend to work longer hours, live in more rural areas, and tend to have lower educational attainment than their center-based counterparts. Increasing the requirements for education for family child care providers may present a strain for these educators, who represent an aging workforce with fewer formal college degrees on average compared to any other educator. A recent state survey of Washington FCC providers found that 82% were over 40 years old and nearly half (48%) were over 50 years old. Seventy-two percent of family child care providers do not have formal college degrees, but many do have some college credit in early learning (Imagine Institute, 2018). This heightened the need to understand how much and what types of professional learning should be required for early childhood educators, and how to provide

equitable access to varied types of professional learning that can increase program quality at a time when the measures of quality are in flux.

Relevant, engaging, and effective professional learning opportunities are important for all early learning providers, but especially for those providers who work in family child care homes. Effective and beneficial professional learning for home-based providers is a critical area of research yet has not been a common area of focus (Zaslow et al. 2012; Burton, Whitebook, Young, Bellem, Wayne, Brandon, & Maher, 2002). Researchers have found inconsistent quality of care among these programs, varying levels of provider preparation and knowledge (Lanigan, 2012); and that family child care homes have often had limited regulation and oversight . Further, studies of professional learning and program quality improvement tend to focus on the center-based child care workforce through quantitative methodologies. Missing from this research have been the voices of family child care providers themselves. These knowledge gaps created a need to better understand how FCC providers experienced professional learning, how they applied what they learned, and how they characterized the relationship between professional learning and program quality.

Research Questions

1. What are FCC providers' experiences with professional learning?
2. In what ways do FCC providers apply what they have learned from professional learning experiences to their FCC programs?
3. In what ways do FCC providers characterize the relationship between their professional learning experiences and the quality of their programs?

Literature Review

Researchers have investigated the relationship between providers' professional learning and the quality of their programs. This section reviews research on professional learning and program quality in early childhood education programs generally, a subsequent section of the literature review will describe studies about FCC programs specifically. Estimates suggest that 60% of U.S. children under the age of 6 are involved in some kind of non-parental or preschool education at least once per week (Mulligan et al., 2005; Hendershot et al., 2016; Quest, 2018). Researchers have estimated that approximately 12.5 million children between the ages birth and 5 were enrolled in some type of child care (Laughlin, 2010) offered by approximately 1 million licensed child care centers; 1 million regulated, licensed, or listed family child care providers; and an estimated 3 million unlisted family child care providers (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, 2013; Durden et al., 2016). Numerous studies have linked children's positive developmental and learning outcomes with the quality of the early childhood education programming those children experienced and with the professional learning of the programs' providers (Currie & Thomas, 1995; National Association of Child care Resource and Referral Agencies, 2010; Vandell & Wolf, 2000; Kelton et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2010). Although there is a lack of literature of this kind focused on FCC providers, understanding the literature on the relationship between early childhood educators' professional learning and program quality is an important foundation from which to examine how FCC providers in Washington experience professional learning, apply what they have learned, and develop their own understanding of the relationship between professional learning and quality.

Relationship Between Professional Learning and Program Quality

Studies on the importance of high-quality care to the lives of young children have led to an increasing debate about how to make high-quality early childhood education accessible for an increasingly diverse population of young children and families in the U.S. (Espinosa, 2010; Collins, 2012; Fuligni et al., 2009). High-quality early childhood intervention programs have proven effective in improving educational achievement with positive effects that continue for years (e.g., Perry Preschool) (Schweinhart, 2005). Longitudinal studies have shown links between attending high-quality early care and education programs and higher income, reduced use of drugs, less criminal behavior, and more stable living arrangements among the children they have served (Reynolds et al., 2002; Schweinhart, 2005; Yoshikawa, 1995). Children participating in high-quality programs have been shown to demonstrate greater language abilities, experience fewer grade retentions, and have less need for remediation support in elementary school (Lynch, 2005; Collins, 2012).

Research over decades has strongly suggested a link between higher education among early childhood educators and better teaching and learning outcomes for children (Barnett, 2004; Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Whitebook, 2003; Burchinal et al., 2002; Doherty et al., 2006; Kontos et al., 1995; NICHD ECCRN, 2002; Zuniga & Howes, 2009). Researchers have questioned whether a bachelor's degree is necessary to provide high-quality ECE programs, whether ECE specialization is needed, and if either are sufficient (Fuligni et al., 2009). Some studies have provided evidence that to offer high-quality programs, ECE providers should have at least a bachelor's degree (Early et al., 2006, 2007; Howes & Norris, 1997). Other studies have shown that training, rather than higher education, has a greater influence on program quality (Burchinal et al., 2002; Howes & Norris, 1997; Kontos, Howes & Galinsky,

1996; Zuniga & Howes, 2009). Other evidence has suggested that the expense associated with increasing educational requirements to mandate a bachelor's degree would not increase quality in programming (Early et al., 2007). Researchers have also examined the relationship between providers' level of education and the learning environment as well as interactions that take place within those environments.

Learning Environments

Academic research into program quality has focused in large part on the provisions and arrangements of early learning spaces. Learning environments themselves can both hinder or enable children to develop and practice skills (Neuman & Wright, 2010). ECE providers can learn and practice the ability to establish environments that support children's learning and development, though researchers have not consistently found evidence that teachers' level of education predicted the quality of early learning environments (Early et al., 2006; Early et al., 2007; Powell & Diamond, 2010). Studies have shown that providers' increased professional engagement (Abell et al., 2014), level of education, and whether they have a college degree with specialization in ECE are correlated with quality in early learning environments, especially if that coursework was combined with a site-based coaching program (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010; Koh & Neuman, 2009). In a study of 237 programs, Early and colleagues (2006) found that ECE certification predicted lower provision for learning scores on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R), a common measure used to assess process and structural quality in early learning settings that has been used in QRIS assessments in Washington State and in other states. A comprehensive meta-analysis showed that teachers with graduate degrees were likelier to have moderately higher environmental quality scores than teachers with bachelor's or associate degrees, and that teachers with bachelor's degrees were

found to have higher quality classrooms than those with high school diplomas (Early et al., 2007). Son, Kwon, Jeon, and Hong (2013) found no association between ECE teachers' level of education and higher-quality environments but having an ECE major predicted higher environmental quality score on a provision for learning measure ($b_{StdYX} = .17$, $p < .05$).

A lack of consistent association between ECE providers' higher education attainment and classroom environment scores on standardized measures could be attributed to variable effectiveness among professional learning programs, differences in how providers apply the learning, or the length of time since engaging in professional learning. It may also be the case that because higher education coursework often does not take place where providers work, this learning may be more difficult to transfer into specific practices in their own settings. Some evidence also suggested that the setting-based follow up to formal instruction is important for providers to improve environmental quality.

In several studies, Neuman and colleagues found that higher education coursework did not lead to improved learning environments, unless the course content was offered in combination with onsite coaching visits (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Neuman & Wright, 2010; Koh & Neuman, 2009). Neuman and Wright (2010) conducted a study comparing the effects of two professional learning formats – classroom coursework and the same content delivered through on-site coaching. In this intervention, 58 ECE providers attended a 30-hour college course on language and literacy pedagogy. When assessed immediately after the intervention and again five months later, the teachers' who attended the course did not provide higher-quality environments than the comparison group ($n = 32$). However, a third group in this study ($n = 58$) received the same language and literacy course content through on-site coaching visits. These providers' learning environments showed significant structural differences

following the intervention, specifically in the book area ($F(2, 145) = 3.92$, $p < .05$) writing area ($F(2, 145) = 10.62$, $p = < .05$), and overall literacy environment ($F(2, 173) = 8.97$, $p = < .01$). The environments of providers who were coached retained higher rating scores five months after the intervention, whereas the environments of providers who were not coached did not improve.

Neuman and Cunningham (2009) studied the effect of course work and coaching with 304 providers in center-based (n = 168) and home-based (n = 136) programs, who were randomly assigned to one of three groups – 86 received course work only, 85 received coursework and 1.5 hours per week of coaching for 15 weeks, and a control group (n = 133) who received neither coursework nor coaching. The coached group demonstrated higher quality classrooms as measured by the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Assessment (ELLCO) and Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation Tool (CHELLO) measures than the coursework or control groups. The group receiving coaching also had significantly better book areas, based on ELLCO and CHELLO measures ($F(2, 173) = 6.02$, $p = < .01$), writing areas ($F(2, 173) = 12.63$, $p = < .001$) and physical environments ($F(2, 173) = 4.60$, $p = < .01$) after the intervention, compared to other groups in the study. In a related study, Koh and Neuman (2009) tested the effects of coursework only (n = 33) and coursework with coaching (n = 40) against a comparison group (n = 55). Coursework was not associated with improvements in the learning environment, but the coaching intervention was associated with improvement relative to the coursework (d = .70) and comparison groups. Coaching programs without higher education course work were described in the literature and showed mixed results (McCollum, Hemmetter & Hsieh, 2013; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2010; Wilcox-Herzog, McLaren, Ward, and Wong, 2013).

Interactions Among Children and ECE Providers

A key aspect of ECE program quality is the kind of interaction that children have with their caregivers and other children in the learning environment. High-quality early learning environments feature positive, nurturing, and thought-provoking conversations characterized by "...sophisticated vocabulary, occurring not only between caregivers and children but between children and their peers" (Hindman & Wasik, 2012, p. 132). Positive teacher-child interactions can serve as a protective factor for children associated with later school readiness, social-emotional, behavioral, and developmental outcomes. Conversely, negative interactions can place children at risk for future negative social interactions. Rich and engaging teacher-child interactions have also been associated with greater social and academic gains for children (Zan & Donegan-Ritter, 2014).

Studies in this review indicated that although innovative approaches to combining higher education and video-based peer-coaching (Joseph & Brennan, 2013) have shown potential to improve providers' interactions, college courses alone are less-likely than training combined with coaching to support lasting improvement in interactions within early learning environments (Conroy et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2015). In a three-group intervention study, Moreno and colleagues (2015) offered a 48-hour college course focused on improving program quality by improving interactions with children. Although child care providers in the study increased in measures of self-efficacy, interactions in the classrooms of course participants were not significantly different from the comparison group. There was no effect when providers in this study received the course content through an in-person training with no coaching, nor when they took the training and received 5-hours of coaching. At post-intervention follow-up, the groups that received training plus 15 hours of coaching showed significant improvement in teacher

knowledge (d = .48) measured using a novel scenario-based knowledge test and improved on two constructs the author's developed using both toddler and infant versions of the CLASS, teacher knowledge emotional and behavior support (d = .58) and support for language and literacy (d = .95).

Coaching-based professional learning programs have been shown to vary in effectiveness based on the frequency, duration, and overall number of coaching hours that providers received. Zan and Donegan-Ritter (2014) used the pre-K version of the CLASS tool to measure three domains related to children's learning and development – emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Even with modest intervention, three trainings and bi-monthly peer-coaching, providers decreased use of negative interactions by nearly half a point on the 7-point CLASS scale (.4, $p < .05$) and the intervention group significantly increased ($p < .05$) points in behavior management (.4) productivity (.5), feedback (.9) and language modeling (.6). Similarly, Conroy and colleagues (2015) tested the effect of 6-hour training followed by coaching 2-hours per week for 14 weeks (n = 26) against a comparison group (n = 27). The coaching group significantly increased positive feedback ($t(123.70) = 6.02$, $p \leq .01$, $t(26.95) = 7.03$, $p \leq .01$), and decreased negative feedback ($t(33.94) = -4.66$, $p \leq .01$) from baseline to post-test. These improvements persisted for the coaching group post intervention $t(118.70) = 4.34$, $p \leq .01$ and five months later $t(26.04) = -2.66$, $p \leq .01$.

Professional learning that supports rich interactions can also support curriculum knowledge and application. Vartuli et al. (2014) found a modest, peer-based intervention focused on interactions combined with a Project Approach curriculum training was associated with increases in the Pre-k CLASS measures of emotional support (.5; $p \leq 0.05$), instructional support (.7; $p \leq 0.05$), and classroom organization (.4; $p \leq 0.05$). These researchers also concluded that the

more effectively providers implemented the Project Approach, the more their interactions improved. The authors attributed this improvement to their own increased focus on engaging children's cognitive development through conversation and action when applying the Project Approach.

The quality of providers' interactions improves with professional learning involving site-based coaching, especially during the first year of coaching (Hindman & Wasik, 2012; Conroy et al., 2015). Hindman and Wasik (2012) showed that providers in a coaching intervention group increased interaction quality as measured through the instructional support subscale of the pre-k CLASS scores by .42 points over the first year of coaching, decreased by .22 points when coaching was paused for a summer and increased again by .33 points, over the second year once coaching resumed. Conroy et al (2015) showed increased observations of behavior-specific praise, instructive feedback, and corrective feedback in year one and to a lesser degree, over year two. Taken together, these findings suggested that even minimal coursework, combined with modest, peer-based coaching intervention and training on curriculum could significantly improve providers' capacity to provide high-quality interactions. However, variations in the quality of these professional learning experiences cannot be underestimated in considering their widespread impacts; and the systemic costs associated with coaching interventions are significant.

Quality in Family Child care Programming

"Family child care" is the term used in the United States to refer to formal, paid child care arrangements that most often involve an adult taking care of children who are not their own within a private home (Uttal, 2010). Family child care is a diverse and complex landscape including regulated and non-regulated settings serving seven million children in the U.S. aged birth-to-five (Buell, Hooper, Hallam, & Han, 2018). One-quarter of the children in non-parental

care spend time in family child care programs (Iruka and Carver, 2006; Morrissey and Banghart, 2007). Researchers have estimated that between 25% and 45% of children with working mothers are in family child care or family, friend, and neighbor care. It is critical to recognize that these programs tend to serve disproportionately higher percentages of children of color, children living in poverty, immigrant children, and multilingual learners (Quest, 2018).

In the present study, and in most studies considered within this literature review, family child care providers are individuals who provided paid care for children who are not their own in regulated, licensed, or otherwise registered businesses (Iruka & Carver, 2006; Morrissey, 2007; Garner & Parker, 2016; Morrisey and Banghart, 2007; Buell, Hooper, Hallam, & Han, 2018). More informal care arrangements known as family friend and neighbor, unlicensed, or illegal child care are difficult to estimate, but believed to be more prevalent than licensed home care facilities. FCC providers can be either licensed or unlicensed by state child care administrations. Depending on the state, licensed family child care providers may be eligible for subsidies, scholarships, and certificates of recognition in addition to being subject to health, safety, quality, and professional learning regulations. The present study concerns licensed FCC providers, as opposed to those who are not licensed. I focus on this population because these are the FCC providers who are subject to policies regarding professional learning and program quality, and these providers can be contacted using public data sets and contact lists.

Licensed family child care settings have been estimated to be the second largest provider of non-relative care to preschoolers in the U.S., serving nearly 2 million young children, who spend about 33 hours per week in these programs (Forum on Child and Family Statistics 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013; Figueroa, Barnett, Estevan, & Wiley, 2019). On average, children attending FCC programs spend between 21 and 34 hours per week in child care (Laughlin,

2010). Family child care is a unique synthesis of economic activities, education, and business practices because it is a service provided in exchange for pay; yet the essential character of the work itself is about care and education (Uttal, 2010). FCC providers operate child care businesses within their family home, caring for mixed-age groups, and typically serving as sole proprietor and caregiver (Bromer & Henly, 2004; Lanigan, 2011). Because they are caregivers, teachers, and business owners, they have acute challenge of providing quality child care and succeeding in a small business operation. FCC providers represent a unique segment of the education workforce and an important group of small business owners because they are a site of the traditionally private setting of care for children, but also involve the public domain of education policy, public funding, and state regulation (Tonyan, 2015).

Licensed family child care providers are a unique sector within the education workforce comprised of a diverse group of individuals in terms of their demographic characteristics, education backgrounds, and motivations to provide care (Morrissey, 2007). Parents tend to choose child care setting based upon multiple factors including their children's age, the family's location in relation to available care settings, and their beliefs about the quality of the programming and the kinds of relationship they are looking for between them and the caregiver (Johansen et al., 1996; Garner et al. 2016). FCC programs can be attractive to parents because they serve mixed-age groups of children and offer continuity of care for families over time (Whitebook et al., 2004); they resemble a home environment (Fuller et al., 2004), and often offer families the convenience of a residential location as well as longer and more flexible hours of operation compared to center-based care (Buell et al., 2018).

Single parent households, those with relatively lower incomes, or relatively lower parental education levels are more likely to use family child care than families with two parents,

higher incomes, or higher levels of education (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network 2004; Buell et al., 2018). Family child care programs tend to have smaller group sizes, smaller child-staff ratios, and providers with less training and education compared to center-based providers (Dowsett et al., 2008). FCC providers also often offer work-family supports to help parents manage the daily logistics of work and family (Bromer & Henly, 2009). Although little is known empirically about the work-family support roles played by family child care providers, some studies suggest high levels of informal help-giving of various kinds (Bromer, 2001; Bromer & Henly, 2009). Finding stable, regular, and high-quality care of any type remains inaccessible for many working families (California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, 2015) and FCC programs can be more accessible because they often cost less than center-base programs. In addition to costing less, FCC programs are often available where center-based care is less available and serve parents with irregular work schedules (Burstein & Layzer, 2007; Rusby et al., 2013; Swartz et al., 2016). For these reasons, FCC programs can often be more appealing than center-based programs to families with lower incomes because of their relatively lower cost and flexibility in hours to accommodate parents' work schedules (Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012; Schaak & Messan Setodii, 2017). FCC programs have been found to be the most common type of program for toddlers whose families have low incomes (Schaack et al., 2016) and non-standard schedules (Presser, 2003; Bromer & Henly, 2009). Bromer (2001 & 2002) found that licensed FCC providers offered lower-income family's flexible child care hours and fees and have been reported to set their fees lower to accommodate parent's economic situations rather than charging the highest price the market would bear (Helburn et al, 2002; Bromer & Henly, 2009).

Studies have reported that FCC providers also have unique constraints. FCC providers are uniquely challenged by some factors of their program setting, such as the challenge of sharing their workspace and living space, lack of accessible and relevant training, and lack of parental involvement (Gunter et al., 2012). Researchers have identified several areas of concern regarding program quality among FCC programs, compared to center-based settings including lack of comprehensive policies, frequent use of unhealthy celebration foods, prolonged periods of time spent in sedentary activities such as screen-based entertainment, lack of sufficient indoor play space, and restrictions of physical activity (Trost et al., 2009; Gunter et al., 2012). For these and other reasons, FCC programs have been poorly represented in the media, community, and government in terms of the quality of their programming, the type of service they provide, the background of the providers', and the nature of the care they offer (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005; Freeman, 2011). These providers have also been considered lower in status than center-based peers in part due to real, or perceived, lower standards and looser requirements for training and professional learning (Davis et al., 2012; Mooney and Statham, 2003; Tonyan, 2015).

Researchers have published mixed findings about the differences between licensed FCC programs and center-based programs. Significant differences in structural and process quality have been found between FCC and center-based child care settings (Dowsett et al., 2008). FCC programs have been found to have less warmth and sensitivity, less organization, and have fewer positive interactions with children and parents and less training in early childhood education than center-based providers. Dowsett and colleagues (2008) found FCC providers to have less responsive and sensitive care and less cognitive stimulation and language interactions than center-based settings. Another study found parents' perceived family child care programs as less safe yet rated them higher in the level of nurturing and opportunities for social interactions with

other children (Durden, 2016). Conversely, Groeneveld and colleagues (2010) found higher caregiver warmth and lower noise levels in home-based child care compared to center-based child care (Rusby et al., 2013). Coplan, Findlay, and Schneider (2007) found that children who attended FCC programs had lower scores on measures of anxiety when beginning school than children who attended center-based care. Researchers documented lower school readiness scores among children in FCC programs, especially in math, (Austin et al., 2010) and letter awareness (Berghout et al., 2011) compared to the children's center-based peers. Studies have indicated that children who participated in FCC programs as infants and toddlers later scored lower scores on standard measures of cognitive and language development and had fewer pre-academic skills than peers spending an equivalent amount of time in center-based care (Garces et al., 2002; National Institute of Child health and Human Development Early Childhood Research Network, 2000, 2002; NICHD ECCRN and Duncan, 2003; Doherty, 2015).

These differences could be attributed to the differences in populations served by FCC programs, to lower levels of professional learning of FCC providers, or other factors. Researchers have investigated the differences in providers' professional learning and program quality between FCC and center-based child care settings and found evidence of lower quality among FCC programs (Raikes et al., 2005; Johnson et al. 2012; Swartz et al., 2016). Studies have also found FCC providers less well equipped and with lower levels of education and training compared to their center-based counterparts (Kontos, 1992; Kontos, Hsu, & Dunn, 1994; Berghout et al., 2011). Comparing a variety of program types, researchers have found the greater variation in education and training experience among licensed FCC providers, compared to their center-based peers. These differences have been thought to reflect variations in licensing and employment requirements in these settings (Fuligni et al, 2009). These differences have also

been attributed to lower requirements for FCC programs than center-based programs. For example, the highest professional development tier for licensed FCC providers in many states is significantly lower than that for center-based and prekindergarten teachers (Tout et al., 2010; Schaack & Stetodji, 2017). This may be because FCC providers have fewer opportunities for day-to-day support from other educators, have longer and more irregular working hours, and have less time to pursue higher education and extensive training, even when these are subsidized by states (Fuligni et al, 2009).

Family Child Care Provider Learning and Program Quality

A qualified family child care workforce is a key component of supporting high-quality family-based care (Swartz et al., 2016). Studies have suggested that family child care providers' professional experience and education backgrounds vary more widely than do those of their center-based peers and that home-based providers are less likely to seek and receive ongoing professional development that supports quality care (Fuligni et al., 2009; Swartz et al., 2016). Qualifications and professional learning requirements for home-based family child care providers also vary markedly across states and tend to be lower than requirements for center-based counterparts (National Child care Information and Technical Assistance Center and National Association for Regulatory Administration, 2010). Further, national family child care accreditation criteria have not always addressed educational qualifications for providers (National Association of Family Child care, 2016; Schaak & Stedoji, 2017). States vary in their training requirements for pre-service training only, licensure, and licensure maintenance (Garner & Parker, 2016; Tonyan, 2017). Given the strong relationship between ECE providers' professional learning and the quality of their programs, it is of concern that so little research and so much variation exists regarding professional learning for FCC providers.

In terms of experience in the field, licensed FCC providers have been found to have more experience than unlicensed FCC providers (OPRE, 2014; Durden et al., 2016). Providers with more experience have been found to reference school readiness skills, such as mathematics, more than providers with fewer years of experience (Hendershot et al., 2016). In one study of FCC providers, those with more experience demonstrated more scaffolding behaviors and scored higher on measures of responsiveness than providers with less training (Zuniga & Howes, 2009). These scaffolding behaviors, they found, were more significantly related to FCC environmental quality and literacy activities than were providers' education and training.

Researchers have also investigated relationships between FCC providers' participation in education and training, and the quality of their programs. These studies have had mixed results. Researchers found that FCC providers, compared to early childhood educators in other settings, were less likely to attend professional development trainings (Fuligni et al., 2009; Durden et al., 2016). The effectiveness and quality of the trainings FCC providers receive is highly variable and difficult to measure due to the fragmented nature of the professional development systems within and across states (Winton et al., 2008; Durden et al., 2016). FCC providers who do have access to participate in professional development tend to prefer trainings that provide more informal interactions, foster supportive social relationships, and more interactions with other providers (Kontos, 1992; Kontos et al., 1996; Walker et al., 2002; Swartz et al. 2016; Lanigan, 2011; Durden, 2016). Although studies have found that advanced degrees among FCC providers have been associated with higher quality programs, mandating that all FCC providers have advanced degrees would be unrealistic and could result in dramatic reduction in the licensed FCC workforce in many communities (Schaack et al., 2017; Durden et al., 2016).

Researchers have argued that state policy leaders and professional development administrators need to consider a variety of strategies such as coaching (Zaslow et al., 2012); support networks and learning communities (Bromer et al., 2009), home visiting (McCabe & Cochran, 2008), and other strategies to ensure accessible and effective supports for FCC providers (Schaak & Setodji, 2017; Durden et al., 2016). This adds pressure to state policy leaders to consider not only whether to encourage, require, and support professional learning opportunities for FCC providers but also to consider how best to offer that professional learning. These decisions must involve not only research that includes the voices of FCC providers, such as the present study; but also, direct involvement of FCC providers in the development of the policies and supports that influence them.

Methods

Research Design

In this phenomenological qualitative study, I explored the lived experiences of 12 FCC providers in the State of Washington to better understand how they have responded to increased professional learning requirements, their preferences in professional learning, and how they have applied what they have learned to improve the quality of their programs. I investigated the firsthand experiences of FCC providers to address a gap in the literature shedding light on how FCC providers grow professionally and implement quality programs. Using semi-structured interviews, I explored how they interpreted their professional learning requirements and experiences, what meanings, and value they placed on these professional learning experiences, and how they constructed their knowledge, skill, and understanding through the professional learning process.

Participants

Participants were recruited using publicly available contact data from licensed family child care providers who responded to a needs assessment survey (The Imagine Institute, 2018) that I conducted on behalf of the State of Washington Department of Children Youth and Families (Imagine Institute, 2018). An item on the 2018 survey asked participants to indicate whether they were willing to be contacted in the future for further research (n=271). Using the Department of Children and Family's online child care locater to verify contact information, I emailed study information with an invitation to participate and an informed consent survey to 147 providers who were still licensed; 11 email address were no longer valid. From the 136 providers who received invitations, 15 agreed to participate, three of whom dropped out when they could not identify an interview time that would work for their schedules. The remaining 12 participants represent multiple and varied perspectives, operated programs in all regions of the state and varied in their years of experience, languages, education background, and program approach (see Tables 1 and 2).

The 12 participants reflected the statewide family childcare workforce in several ways but were not a representative group. There was at least one participant from each of the state's six QRIS administrative regions. This was significant because certain professional learning opportunities and coaching availability varied based on regional availability. Participants varied levels of participation in Early Achievers. One provider had never participate, and one had quit the program. The rest were either preparing for their first rating or had been rated. Of the eight who had been rated, there was little variation in their ratings; seven were rated at QRIS quality level three and one rated quality level three-plus. Participants ranged in age between 36 and 65 years old and 10 of the 12 were between 36 and 55 years old. Five out of the 12 participants, five

identified as White, three as Hispanic / Latino, two as Asian, one as Black / African American, and one as American Indian / Alaska Native. It was relevant that the participant group reflected some of ways providers vary, however the small participant group in this study did not represent the family child care providers across the state. Rather, these individuals had unique perspectives based on their lived experiences as family child care providers. From their descriptions of learning to run their programs we cannot make conclusions about all provides, but we can glimpse some of the motivations, opportunities, and tensions they may share with their peers around the state.

Data Collection

I recorded one semi-structured interview with each of the 12 licensed FCC providers to discuss their experiences with professional learning, how they have applied what they have learned to different areas of ECE practice, as well as their perspectives about the relationship between professional learning and program quality (see Table 3). Interviews were collected over a four-week period, ranged from 24 minutes to 68 minutes, and produced a total of 205 transcript pages. The interview protocol (see Appendix A), recruitment messaging, and study design were reviewed and approved by the University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB). All interviews were conducted and recorded through the Zoom virtual meeting platform and audio recordings were transcribed using Notta transcription software. Following the interviews, I conducted member checks by sending participants summaries of their responses to each interview question; no participants objected to the content of the summaries.

Data Analysis

Transcripts analyzed using an iterative method consistent with interpretive studies (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002) facilitated by NVivo R1 qualitative data analysis software. Data were

analyzed using an initial set of a priori codes, codes that emerged during the process of analysis, and a conceptual framework connecting professional learning and program quality (see Figure 1).

A Priori Codes

The broad, a priori codes for the initial analysis included (a) providers' experiences with professional learning, (b) how providers have applied their professional learning experiences to their early childhood center, and (c) characterizations of the relationships between professional learning and program quality. Related to providers' experiences, I began with codes that included learning to open a family child care program, trusted sources of professional learning, and providers' evaluations of professional learning experiences. Related to how providers have applied professional learning, a priori codes were aligned with the areas of practice that were most common in the literature reviewed for the study. Initial codes related to participants' views about the relationship between professional learning and quality included each link in the conceptual framework.

Emergent Codes

Throughout the process of analysis, I identified additional themes in the transcripts and created additional codes and subcodes (see Tables 4, 5, and 6). Pertinent to providers' experience, emergent codes included how providers identified possible professional learning opportunities and how they selected which ones mattered most to them. Related to how providers applied professional learning, themes emerged regarding areas of practice not well-described in the literature – family engagement, business practices, supporting children with special needs, outdoor learning, and learning to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. In connection with how providers understood the relationship between professional learning and program quality, themes

emerged related to participation in the Early Achievers QRIS and providers' own sense of wellbeing.

Conceptual Framework

This study focused on the providers' characterization of the relationship between professional learning and program quality. Summarized, professional learning can influence ECE practice, ECE practice can improve program quality, and program quality can enhance program outcomes (see Figure 1). Throughout the process of analysis, I created data displays that showed interview text data in relation to the a priori and emergent codes.

Trustworthiness

I took several deliberate steps to support the trustworthiness of the research processes and findings. Trustworthiness, or credibility, is important to ensure that the interpretations and conclusions that the research represents can be a reliable, although imperfect, guide to subsequent researchers on the topic as well as future practice and policy decisions and investments. Wolcott (2005) described credibility in qualitative research in terms of the correspondence between the findings and the research setting, including the experiences of the participants. To provide context to the interview data I examined publicly available data from state QRIS policy reports, providers' QRIS ratings, as well as the participants' earlier responses to the 2018 professional learning needs assessment survey. To further support credibility of the findings, I gathered input from multiple investigative collaborators. Throughout the process of coding, I discussed the interview data, its emerging themes, and the analysis process with my dissertation chair and peer researchers. These processes involved colleagues scanning some of the raw data to assess the plausibility and credibility of emerging themes and preliminary findings and examining the coding tables to verify the connections between the data, the codes,

and the findings of the study. These processes add credibility to ensure that results were consistent with the data that has been collected (Merriam, 2009).

I also conducted member checks with participants after transcribing the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the initial data collection and support the trustworthiness of the research. To conduct member checks, I created interview memos that summarized the participants' responses to each question asked in the interview as well as my initial interpretations of their perspectives. I shared each memo with the participants involved to provide them an opportunity to confirm or amend my initial interpretation of their perspective (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). This continual data analysis and comparison of information helped to refine constructs and support alignment between the codes that emerge and the realities of the participants in the study.

These ongoing analyses also incorporated my own reflection, introspection, and self-monitoring. Erickson (1973) called this process disciplined subjectivity in which the researcher exposes all phases of the process to continual questioning and re-evaluation. Through this process I sought to surface and explain my own biases, dispositions, and assumptions about the study as it was taking place to better understand my positionality as the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

Positionality

Positionality concerns how the researcher is situated within the research study. This includes how the researcher has come identify the topic, how one relates to it, and how these experiences are involved in the processes of the interpretation and meaning making (Genishi & Glupcyznski, 2009). "Knowledge created by social science and educational researchers reflects their social and cultural contexts as well as their political and economic interests…Research

reflects the political and social context as well as the epistemological journeys of researchers and scholars" (Banks, 2009, pp. 780-781).

My own professional experience has shaped my perspective on the issues surrounding the study. My background as a K-12 teacher in classroom settings as well as my experience as a ECE teacher in both center-based and FCC programs has provided me opportunities to relate to the work lives of early childhood educators. Experience as an instructor in a university-based early childhood education certification and degree programs has also informed my perspectives on the challenges that early care and education providers can face in seeking and applying professional learning, as well as the challenges inherent in developing high-quality professional learning programs that educators need. Experience as a state policy officer evaluating educator preparation programming has also helped me understand the many challenges that state managers and administrators face as they work to create frameworks of benefits, incentives, and requirements to support a high-effective, culturally responsive educator workforce. My current work with family child care programming and policy in the State of Maryland also informed my perspective on Washington's unique programs and policies, and illuminated how FCC providers in different states contend with some of the same challenges, constraints, and opportunities.

I have also gained specific insight into this study through previous scholarly efforts. In 2018, I conducted the statewide needs assessment of family child care providers in Washington State described above. That study was funded by the DCYF through its contractor The Imagine Institute. In that work, I conducted a telephonic and email survey (n=423) of family child care providers that informed the focus of this study and provided me a list of FCC providers in Washington State who were willing to be contacted to participate in this follow-up study. The previous study provided me the opportunity to consider broadly the professional learning needs

of FCC providers across the state, as well as their qualification requirements, and the professional learning programs available to them. The present study builds from that work to better understand providers' experiences and stories of professional learning.

In addition to my previous work on the topic, my positionality as a White, cisgender, male, English-speaker who was affiliated with the University of Washington impacted how participants perceived me in unknown ways. Because I was only able conduct the interviews in English, I was not able to hear from providers who did not feel comfortable or capable of having an English language interview. As well, providers who were multilingual and agreed to the interviews may not have been able to fully express their perspectives. My racial and gender identities may also have impacted the data I collected and how I interpreted it. White males have long been over represented in education leadership positions while females of color have been over represented in care giving and early education positions. Even though I disclosed to participants that I did not work in education leadership, nor for any state agency, it was possible that my positionality unduly conveyed an amount authority that could have influenced how participants described their programs, their learning, or their quality improvement efforts. Though I also disclosed that I did not work for the University of Washington, participants knew that I was affiliated with the institution responsible for their quality ratings, which may have influenced how they described their experiences with Early Achievers or other quality improvement efforts. Though it was not possible to understand all the ways my positionality may have impacted the data I collected or how I analyzed it, I made effort throughout the process to reflect upon how my positionality affected my interpretations.

Findings

This study examined FCC providers' experiences with professional learning, how they applied what they learned, and how they characterized the relationship between professional learning and quality in their FCC programs. After a brief overview of the findings, I detail the themes from each of the study's three research questions.

After initial basic trainings, FCC providers described professional learning experiences in similar ways, but for different reasons. Initial licensure trainings provided a low barrier to access to starting a program, but did not leave them confident to start a business. Providers found learning experiences by searching for opportunities when they experienced challenges, and by responding to direct outreach from professional learning providers. Although the quality of their learning experiences varied, the value of these experiences depended on the learner.

Providers applied what they had learned across a range of areas in their professional practice such as designing learning environments, fostering enriching interactions and learning experiences in literacy and math. Providers also applied what they learned about working with families, supporting children with special needs, developing outdoor education spaces, navigating COVID-19, and running a business. Providers described having learned similar practices in college courses, trainings, and coaching experiences. Participants explained that the learning processes involved in applying new practices were in part influenced by how effective they believed they could be in making changes, and how confident they were that changes to practices would change outcomes for the children and families they served.

Participants explained that Early Achievers, the state's QRIS is optional, but to them, it did not always feel like it. Providers knew that professional learning improved their practice, to a point. They explained how improving their performance improved program quality, by some

definition, and to an extent; and they understood how improving program quality improved child outcomes, but not just the academic outcomes common in the academic literature on professional learning and program quality. In discussing their experiences with highly valuable learning experiences, participants reflected that learning, improvement, and quality were all situated within their own perspective, in relationship with their well-being.

Research Question 1: What are FCC providers' experiences with professional learning opportunities?

The providers who participated in this study had varied backgrounds, with their own lived experiences and insights. Collectively, their stories included common themes, converging perspectives, and opposing views. Participants described their learning experiences entering the field, the learning resources they have relied on, how they selected professional learning opportunities, and how they ascribed value to the experiences they have had.

Learning to Provide Family Child Care

Participants discussed how they initially learned to provide family child care. The themes that emerged from their descriptions were (a) how they decided to provide family child care and (b) their experiences with initial orientation and training to become licensed by the state (see Table 7).

Deciding to Provide Family Child Care. Participants explained why they became family child care providers, "So, I have always been that person that kids are attracted to, and I just thought it was this weird phenomenon" (1134) and "I realized that when I became a parent for my first child, the housework that I was doing is similar as the work" (1111). Family child care providers enter the field for a variety of reasons; this group of participants had multiple and overlapping motivations for starting their programs, summarized by one participant, "I started

my daycare because all I ever loved was taking care of kids, my daughter was five, I was a single parent working outside of the home; and I just decided to go for it" (1091). As a group, participants in this study entered the field because they had an affinity for young children and developed a passion for caring for and educating them; they realized the work of the family child care provider was like the daily work they were doing caring for their own children; and they saw a viable business opportunity. These reasons were not mutually exclusive and individual providers weighted them differently and claimed multiple reasons as their own.

Providers opened programs because they “had a way with kids” and had developed a passion for educating young children (1077). Two providers explained how children had always been drawn to them, and though they couldn’t explain why, this phenomenon made starting in the field of early childhood education a natural choice. Two more providers lived with their mothers-in-law, who were licensed family child care providers, “she was doing that job and I spent two years living in her house. And I just love, I love to see how she works with the kiddos. And I was like, I want to do that” (1116). Providers described developing a “dream” or “passion” “to provide a safe, fun environment for kids,” including their own children.

The work of family child care providers is like parenting in many ways. For parents, finding both child care and employment can be very difficult. For these providers, opening a family child care home offered a way to find both employment and a positive place for their own children. For other providers, opening a family child care program can feel like their only option. Providers discussed the convenience of being able to care for their own pre-school-aged children alongside their clients and being available for their own older children before and after school. For some participants, working at home while providing care was a viable employment alternative to working elsewhere and finding a child care provider. One participant shared:

> My son never had a good time or a good experience with the child care providers. Every week it was something different... my son used to cry... he was never happy. I was switching him to the different child care providers. And every time it got worse and worse and very difficult for me to leave him with a child care provider, but I had to go work. So, at that time I took a year off work. So, I stayed with him at home. And then I decided to work with children. (1022)

From another perspective:

> I have a degree in horticulture, and that was the field that...I am 51. And so that's what I did for the most of my adult life. I was a single mom. I got my daughter registered for kindergarten, and I found out that there were zero options for her after school that there was no after school programs. And I thought it would be a good occupation for me to keep doing until I retired. Horticulture is physically demanding. And being in child care, picking up babies is demanding. But it's not as demanding. (1126)

For other participants, finding a child care provider for their own children and working out of the home was less of an option and more of last resort:

> Okay, when I started, I didn't have not even a high school diploma. I was a dropout. Because I got pregnant. And then back then, my husband, you know how Latinos are like, “No, you're going to stay home, you're not going to go back to school”. So, my [ex-husband] wanted me to do daycare and I'm like, “No, I don't want to”. I didn’t want to do babysitter...And then my mom showed my ex-husband a check and she's like, “this is what she can earn.” So, he pushed me into it, like “you should do it… this and that…”! And I was like, “Okay then, so if I'm already doing it”, yeah. (1002)

Regardless of their initial motivations, participants recognized that there was a viable business opportunity available to them by opening a family child care home, but not one that came without investment and risk. They described their experiences overcoming their hesitations and deciding to enter the field, “Oh, it was nerve-racking because I was the only income for us. I built my own home. And I thought, you know what? I can do it” (1091); “…You have to put money into it to make money. So, I put all my money into the business to open it” (1066).

> Well, the first year was not easy. It was difficult with a lot of money to invest. I had to buy a house and put the fence and the alarms and all the stuff I need for a child care just to become a secure home, you know, safety, safety and secure for all children. Nothing was easy. (1022)

Even when becoming a family child care provider seemed certainly a good idea, the prospect of starting a business was fraught, as one participant explained:

> The lady at the school district said if somebody was to open a licensed child care, they would do really well. I was scared, honestly, that I wouldn't have enough clients…I wasn't sure how accurate her statement was. And I wasn't sure how much need there would be. And would I make enough money because, you know, it's... something you hear, that child care providers don't make very much money. It may be the case in centers, but family, child care, me working by myself, I make more now than I did in horticulture at any of my jobs. (1126)

The providers in this study all planned to continue providing family child care for the time being, but not all had the same outlooks on their current business prospects. Some participants described having ample business and flexibility to choose their clients and hours

while making more money than they did before; others spoke honestly about their struggle to stay afloat:

> Well, I'm very busy and very stressed. I'm going to just try to make ends meet. [The stress is] purchasing, you know, supplies. Everything has went up so much in cost and also with minimum wage going up that's really tough too because our wage doesn't go up, but minimum wage does. I'm not making more, but I have to pay out more! (1091)

Regardless of why they decided to become a family child care provider, after making the decision providers navigated initial, basic training to become licensed.

Initial Orientation and Training. One participant remembered initial basic training as a daunting experience,

> Well, what I remember in this 20 plus years of being a provider…when I went to my first licensing orientation man, honestly, if I even knew what I was going to hear, I would have taken a diaper with me! I was like, Oh my gosh! I was so scared! (1022)

Although some providers described concern about the initial, basic training, most considered it a necessary first step that was "minimal" and "pretty simple", but not sufficient, "You know, just to be honest, the trainings are just the basics, just to be in compliance…But you need more than that" (1116).

During the period in which these participants have been practicing, the licensure training requirement increased from 20 hours to 30 hours. Following this basic training, the state requires providers to take 10 additional hours of training, from approved training programs, on an annual basis, though providers often voluntarily exceed that. Over time, providers have noticed the additional training requirements, "So at the very beginning, there were minimal rules and licensing. It was pretty basic, like health and safety. And then as the years have gone on, the

rules have multiplied by dozens, if not more than that" (1091). To stay in compliance and continue to learn, providers found trusted sources of professional learning.

Knowing Sources for Ongoing Professional Learning

For their ongoing professional learning, family child care providers sought out learning opportunities from familiar sources and in somewhat similar ways, but each had her own motivation. All participants in this study found learning opportunities through (a) state agencies, (b) non-government organizations, (c) colleges and universities, (d) their peers, and (e) through self-guided explorations on the internet.

State Agency Representatives and Resources. The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) establishes the professional learning requirements for family child care providers and shares guidance materials through direct outreach and through resources and referral agencies. Multiple providers in the study found those materials and resources helpful and were able to reference them when needed.

Non-government Organizations. The state's main child care resource and referral agency, Child Care Aware, has a network office and six regional offices, all of which provide professional learning opportunities for ECE providers including training and coaching, conferences, and workshops where family child care program operators can make connection with professional learning providers from beyond their area, or beyond the state. All participants described having had some interaction with their local resource and referral agencies. Multiple participants mentioned finding support from another organization, the Imagine Institute, which was established specifically to support the needs of the family child care community through cooperation between the Department of Children Youth and Families and Services Employees International Union (SEIU) local 925.

Peers. Participants described many professional learning experiences involving peer FCC providers, professionals from other human services fields (e.g., counselors, K12 teachers, etc.), and from members of their own families. Some providers had social networks that included other early childhood educators, others found peers within group training experiences. In these experiences they described being able to discuss business administration, dynamics with children and families they serve, as well as provide encouragement and advice to one another. These social and professional experiences were not formal, but very valuable to providers, who often had fewer opportunities for peer-peer professional connections than their child care center-based peers.

Professionals in Other Fields. Providers also learned from, and with, other professionals, some of whom were parents in the program. One provider described, “I've had professionals come in and we sit down, and we have a chat. I get their perspective on it, especially I've had therapists, psychologists, and we sit down and talk about behavior. We swap notes, you know" (1143), put differently, “I have a parent who's a counselor. So, if I have a real hard time trying to figure something out, I can usually, you know, research with her” (1091). These anecdotes reveal not only how closely tied the work of family child care providers is to family therapists and counselors, but also the fact the providers seek the resources available to them to address the problems that matter to them.

Families. Participants also learned important aspects of providing child care from their own families. They described having parents who were able to guide their early steps, siblings who could create business plans and make websites, and husbands who could do the taxes. When the problems of practice arose, these participants reached to those closest to them for help.

Colleges and Universities. Participants learned from the state's colleges and universities. They described the college access points they were familiar with, the challenges of working and studying, and the phenomenon of momentum in their education. Providers found out about access points to college and university programs in ECE through their state licensor or through contacts with representatives of the Early Achievers program, the state's QRIS. Though some had degrees in other fields such as horticulture, public administration, or had been "grandfathered in" based on their experience. Family child care providers work long hours; finding time for a college education was not easy.

In their descriptions of arranging their child care programs to accommodate their school schedules and starting and stopping their education to accommodate their businesses, a phenomenon of momentum emerged. It was challenging to start a college degree program, but even more challenging to have to start over again. Pursuing college was slow going, but it helped to have smaller chunks that led to the completion of a certificate, if not a full degree. This sentiment was summarized by one participant, "And I did sign up for the Bachelor program, but life is just crazy. And like I've done it three times at this point, I'm like, you know what? I just take smaller blocks of training" (1066). When those smaller blocks of training can be added up to a completed certificate that equates to college credit, providers can build momentum toward completion, even if they must pause midway:

> Yeah, so I took for my 12 hours initial certificate. Then I took [a couple more classes], now I think the only thing is that three or two classes to finish my Associate. So, I get busy had a baby. And life's kind of hard. So, I was like, maybe I'll come back for next time. But I'm almost done. (1111)

Success completing certificates, as a step toward completing degrees, was motivating for participants in the study. Participants found this inspiring, “So, they inspired me to continue my education and now I'm still in to WSU. I'm working on my BA in Human Development” (1022); and it built their confidence in learning more, “So, I went for my master’s, and I got it. I just graduated. And I'm still debating if I want to go for my PhD. It's most likely that I go for it because the learning doesn't end” (1002). Although this sense of momentum was pervasive across interviews, some providers were still on the fence about continuing college and university education, “I'm really, really battling with myself about going back for my master's degree. But I'm going to stay right where I'm at because I am needed more here than I think I could do anywhere else” (1077); and others knew when to call it enough, “I’m so done being educated” (1143).

Internet Searching. In addition to formal professional learning experiences, participants in the study described finding learning experiences through self-guided internet searching, “If something I need to look [up], I just do online” (1133). Participants found strategies for engaging positive social interactions, setting up their environments, and learning about outdoor education through these searchers. Although multiple providers described the ease with which they could find information on the internet, none described how they assessed the accuracy or quality of the information they found.

Finding Professional Learning Opportunities

For the FCC providers in this study, finding professional learning experiences involved (a) knowing where to look and (b) responding to the opportunities that come their way (see Table 8).

Knowing Where to Look. Participants looked to the trusted sources described above and asked their coaches and licensors for recommendations and guidance. Once they had established some trust in particular sources, they regularly sought published training calendars and other resources from these professional learning providers.

Responding to Direct Outreach. In addition to actively seeking out professional learning opportunities, providers also responded to direct outreach from associations, non-profit groups focused on child care, as well as local and state education agencies. Providers came to rely on receiving training calendars, notices about public speakers, networking opportunities, and other professional learning experiences. Both the state, and system of non-government and professional associations were critical to keeping providers informed about their options.

Making Professional Learning Choices

When it came to moving past awareness of professional learning opportunities to making choices about actual learning experiences, providers considered (a) requirements and convenience; (b) learning format and interactivity, and (c) relevance to current problems of practice (see Table 9).

Requirements and Convenience. Convenience and licensure maintenance requirements played a role in providers' decisions on professional learning, "We have 10 hours continuing education every year that we have to pick up" (1111); "[I ask myself] What can I do to keep my [training] numbers up" (1143). Although convenience and requirements influenced decision-making, providers' stories offered more detail about what they were looking for, and not looking for, in learning experiences.

Interactive Learning Format. In-person or virtual format is a personal preference that is heavily dependent on location and flexibility.

> Yeah, so I mean, it's nice to do in person. It really is because then you kind of network with other providers when you do that. But then also it's like not possible to do it because your schedule is so crazy. I mean, I work at least 13, 14 hours a day. (1091)

Providers in rural areas relied on the online classes but were also challenged by work schedules reliable WIFI connections. Whether in person or virtual, providers appreciated interaction with other providers, “I think that's where people probably get the most out of it is when you communicate with other educators” (1066); “When I have an idea and I need to interact" (1116). They also preferred experiences that were not lecture-heavy, “I hate those lectures, trainings. They're just like, ‘blah, blah, blah’. You feel like that Peanuts movie. La, la, la. What did I learn? I didn't learn anything because it was old lectures” (1002). However, even when trainings were highly interactive, whether in-person or virtual, having the time and energy to fully participate was not certain:

> And they're good at asking us to participate, and that helps. But honestly, it's really hard to... I'm for short and sweet. Less words, say more with less words. I work 10 -hour days, 7:00 am to 5:00 pm. And by 7:00 pm or 8:00 pm, my brain is shutting down. I'm tired, and it's hard to concentrate and to pay attention … I'll be trying to focus and stay awake listening to someone talk about record keeping and taxes. (1126)

Relevance to Problems of Practice. Given the constraints on their time and the extensiveness of their daily work with children and families, providers needed professional learning that was relevant and eased their burden, rather than adding to it. Providers valued practical advice that made the day easier for them on topics such as pre-preparing food, how to interact with families, how to help children stuck in social conflict or who have special needs, how to do taxes, or how to set up the yard. Participants also looked for insights from professional

learning experiences to see whether new ideas might give them novel approaches to thinking about familiar practices.

Evaluating Professional Learning Experiences

For participants in the study, the quality of their professional learning experiences varied, and the value depended on the individual's perspective (see Table 10). Providers described preferences in their learning experiences in terms of content and format. They valued interactive and relevant experiences that met their licensure maintenance requirements, addressed their problems of practice, and helped them build momentum toward their education and career goals. They did not value lecture-based trainings or when trainers are "probably trying to sell a product or something" (1133). However, these providers had found through trusted sources of professional learning, that they could gather something of value from each experience, "You know…I think because I pick and choose which ones I take, I think that I haven't taken one that I haven't taken something from it" (1091), if they could stay awake, "You're waking up to pay attention in there…Gotta get something out of it" (1126).

Research Question 2: In what ways do FCC providers apply what they have learned in professional learning opportunities to their FCC programs?

The providers who participated in this study ran different kinds of family child care programs, each with its own history, community, and approach. Each participant also had her own background of formal and informal learning experiences, though they spoke of having learned many of the same practices. Each of the participants in the study applied professional learning experiences in their program in the areas of ECE practice common in the literature reviewed in this study – learning environments, interactions, literacy, and math. All providers shared their learning experiences running businesses. Several described applying what they had

learned to support children with special needs, and to develop their outdoor education environments. While telling the stories of the learning experiences, participants also recounted their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout their stories, a theme emerged; when it came to applying what they learned, their own motivation and personal assessment of how effective they could be played a significant role. And, when supported by or others in their environment, they felt more effective and more motivated to apply learning to their practice.

Learning Environments

Participants described at length how they applied what they learned related to setting up their environment. As one provider explained:

> Well, a lot of it's the environment and like setting up my environment in a way that's going to work for teaching. And you know, just setting up to where your environment is, your teaching tool, basically. So, and I would have never thought about, you know, environment being so important as I do now. (1077)

Several themes emerged from their descriptions of this learning (a) sharing space with work and home, (b) reducing clutter, (c) setting up activity stations, and (d) children's choices in setting up the environment (see Table 11).

Sharing Space for Home and Work. Family child care providers' learning about setting up their child care environments involved a sense of place and use of space. To them, a child care home was both child care program and home. To set up a program that met licensing standards, providers needed to make changes to the home to safeguard children's health and safety. One participant recounted:

> We took and cleaned out the garage. We had these [people] come in and inspect it, make sure it's a good space. Then we rebuilt; we did everything. We put a playground in the back. We did all of that. All to the specs. (1143)

However, it was challenging because changes to the care environment also meant changes to the living space, “the rules kind of got to the point where it's pretty tough to live in your house and have a daycare. It's doable, but it's not very easy” (1091). To make it work required some flexibility, creativity, the willingness to adapt to a sense of place that is for both living and working. A participant who was a single parent in a rural area explained:

> I have a relatively small house. I have child care literally throughout my whole house. My kitchen, living room, and the playroom is all just [child care], like my living room is the classroom. I have two cribs in my living room. And so, I don't have a real classroom like at a center (1126).

Reducing Clutter. There was a strong convergence of opinion among the providers that having fewer items could make more space, which could make a difference to their sense of place. Professional learning experiences exposed participants to the idea that they did not need as many toys and materials as they thought they did, leaving children space to move was important and that they could rotate materials, so everything wasn’t out at once. As one provider described “I used to have my shelves packed full of stuff, but yet all that stuff fell on the floor and the cleanup was awful” (1134). Fewer items, they found, also made it easier to help children take responsibility for the cleaning up, “It's reduced my amount of stress and the amount of cleanup that I'm doing and the amount of organizing that I'm doing. Yeah, it's a big deal” (1126).

Setting Up Activity Stations. Multiple providers in this study shared the view that organizing the child care home into separate activity centers made a difference for how children

used the space. Several pointed to the influence of Early Achievers on their thinking in this area. Providers mainly described their use of activity centers indoors where they set up “cozy areas”, “mud area”, “science area”, “literacy area”, music area …etc.; two also made use of centers outdoors (1066; 1126).

> Early Achievers taught us all those good things. And now I believe the environment is really important for the kids because they need to have all their toys and materials what they need to use to grow, to explore. They know what they need. If they want music, they know where the instruments are and they just come and get the instruments and if one, if the other one decides not to do music but wants to do art, they know where the art stuff is, and they just go to the table and get all the stuff. (1116)

Children's Choice. Some providers who were involved in Early Achievers, understood why centers can help, but they used space differently, to promote children’s sense of place.

> Focusing on the environment's fine, but they should still be about the children. So, the [Early Achievers] quality standards were like, everything had to have a home so like if [the evaluators] came … it was, “Wait! The block area cannot have dinosaurs!” Then, it was our cars … I couldn't have cars because then it wouldn't be the “block” area; it would distract from that. How ridiculous is that that?! We're gonna say, “children if you want to have dinosaurs and cars”, or Heaven forbid like PlayDoh or something, “you can't do that because we're not gonna write good.” How is that on the children? (1066)

Rather, she believed:

> The children should be able to set the room up the way they want it. And they should be able to put it the way they want, this is their space, this is their childhood. I think that it

> needs to be revamped that we're looking at relationships with the children, not if they're putting their blocks back at the block shelf. (1066)

Together, providers' stories explained the challenge of sharing living and working space in a family child care home, how they have learned to make the two co-exist effectively, and truth that ultimately what works is what works for the provider and the children in her care.

Interactions Among Children and Providers

For many, learning about conversation and interaction strategies helped them learn to navigate challenging interactions with children (see Table 12). They explained that intentional approaches to word choice, question pattern, tone, and volume could make a big difference in the experiences that providers and children have in a child care home,

> Like the changes that make the greatest impact or for just to tell the child what they *can* do [instead of what they cannot] and it's so simple and it changes everything rather than the chasing children around telling them what they can't do they just they people have these habits, and no one has ever like pointed out. (1136)

Many providers picked up these skills in practice but found they could be improved through professional learning. All providers had learned, as one provider put it, through "experience over the years of dealing with different kids…" (1091). But many also learned through trainings and exposure to Early Achievers, which has for many providers meant learning to be assessed by the CLASS tool, which includes a measure of the positivity of the social climate in the room. Harsh words and conflict can lead to a lower score. Though all providers were familiar with tool, not all agreed that conflict should be avoided:

> So, with CLASS, with the CLASS thing, if the kids had conflict where we were being rated, we would lose, we would go to the lowest level on that area because it would be a

> negative environment. I realized that I was just trying to make sure there's no conflicts. [Now,] I've been stepping back, and they have some conflict, and we have really good social skills. (1066)

Multiple providers shared this sentiment in different ways, expressing incredulity that 100% positivity was a realistic or worthwhile goal, “Do you make sure that your words that you're saying is never a yell, even if you didn't mean to and it just came out slightly? [If not] then you're an awful provider” (1134); “I mean, it's always supposed to be a positive. And that's like, okay, sometimes in life, it's not always positive. That child is pulling someone's hair. I'm supposed to just say, oh, now Johnny, please don't do that. Right” (1091)?! Learning to be more intentional about their interactions was something that all participants could relate to, and some mentioned how that work influenced how they approached other topics with children, such as literacy and math.

Literacy

Providers in this study learned about creating literacy learning experiences for children from college courses, through trainings, and participation in Early Achievers (see Table 13). Regardless of where they learned, overall, they used many of the same practices. “You thought, you know, oh, just teaching them to read...It was like way more than that. Once I figured that out, it's been a lot better” (1091). They learned that early exposure to literacy can help children’s academic outcomes, and that combining what they have learned about open-ended questions and positive interactions complimented what they learned about talking with children about books, as described by one provider, “So for example, we can say it's the reading area, the kids’ reading area. We say, what is this title of that book? And what does that cover tell you about the book” (1111)? and by another, “Reading books is great. Everyone should do that with their kids, but

you need to do more like you need to do open-ended questions and like have conversations with kids, you know, get them familiar with books" (1091).

Regardless of where or how they had learned, providers in this study valued literacy experiences that were set in the context of everyday interactions with children, rather than through formal instruction in the A, B, Cs. They learned to make books accessible in different, predictable places in child care home. They learned to include descriptions, sound characterizations, and simple word games in everyday conversation. Two participants also described applying what they learned about literacy to provide cultural experiences, either by having "many different books from many different cultures" (1116) or by interpreting English books into another language as an aspect of language and cultural immersion:

> My program, Mandarin immersion, I've just been learning a lot, like how can I integrate English books, I translate in Chinese, because based on children's interest, and then I just might read a book for them, I translate them in Chinese, so they can, they have a lot of experience. Yeah, so that's from teaching and studying and I got coaching from Early Achievers. (1133)

Math

Early math was another area of practice in which participants described applying their professional learning (see Table 14). Participants learned literacy practices, participants in this study learned from college courses, trainings, and Early Achievers participation and they described using the similar practices, regardless of where they first learned them. Participants were clear that any effective approach needed to be applicable in a mixed-age learning environment. "When I have mixed ages … I don't have to do the teaching at all. It comes from the kids. My little ones, they're almost two now, they can count to five or six because of [older

children] counting." (1134). They described integrating math into everyday conversations and activities, for example, "We eat at the table for breakfast. We talk about things. If the child had an interest with cars this week, our whole week is about cars. And then the cars contain numbers and colors" (1133). Teaching math in this way, for these providers, started when they realized "Math is everywhere. Anywhere we go – shapes, patters, colors…" (1002); and then began to slightly change everyday activities, "counting in your cereal in your bowl" (1091); "Who's here today? How many chairs do we need?" (1066). All providers described including these practices in their work and some used songs to teach numbers ; another added mathematical materials to the environment such as scales, measurement tools, and calculators because as one provider put it, "everything has to be associated with their play or learning because that's how kids retain. Kids play. They play and learn" (1143).

Family Engagement

Participants learned how to communicate and collaborate with families through the necessity of daily practice, through college courses, and Early Achievers participation (see Table 15). Learning to communicate and collaborate with families was necessary; participants found the effort involved worthwhile in building relationships and easing their stress, "What motivates me? I have hard families" (1111). Organized, professional learning experiences in this area had strong impacts for several providers who said these experiences changed their approach:

> Since I've been educated more and since Early Achievers started, I feel like I'm more of a family advocate and a child advocate. And I feel like I support them more. [Professional learning] helped, it gave me more ideas and showed me to not be afraid on how to talk to the families. When you recognize signs or signals or whatever you want to call it, you gotta say, "Hey, it's everything okay" and start the conversation. (1077)

Multiple providers shared the real challenges they face working with families, as one provider put it frankly, “It's harder to work with families more than with children...nothing is easy with families” (1022*).* Challenges included communication about attending the program, sharing child development information that parents would trust, breaks and hours of operation, non-payment, and unfounded allegations to Child Protective Services (CPS).

These challenges led even providers who “communicated pretty well with the parents" (1091) to seek professional learning and apply what they had learned. Providers’ stories included multiple examples of having learned strategies that helped them “take the next step” (1066) by hosting activities, sending out newsletters and making online parent pages, designing parent contracts prompting conversations, and helping the parents “get involved with what the children were doing” (1091). However, to some, these extra events, were just that, extra, “We know them and we're talking to the parents every day. What are we going to tell them that these big meetings are having that they're not going to know” (1066)? Regardless of what they learned, or where, providers felt more confident talking to parents after their learning experiences. Strong relationships, open communication, and clear boundaries with their clients helped family child care providers do what they do, not just for the children, but for the whole family.

Business Practices

Although some providers had a background in business, there was a pervasive need among them to learn more (see Table 16). For most participants in the study, running a business was a secondary and somewhat separate concern than running a family child care program, “Yeah, because I mean you go into it with your heart like that's what you love to do. You don't go into a thinking of it as a business (1091)”. Several participants in this study felt confident starting their businesses because they had a personal or family history in developing

businesses. For some, running businesses was common in their families, "When I was baby, my family were business owners. So, I always have a business education on my planner" (1111). Another explained "My family has different businesses, [I knew] you just had to put money into it to make money. I put all my money into the business to open it. After that, it was just a lot of trial and error" (1066). A third provider had experience running another kind of business, knowledge that was useful, but not ultimately sufficient:

> I'd had a business before, but a landscape maintenance business is really different than a child care business. I really didn't feel confident in that aspect. And so, I keep taking classes just to make sure I'm doing that part right. (1126)

But even with this background, business learning came slowly, and participants needed additional training. For the providers in this study, they did not start a child care with business practices at the top-of-mind, “When I started, I wasn't a business owner, I didn't, I didn't think of my daycare as a business, I thought of it as taking care of children” (1091). Without experience or training, providers faced challenges and did not feel confident in their business administration skills, “I'm not too good in this. You know, I love my business dealing with the kids. I don't like the business with numbers and taxes” (1116).

Providers spoke of the administrative and technical challenges they faced running a business. Without much guidance, participants in this study struggled with determining the structure of their businesses, how to develop a business plan, how to handle accounting, how to use computer applications and encrypted emails, how to hire staff and how to do taxes. Learning these skills was challenging:

> So, then I was going to have another person help me out…and so I became a corporation. And that was at first, I'm like, 'Okay, I can do this'. And then... 'I'm not sure how to do this' I cried the first tax return. It was so hard. (1134)

Although none of the participants had formal training in business prior to opening, many had taken courses or trainings at the community college or through a local non-profit training organization to learn how to do accounts, taxes, and hiring. Others leaned on people they knew such as accountants, other providers, and family members.

Beyond the challenge of administrating their own business, participants described some additional challenges related to protecting their business, the economy, and workforce more broadly. Some described protecting their business and livelihood from "false allegations" to Child Protective Services and litigious parents. They described challenges staying solvent with rising supply costs and workforce concerns and finding enough clients. As one provider considered the attrition among family child care providers across the state and noted that the rising education requirements make it hard for her to hire, she noted:

> I have a problem with the education piece because someone who is an assistant that has to have the same education I have or more to be left alone with the kids is ridiculous to me because then they're gonna go somewhere else or they can get benefits or this or that. We can't afford to do that. (1091)

Another provider wanted to hire, but did not yet know enough about business practices to do so:

> I'm focused on getting an outdoor child care provider license and hiring. So that is something I need to learn how to do. Cause I don't, I've never had an employee, um, where I had to manage the HR part myself. The taxes and the payroll part is what I find really intimidating. (1066)

Finding clients was another concern:

> So, if the parent says yes, and then they find they don't want to come anymore, they can ghost you. And they're just like, never hear from them again, you can text them, you can call them and or email them any of those methods. And they're like, nothing. And then I just wasted my whole, oh gosh, like four days on this person trying to get a new person into my day care. (1134)

Even though running a business was fundamental to providing family child care programs, professional learning in business was an afterthought for providers, one that provoked anxiety, concern, and uncertainty more than learning about literacy, math, or family engagement. Although all providers in this study described their learning about environments, interactions, literacy, math, family engagement, and business practices, some also discussed what they had learned related to serving children with special needs.

Supporting Children with Special Needs

Supporting children with special needs was an emergent theme among some providers in the study (see Table 17). Those who did mention how they learned about supporting children with special needs, learned from different sources. One provider described her experience as a child working with her mother who was a special education paraeducator. This experience set her at ease early in her career, "…then I took that into my practice and had had many, many, many special-needs-kids come through my care. And I was able to help them because of her foundation" (1134). Another sought formal training with the Department of Developmental Disabilities which helped her serve the children who she already had in the program. A third described how what she had learned in a training gave her a perspective she needed, which made a big difference in her program's ability to serve children with special needs:

> And the significant thing for that was my first class, the teacher said, so we got to think about the children as a puzzle. They need something. We got to figure out what that need is, how they need it. What can we offer to meet that need? I took a lot of special needs kids over the years. Children get thrown out of other sites [would] appear [here]. (1066)

Learning to support children with special needs does require specialized training, not just to help the children, but their families as well. As one provided explained:

> I'm taking trainings with Washington University about that. Okay. So how to learn how to work with kids with autism. Because, you know, lately most of the kids have something. And we need to learn, we need to be educated to understand better and to be a good support for the family. (1116)

Supporting children with special needs was not mentioned by all participants, but those who mentioned this area of practice could explain how they had learned to apply what they learned to benefit children and families in their programs. Another area of practice mentioned by some, but not all providers involved how they used their outdoor environments.

Outdoor Learning

Several providers in this study applied information they had recently learned about outdoor education and described their interest in learning more (see Table 18). One provider explained how her existing focus on outdoor education was at odds with experience of Early Achievers' approach to science:

> There are rocks outside, and [Early Achievers] wanted rocks inside my house for a science. I'm like, do you not see this [motions to outdoors] that you go outside? But a lot of providers don't go outside and that's a big part of my program is to go outside. More than an hour a day that's my goal. Except for when it's really cool out, or really hot so

> above 100 or below 20 degrees. We're outside. We have rain suits. We're going outside all the weathers. So why do I want to bring all this [nature] stuff in my house [for science]? (1134)

There was a strong theme among participants in this study to learn more about setting up their outdoor environments. Providers were "focusing on outdoor classroom space" (1126) wondering "What's the best way I can set up an outdoor environment for children like a more nature style? I know we can have greenhouse, we can have garden, and how about wintertime" (1133), because "vacations coming like three months, you know, so I might have to keep the children busy" (1022). One provider drew her learning from necessities of the COVID-19 pandemic. With her assistant out coupled with the challenge of increased sanitation requirements for indoor spaces:

> We moved outside like about three, four weeks into it. My assistant was on break. And so it was just me and I moved the kids outside. And then through COVID, I did just the four-hour program and we stayed outside. We did an outdoor study for 18 months. So, I only gave the kids stuff like traffic cones and whatever else we had, I felt like I could just spray them off. And, that first week outside, my kids took all of this stuff just ran the parts around the yard and they made a car, this whole little group, they made a car, and I was like, just like, oh my gosh, my kids are going to be fine. (1066)

In addition to the outdoor aspects related to COVID-19, providers stories included a theme related to what they had to learn to keep their business open during the pandemic.

COVID Learning

Providers had varied, challenging experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that required them to adapt their programs quickly (see Table 19). As one put it simple, "Well,

COVID was a nightmare" (1116). Navigating the pandemic involved new collaboration with parents and learning about public health precautions. Some took on shorter hours or accepted fewer children. One accepted elementary aged students for the first time, “What we did is we took Seattle public school children. We took six of them. And so COVID, we adjusted. You had to learn to adjust” (1143). Providers had to lay off staff and recruit family members to help. Not only did participants have to adjust to new practices, often with less help, they also had the concern for their own health, the health of their family, and their livelihoods:

> You worry about, like, oh, my God, what if it's COVID? What if it's this? What if it's that? And that's the most scary thing. And now, what is scaring me more is that, like, right now, I'm not feeling well. I don't have COVID. But I think about because I'm the main support here in my home, what if I get sick? What if I have to close? What's going to happen. (1002)

These challenges did not come, however, without some benefits. With a careful caveat about broader concerns for health, one provider found an unexpected benefit through the circumstance:

> But actually, other than the sickness and everyone being unhealthy and dying, actually, it was a really pleasant time. The children just seemed more peaceful and happy to be at school, and my theory is because they weren't going anywhere else. You know, sometimes kids get dragged around a lot of places, and they just seemed really happy and enjoyed each other. (1136)

Another experienced an unexpected benefit when she witnessed parents bringing food to the homes of other program parents who were quarantined, “When the [sick] family was in

quarantine some of the healthy families would go and take food to them and it was so beautiful. It just taught us a lot" (1116).

Regardless of their experiences, providers had to learn and apply new policies during the COVID-19 outbreak. They discussed more rigorous sanitation requirements, having the parents stay outside and wearing masks. Though, not all providers followed all guidelines. While some alluded to this, "What did I have to change for COVID? Well, I don't really want to say on record" (1091), others were more direct in their description:

> Oh, I didn't do hardly anything that they told me that I should do. I should have masks, and I didn't because I think that is detrimental to children learning to speak. Babies learning facial expressions. And I thought I still do a stand by it that not masking helped the kids in my care through this time when everybody was masking and being hidden from everybody. And it's so scary. So, I didn't mask like I was supposed to. (1134)

Throughout their stories of learning to apply professional learning across these areas of ECE practice a theme emerged; when it came to applying what they learned, their own motivation and personal assessment of how effective they could be played a significant role. And, when supported by or others in their environment, they felt more effective and more motivated to apply learning to their practice. Many participants explained how Early Achievers coaches provided this motivation and encouragement to improve their practice:

> Oh, yes. Well, having a coach, when Early Achievers start, they designate a coach to each provider… what it helped me the most, she just came once a month to see the interactions and she filmed. And then we just see the video and it just helped me to think how can I do better? How do I need to improve? Yeah. It's been helping so much. Doing those videos is amazing. (1111)

Coaches helped some participants improve the quality of their programs in ways that the providers appreciated:

> You know, always change is hard. That is human; sometimes we don't wanna put effort, you know? But with all the love and patience, my coach teaches me how to do better in my job because she told me, “Anyway you're doing this job, right? And you say you don't wanna change your job”. I say, No, I wanna do this until the end of my life. She was like, “Well, you learn how to do better”. And she's always my fan. She's always told me like, oh my goodness, I'm so amazed how you deal with this. And she's so helpful. She's so good. (1116)

Coaches were among those encouraging providers to continue their professional learning. One participant explained the encouragement she received:

> They were like, “You should go for your master's. You should try. You could be good!” And I was like, Okay. So, I went for my master’s, and I got it. I just graduated. It will be in March a year ago. And then they, and I'm still debating if I want to go for my PhD and I'm still debating it. So, it's most likely that I may go for it, but it's because, you know, the learning doesn't end. It never ends. (1002)

Participants in this study described what they had learned across many areas of ECE practice through stories of their experiences. Through these stories, they also explained how these practices, in some cases, made their programs better. As they made these connections between what they had learned and how they applied it, they began to reveal their own understandings of the relationships they see between professional learning and program quality.

Research Question 3: In what ways do FCC providers characterize the relationship between professional learning opportunities and the quality of their programs?

As providers shared their experiences applying professional learning, they characterized their individual understanding of the relationship between professional learning opportunities and the quality of their family child care programs. Their descriptions involved their experience with Early Achievers, the state's QRIS, how they related to this study's conceptual framework, and that learning, improvement, and quality are situated within them in relationship to their wellbeing.

Early Achievers and Quality Improvement

All but one participant had joined Early Achievers at one point or another; some were still participating actively. Participating in the state's QRIS, Early Achievers, was optional, but there were strong incentives to participate, such as materials, grants, college scholarships, quality improvement bonus payments, and eligibility to accept families that use state child care subsidies. Participants discussed (a) deciding to join, (b) benefits and hassles of participation, (c) navigating changes to the Early Achievers program, and (d) their experiences with program quality improvement coaching (see Table 20).

Deciding to Join. When the QRIS program launched in the state, enrollment was optional for all providers. This changed when participation became mandatory for all providers who accepted state child care subsidies. Participants in this study had a range of reactions to this policy change. Some did not see it as an issue because their decision to sign up was influenced by the incentives; one explained that she joined Early Achievers, "because I wanted to become a student again. I wanted to get my B.A." (1022). Another saw Early Achievers participation as a benefit and was glad to participate regardless of the mandates or incentives, "It just sounded

exciting to me. And I didn't know about the free schooling… I didn't learn about that until I actually signed up" (1077). Several participants noticed the new participation mandate but weren't affected by it, "Well, in the beginning, the state told us, it's your choice if you wanna be Early Achievers member or not, a few years later, they told us you have to" (1116); another never realized it was ever optional "How did I start in the Early Achievers? I think we were required to participate for Early Achievers. So that's how I started" (1111). One participant said she knew it was optional, but it didn't feel like real choice, "So I have to be in it because if you're not in Early Achievers, it's like a chess board, you can't really do anything" (1066). Another participant adamantly passed, knowing it would limit her pool of eligible families.

> So, I can't take subsidy kids because I refuse to take Early Achievers. So, [the Early Achievers representative] came down, she asked me, "Why don't you do the Early Achievers and the scale rate"? And I said, It's dumb. It has no relevancy to me. You are literally taking me, a professional, who has already written a program that is a five-star program that I barely get ticked on with the licensors…they love my curriculum. So, you're gonna come in and tell me, This shouldn't be there. You should try this, you should do this, you should do that. When half of their stuff is old?! I don't like the way they approach. (1143)

Participants had different reasons for joining, or not joining, and all described their reasoning including benefits and hassles that came along with participating.

Benefits and Hassles of Participation. Participating in Early Achievers had benefits for providers in this study. Even the provider who strongly opted out conceded, "I have never liked the way they see things, but I like the one thing that they do is the beneficiary that they provide for those who are not educated. That is a good thing" (1143). Early Achievers participants were

eligible for scholarships to get certificates and degrees from participating state colleges and universities. Seven of the participants in this study took advantage of Early Achievers education scholarships, whether they knew or not where the scholarship came from, “I think [Early Achievers] are the one who was..., I'm not sure if they were the one who was paid our classes when I was taking the classes for the AA degrees” (1111). In addition to education benefits, providers appreciated the support they had received from coaches to improve their environment, enrich their interactions, and strengthen their parent engagement practices.

Despite the benefits, participating in Early Achievers quality improvement efforts could also be a stressful hassle, one that made participating not worthwhile for some, “I got my rating and then I just didn't keep going with it. I mean if I thought it was going to improve or did improve. I would have kept doing it” (1136).

Participants described the rating process, which changed, for better or worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to COVID-19 Early Achievers ratings were done through in-person assessment of the environment using the Family Child care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS), observation of the interactions using the CLASS tool, and a review of program documents, such as parent handbooks or program policy manuals. These highly consequential rating visits were stressful for participants. The way rating used to work, a provider was given a date range within which the evaluation team may arrive, but not told exactly when, “An observer could show up at any time, which was making me a nervous wreck because I don't like surprises. I don't like people just showing up at my door” (1126). Having observers present, they explained, could also change the children’s behavior:

> All the kids are going to act up when you have a stranger in your house. It just wasn't conducive of like what it really looked like. It was too much of a snapshot that was not

> really conducive to like what we do because the kids never are going to don't listen, I swear every kid felt they could stand on the table at one point, you know, I mean, they just, the rules are thrown out the door cause there's a stranger in your house watching you. (1091)

The ratings were not the only stressful part of the Early Achievers program for the participants in this study; they also struggled with the administrative responsibilities that came with it, "It's just so much. I mean, five-inch binder last time I did it, and I didn't even do all the stuff" (1066). Providers found the paperwork not only extensive, but also disconnected from their practice, "I think like that's what matters the most me is what I do with my children, and I don't even remember all that all the paperwork … of just everything else that was not directly related to interacting with children" (1136).

Navigating Changes to the Early Achievers Program. During the pandemic, DCYF, the state agency administering Early Achievers changed the evaluation method and the points used to calculate the rating, "I think the big change that I notice the most is the way they do their ratings" (1077). Providers began getting points for essays about their program and from sending in video clips of them interacting with children, rather than having evaluators visit the home. Along with this, the *quality rating* process was rebranded a *quality recognition* process. Most providers in this study appreciated the change; one explained those changes at length in the context of her program:

> Before they changed what they based their ratings on, it was awful. They were so far away from child development and being child-centered and all about the children, they were more concerned about how many blocks do you have? How many stuffed animals do you have for a child? Do you have enough of this stuff? *Stuff, stuff, stuff, stuff, stuff*.

> Now you get points by sending in an essay to let your program shine through your eyes and then just for writing down words, just for submitting it you get 20 points. Now they have video clips that you can send in they have to be 10 to 15 minutes long. So, they get a good chunk of what you're doing. And I think it's like five points per, and you got five videos. But the thing that I've learned that I can't do is go back and read the feedback [that is given based on a rating of the video]. Because I know I'm a phenomenal teacher. I have great connections with my kids. And they marked me as a novice teacher! And I'm like, that's not novice! So angry about that! But as long as you don't look at that [feedback and evaluation summary]… they give you your five points… like I said, the voice that we have to really just let our passion or strength shine it's more strength-based now, opposed to what they saw as 'best practice' and each child care provider has many strengths, but we weren't being seen. So, I think I think it's more useful in that sense. (1134)

Another provider noticed this change and had a very different reaction based on her experience with Early Achievers up to that point. She had joined at the beginning, before the rating scale and video changes; she recounted; "I started right when it rolled out in our area. As soon as I could, I was like, oh yeah, I'm in. I was super excited" (1066). She and her assistants had high expectations of their efficacy; they expected a high score on the five-point scale. However, at that time they did not understand the environment and interaction scales that rating points were based on, she said, "We didn't understand FCCERS. We didn't understand CLASS. We didn't understand any of that. So, we went in really excited about, we forced our way through. Got a three. Everybody was done. My staff were all like, this is stupid" (1066). She and her team were disappointed and wanted a higher rating. To learn how, she attended a CLASS

train-the-trainer course which was “eye-opener” where she realized “Oh, that's what they mean…” (1066)! After the second rating, she got a four. When she came up to be rated again, she attempted to get a four again, this time with a unique and bespoke program approach, which is a more challenging. But she was excited about the challenge:

> I was like, okay, I'm ready for something new. And then I was getting ready to rate in 2020. I'm gonna go through with the Curiosity Approach [different approach curriculum and environment]. We would have been the first ones to try and go through it without toys and without labels. Yeah. I'd worked really hard to make sure that I felt like I could still get a four, but in a very out of the box way. It was super exciting. (1066)

However, before the rating, the COVID-19 outbreak began. She was overwhelmed and quit Early Achievers, for a while, “And I was like, you know, I'm done. I left everything. And I just moved my class outside. But then I felt weird not having any sort of like structures. So, I signed back up” (1066). But at this time, she noticed the rating scale had changed, a change she did not appreciate:

> And I just was like, I'm not doing this. I'm not going for a higher rating because it doesn't matter. Because at least with CLASS, it figures; there was a score. It was like, okay, you do this. And this is a score. But the new thing with Early Achievers, I found out that, uh, the video, no matter whether my [CLASS] score was, you're getting the same. It doesn't mean anything. So, when you get your rating that part doesn't mean anything at all. You're getting your extra rating points by paperwork, which has nothing to do with the children because anybody could fake that paperwork. Anybody can fake your assessments or whatever you're doing. That's not even to do with the children, but that's how you're getting your higher score. Before I got it all off having really high CLASS

> scores and FCCERS scores. I didn't get it from paperwork. I just said, you know what, I'm done. I'll take my three. I'm done. (1066)

Providers' Experiences with Coaching. Regardless of whether they found the program helpful or not, providers did appreciate their experiences with coaches when they could find one. "Well, I will say it easy because they provide us a coach. So, anything what I need to improve my child care, so they always there to help me" (1022). Participation in Early Achievers involved being assigned a coach. Although "some coaches were more helpful than others" (1126), providers enjoyed working with them; "What was it like to have a coach? It was perfect. I was new to the child care and then she was new to the state. And she worked so hard" (1111). Coaches were employed by the child care resource and referral networks' regional offices and funded by the state as part of the Early Achievers program. These individuals with experience in early childhood education and knowledge of the Early Achievers program served a key role in informing providers, connecting them with resources, and assisting them with program changes and improvements. Participants in this study described relying on coaches for "anything what I need to improve my child care", such as arranging the space and sources materials, setting up the environment, modeling enriching interactions; and preparing for ratings. One provider explained:

> If you have a good coach and she helps you to understand, then it's not that big of a deal. But if you have a coach that she doesn't have the knowledge and you don't know because you see the book, you're like, I don't get it. And the points, but now is differently. Now is the video spot [which must be uploaded on the computer]. But if you don't have someone that really is supporting you, then you're not going to get it. (1002)

However, especially early in the program, coaches were in short supply and turned over quickly. Several providers explained their frustration that when they had a coach, it didn't always

last very long, before their coaches “disappeared” (1077) or “went on to be other people” (1066). This was frustrating, as one participant explained, “I don't understand what's going on at the coaches, they don't last longer. They leave and they don't last longer in my area. They leave really fast. And there's some areas that they don't even know their coaches” (1002). Another participant described how this turnover impacted the effectiveness of the program, and how the situation has been improving:

> Well, at the very beginning of Early Achievers, when they started the coaching, it was not good. It's supposed to be a relationship based, like you get a relationship with your coach, and they help you navigate through it. In the first year or two, I probably had eight coaches. There was no consistency at all. Now I've had the same coach for a long time now, and it's a lot different, but at the very beginning of it, it was terrible. (1091)

A strong emergent theme in these provider' stories of professional learning involved the Early Achievers programs. Although their reasons for joining varied, their overall experiences of the challenges and benefits were similar. The participants who had been involved in the program all spoke positively about their experiences with coaching. What made a difference for them between coaching and other professional learning, was that the learning took place in their workplace. Although not all participants were involved in the program, they did all have ideas about how professional learning and program quality were related.

Characterizing the Professional Learning and Program Quality Framework.

This study focused on the work of family child care providers within a conceptual framework linking professional learning, program quality, and child outcomes (see Figure 1). Providers in this study characterized the relationship between professional learning and program outcomes by describing (a) how professional learning influenced their practice, (b) how changes

in practice may have contributed to program quality, and (c) how program quality may impact program outcomes (see Table 21).

Professional Learning and ECE Practice. The first link in the conceptual framework involved the connection between what providers learn and what they do. Among some participants, there was a theme in these stories - they wanted to explain that they had improved, without saying that they were unskilled to begin with. One provider explained, “So, there's a quote that I love when you know better, you do better. I don't think that it was bad at the beginning. It's just not where I am now” (1134). The link between learning and practice was evident in all their stories; one participant reflected, “Well, I like my education I like to continue learning ... so that way it's easy for me to teach children. If I'm more prepared, I'll be ready to teach them” (1022).

Providers knew that learning improved their practice, up to a point. They agreed that professional learning, whether connected with Early Achievers or not, changed their practice. Professional learning experiences on areas of interest helped them address challenging behaviors consistently (1126; 1136; 1143; 1134; 1022), communicate and collaborate with families (1022; 1111), and arrange the space in ways that supported their practice (1002; 1126; 1134). Whether they experienced learning through college courses, coaching experiences, trainings, or self-study, they implemented what they learned to address challenges they had. Providers described taking this learning seriously because they cared about improvement:

> I'm a person that I likes to learn, and those who don't want to learn then that they're the ones that get stuck they get in trouble because they don't care about their jobs what they're doing and like I care about the kids I care about their learning. (1022)

When they experienced acute challenges, many saw professional learning as the way to address their needs, “When I have something difficult, if I have a special need, if I have family problems and stuff like that. I can have a question and answer it to educate myself” (1111). Addressing these challenges made their work easier. They also recognized that their work had high stakes, “I just signed up for everything because there are other people's kids. I was barely into my 20s ... That's a big responsibility (1066). But, at some point, they explained, the extra effort did not pay off because the learning material was not of interest, or they believed it would not change their practice, or it would not make a meaningful difference to the quality of the program. One participant who had taken a Montessori training explained that she did not implement what she learned because, “it just wasn’t my ticket. You were quiet and doing a lot of observation. That was boring for me. I wanted to talk and be with the kids” (1143). Additional professional learning was not always worth the time and effort, in terms of making changes to their practice. One provider described how she was “really battling” about going back for a master's degree (1077). In the end, she reasoned, “I'm going to say right where I'm at because I am needed more here [running the program] than anywhere else” (1077). Another provider summed this sentiment up more briefly, “I am so done with being educated. I'm just, I'm like, what can I do to get by to keep my MERIT [licensure maintenance training hours] numbers up” (1143)?

ECE Practice and Program Quality. Providers knew that improving their practice improved quality, by some definition, and to some degree. When providers talked about changing their practices because of what they had learned, the believed that improved performance improved the quality of their program. They often, but not always, discussed quality

improvement in terms of the Early Achievers quality measures, particularly in reference to the learning environment and interactions within it. One explained key changes to her environment:

> I noticed [quality improvement] because I have an actual teaching environment and I'm getting a lot of feedback from my parents and they are always telling me how great that I make them feel and that I'm a really big help in certain ways and yeah, it's just recognition. (1077)

Another described important changes to her interactions with children and their interactions with each other:

> Well, I think if you're just looking at it from the outside view, hopefully they would notice the quality of interaction, maybe not the program itself just by Facebook posts because on my public page, hopefully they would notice the quality of interaction is all about the children. People that visit, like my Early Achievers coach or if someone else comes to visit, they see the quality. (1066)

Providers also explained how improved performance could improve their program's quality in ways they defined for themselves. One recalled in the beginning her focus was "just the basic care and needs" whereas now, her approach is "more mindful" (1091). Another defined quality by the evidence that her program always maintained a waiting list (1143). And others described their quality improvement based on how well they satisfied the children and parents they served, "Quality, I would say I'm getting better and better. I mean, children pretty happy and parents happy. I would say that's the quality right there. I got a lot of referrals. I don't do advertising anymore" (1133). Put another way, "I think it gets…I like to think it gets better every year. You get more experience and a better perspective on what ultimately matters at the end of the day, [children] and better at supporting parents" (1143). One provider measured the quality

of her program not just by how her program worked with families, but how her child care program *was* a family. When asked how she noticed quality improvement, she explained:

> I feel like we're a child care family. For the most part, all of my clients know each other. And the kids all like, they're all bonded. And I don't have behavior issues. In the beginning, I used to have more behavior issues with kids. And I feel like through the classes and the trainings I've done, I'm more relaxed and more confident. (1126)

However, even though improved performance improved quality, there came a point for providers where the extra effort came at too great a cost. One wondered:

> How much is it going to really help me more? And do I really want to spend that kind of money? …[It's] a lot of it's time, you know. And I'm getting older and it's just, I don't know if I really wanna go do anymore. I know it's pretty, it's pretty rough to go for your masters. So, I don't know if I really wanna do that or if I just wanna keep doing these on the side trainings and stuff like that every time I get a chance to get that extra bit, you know? (1077)

Providers weighed the return on the investment of their time and effort against the benefits to their income and their knowledge:

> I had one girl that was going to get her early ECE, and she was working for me and doing her practicum and everything. I was teaching her what they were teaching her. Like I knew all of it. You know, from over the years of taking all these STARS training and, just working with the state and the union and all the different entities that I knew, I already knew it all, like what they were teaching her. I mean, I'm like 58 now and it's like I really don't want to go back to school. (1091)

One participant in the study had previously trained and worked as a policy analyst. When asked whether she believed that it held true that the more education a provider has, the better her program will be, and whether Early Achievers or other policy measures should push providers to learn more, she replied at length:

> I do not agree with that. And mainly that's because I'm also now I'm a Montessori teacher trainer and part of that is being a field supervisor for students during their practicum and some of my adult learners have bachelor's degrees or even master's degrees in education before they go to the Montessori, and some have a high school diploma and they do their Montessori, and I go and I see how they're interacting with children, I see how they're setting up their environments and even just their attitude towards children, and I would not say that the higher education correlates always to the quality. I wouldn't say the reverse is true, but I would say some of my very best had no education. And I just don't think it's practical to keep telling people they need more and more education when there's already a child care crisis and these people aren't going to be paid any more, any higher. (1136)

Program Quality and Program Outcomes. Providers understood how improving quality could improve outcomes of their program but not only the school-readiness outcomes one may initially think of. Participants spoke of offering rich learning environments, becoming more skilled with assessments (1022; 1116; 1066), and not just "babysitting" **(**1002) so that children in their care wouldn't "miss out on anything" (1143). Some providers spoke about typical academic school readiness outcomes such as math and literacy:

> So, you count while you're playing, you talk about different letters while you're playing. And then they instead of, maybe we do workbooks and worksheets and activities and

> things, but I'm play based because from through the classes I've taken, I've learned that kids learn more through play than through sitting down at the table and doing a workbook. So, we do some of that so that they're ready for it when they go to school. (1126)

Although participants believed improved quality could lead to improved academic outcomes for children, they also knew that quality in their programs led to a variety of additional outcomes for themselves and the children they served. One provider, who offered a Mandarin immersion program, believed that "… the problem about this country…elementary schools, they're not taking bilingual seriously" (1133). She wanted not just literacy experiences but multilingual, culturally rich literacy experiences. Others were more focused on providing a "safe, fun environment for kids…to give local kids what [she] didn't have (1126)". This sentiment touched a theme that emerged throughout the interviews, providers were more concerned about the children's wellness – stress, emotional health, and coping skills, than they were with academic outcomes, "I mean, in general and like the social emotional health and helping children not be anxious" (1136). Providers approached these wellness outcomes for children by "making them know that they own the place. It's their comfort zone. It's their place to not have to be afraid or worry about anything" (1077). For some participants the outcomes they cared about most was immeasurable and priceless – good memories of a good family:

> I guess I just feel like I'm giving a really good memories. I feel good about like, I've always been aware that there any moment could be a memory, but now I feel like I have a better chance that any moment they remember is going to be a good memory (1066).
>
> Just watching them grow and knowing, you know, they feel safe here and I want them to be safe and I want them to have that consistent care where they learned the right bonds

> and it just feels like this home. Most of them think we're family, actually, even though none of us are related. (1091)

Providers discussed these broader benefits, and the sentiments regarding wellness, extending from the program to the children's whole family, "… we need to learn, we need to be educated to understand better and to be a good support for the family (1116). A story from this provider illustrated her process of learning from experiencing a challenge to helping a family. She had a child who had "special behavior"; she took a class on child behavior, which led to a different way of observing the child and interacting with the family:

> …What I see is a cycle. You know, dad didn't have a lovely dad and he was just neglected all the time and many, many things. So now this dad is a young dad. He's doing the same with his kiddo. And that kiddo here in my house is in pieces. He hits so much. He screams. He, and I'm working with a family like, hey, you need to calm down. You need to talk different to him. You need to be patient. It's like, I need to be a mom for them. They are really young. But I just feel like I'm their mom. (1116)

She reflected, "I just put in practice everything what [she] learned in the class, and then [she] was able to handle that situation with child" (1116).

Participants' experiences with professional learning reflected the study's professional learning and program quality conceptual framework. Their stories clarified, from their perspectives, the links between professional learning, ECE practices, program quality, and program outcomes. As they shared their stories, a critical theme emerged involving learning, quality, and wellbeing.

Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

"I love what I do. It is just overwhelming" (1116).

As providers in this study shared their experiences, their stories shared a common theme - learning, improvement, and quality were situated within them in relationship with their well-being. Rather than existing for them as an external search to acquire facts and achieve a static state of objective quality, participants understood learning and improvement as connected to their emotional and financial stability and security.

Literature on the relationship of professional learning, program quality, and child outcomes to guide policy has focused on classifying and quantifying learning experiences that providers have had – how many credits, how many training hours, etc. and considering whether a certain amount makes a difference to measured and pre-determined outcomes. This orientation to learning and improvement situated a providers' learning outsider herself, in reference to others, and in relationship with a system of regulation. However, when providers talked about their moments of profound learning, the experiences were situated within themselves and in relationship with their wellbeing (see Table 22). One provider illustrated this well but hers was not the only example. She spoke of learning to use a computer from her coach:

> And as I told you, it's been a blessing. It's been a blessing because they're giving us support in every, everything. Like in my case, few years ago, I was not able to touch a computer because I didn't know anything about a computer. (1116)

This learning experience moved her deeply and affected how she felt emotionally about what she was able to do technically; she developed internal bonds with her coach and changed the way she saw herself:

> So, my coach, I love her so much. She just, she has a patience and time to come to my house and teach me like. How to send an email, how to answer an email, how to be in a meeting and how to do all those good things. And they're simple things. And now it's

> like, oh my gosh, this is a blessing. And if we don't have Early Achievers in our life, I just can't imagine. If now everything is through the computer, I don't know how to see myself without all those learnings about technology. (1116)

When providers learned how to change their environment, they appreciated having less "clutter" (1143), but what made a difference was that these changes reduced their stress and improved their sense of wellbeing. Providers spoke about the profound differences that arose when they learned to "make the transitions easy during the day for children" (1022), or to "be prepared with everything, have food ready in the fridge…when it's time for breakfast, just open the fridge" (1116).

> I've learned all these tricks and tips through these classes, and it's made a big difference. It's reduced my amount of stress and the amount of cleanup that I'm doing and the amount of organizing that I'm doing. It's a big deal. (1126)

One provider also described professional learning that focused on trauma and mental health, an experience that transformed her life:

> Oh, you know, they offer a training about mental health. Oh, my goodness. That is the best. Learning about mental health is amazing. Oh, yes. Well, the thing is, when we start with Early Achievers, they start talking about how to work with families who deal with trauma and all that. For me, taking those trainings, it helped me to recognize my traumas, to heal my traumas. So, you cannot help, you cannot help families, you cannot help kids if you're not healed. So, when that happened is when I just decided to know like I need to reach for help. So, I did and it just... They just told me to find out what my traumas was. And they just helped me to figure it out and heal. (1116)

Learning experiences that were not relevant or came at a time when providers are not prepared are also situated within the provider and can have a negative effect on their wellbeing.

> I don't have the time. I don't have the preparation to do all of this. And, and then my kiddos are just a stress because I'm a stress because I have so much to do. I have to do my homework. I have to do classes. Some days I finish my class at nine in the late in the night and at nine. And next day I need to be ready to be with my kiddos. I cannot be happy because I feel tired (1116).

Another explained, “I know it's pretty rough to go for your masters. Yeah. It's rough” (1077). Even reading the materials provided by coaches can feel like too much after working, “and because I work so many hours I'll lay down and I'll try to read something, and I fall asleep” (1126). But, when their wellbeing was taken care of, they were interested in learning more and improving their program, “And I've been doing good. So, yes. I will be happy to do something and to get my degree or something” (1116).

Although all providers indicated that having the skills and knowledge they needed could positively impact wellbeing, many shared examples of the opposite and only one described her deliberate practices related to improving her wellness. She explained:

> When you work with children, for teachers especially, you need to learn how to release some stress. We need to make sure to balance taking care of our own children and also work with the young children. I do some breathing practice and do some yoga and then start running. Just go out for jogging in the summertime. And now I started hiking. You know, those are important as a provider so we can make sure, we have a good mood and then the children can have a good mood. (1133)

Just as learning was situated within providers and in relationship with their wellbeing, so was their understanding of program quality improvement. Participants' told stories of quality improvement with strong emotional language about love, hate, and fear. One provider described her feelings about her participation in Early Achievers, “I went through a hate relationship with them, and I absolutely love them (1134).” Another explained that during her first learning experiences she was “so scared” (1002). What helped transform the negative feelings to positive feelings and sense of wellbeing was not *how much* they had learned, or *where* they learned it, but rather how and from whom they learned it. After being “so scared” at her first licensing orientation, this provider heard advice that touched her, she explained:

> What I carry on with me is that the licensor that we got, she said, I don't want to see you guys just being there to stay still and just doing daycare. Think about keeping going, keeping going like on education, like just don't stay there. Just try move on, move on. And then, so I still carry that with me. (1002)

Carrying this confidence within inspired her to continue to her learning in school. Reflecting on how far she came her wellbeing was in focus:

> And the person, if I look back and see the [me] in the and then before, how she didn't want to do it. If I had a chance to go back to that time and say, ‘Hey girl, you don't know why you're going to miss. So, it's been a really a long way, but you know what, it feels good when you have achieved most of it, what you really, really, what you really wanted to finish. Cause I was, like I said, I was a dropout. I was a dropout and, and now I have a master's and I have to be thankful to what I do. (1002)

Providers in this study related to program quality improvement internally, in ways that connected with their own sense of wellbeing. When describing her program’s improved quality

one provider reflected, “I feel like through the classes and the trainings I've done, I'm more relaxed and more confident.” The Montessori trainer recalled how showing candidates to be less stressed and to slow down, led to a higher quality program where learning could happen:

> The edu-caring, so even changing a diaper, like everything about that interaction, you're teaching the child about the world. And so sometimes I'll find adults want to rush through the caregiving tasks to get to the learning, but everything is the learning. (1136)

Quality improvement, one recalled, had not been easy but because she had support, she felt good about the effort:

> It's been hard for me. You know, always change is hard. That is human; sometimes we don't wanna put effort, you know? But with all the love and patience, my coach teaches me how to do better in my job because she told me, “Anyway you're doing this job, right? And you say you don't wanna change your job”. I say, No, I wanna do this until the end of my life. She was like, “Well, you learn how to do better”. And she's always my fan. She's always told me like, “Oh my goodness, I'm so amazed how you deal with this!” And she's so helpful. She's so good. (1116)

Support that gave them confidence could help providers seek learning, apply it to improve their programs' quality, and do so in a way that supported their wellbeing. This extended not just to their family child care programs, but also to their pursuit of education and beyond.

> That's where I got my bachelor's about dual language. I wanted to learn more.
> And then my advisor and my teacher, they're like, “[Provider], you should go for your master's. You should try. You could be good”. And I was like, okay. So, I went for my master’s, and I got it. I just graduated. It will be in March a year ago. And then they, and I'm still debating if I want to go for my PhD and I'm still debating it. So, it's most likely

that I may go for it, but it's because, you know, the learning doesn't end. It never ends. (1002)

Discussion

Themes and tensions arose related to each of the three research questions - how providers experience professional learning, how and why they applied what they learned to their practice, and how they characterized the relationship between professional learning and program quality. Here I discuss those themes and tensions and list several suggestions for professional learning systems and programs designed to support family child care providers.

Experiencing Professional Learning

The first element of the study related to providers experiences with professional learning. When participants described their experiences with professional learning, they told stories of how they entered the field and how they continued their learning overtime. Themes and tensions arose that involved (a) entering the field and (b) making ongoing professional learning choices. Participants' stories revealed themes about why they entered the field and exposed a critical tension regarding their work as early care and education providers, and business owners.

Entering the Field

Analyzing participants' experiences entering the field suggested that emphasizing family child care as a viable business opportunity, and focusing professional learning on those skillsets, may help increase the number of family child care providers in the workforce and alleviate the child care shortage, if providers are able to access trusted sources of learning that meet their needs. Participants stories revealed the themes that they entered the field primarily because they developed a passion for caring for children and because they realized the work of the family child care provider was like their daily work; they tended not explain their choice of career based

a passion to run small business, nor because they had an existing business mindset or skillset. Rather, in terms of business practices, providers struggled to catch up, learning as they went along with much stress and frustration. Participants' obstacles to entering the field included how to finance their new program, how to structure their business license, how to furnish the space, how to purchase supplies, how to attract and invoice clients, and how to do taxes - all business practices. These participants learned on their own or from their family, not as an early part of professional learning through their orientations and trainings. They also observed that the early initial training required to start a family child care program was simple, easy, and just the beginning of what they needed to know. The tension was that although becoming a family child care provider is becoming a business owner, few participants had learned how to run a business. Even though professional learning on business practices was desperately needed at the beginning of their work, providers did not yet have ready or reliable access to this training. Decades later, many participants in the study said they still had not learned what they needed know.

Another theme that arose was that even though most of these providers began their programs when they needed care for their own young children, they continued their businesses long after their children were grown. This revealed a broader workforce tension; even though common, having children who need care is not necessarily a prerequisite to starting a family child care program. In a context where the number of providers is decreasing and care is high demand, there is room in the market for more prospective providers to start their businesses, if they could be reached and encouraged to explore the idea of opening a child care business from their homes.

Given the available incentives and supports, entering the child care field from one's own home may be an attractive option to an individual who never thought of being an educator. A

person who enters this field in the State of Washington, even if for a period of years, rather than decades, can receive scholarship support to earn associate or bachelor's degree that could both support their continued work as a provider and potentially serve as a springboard to another opportunity in early care and education or PK-12 system if they chose. If business practices were incorporated in a more significant way into their professional learning, that person could also be capable of beginning a business of a different kind. Reaching a wider group of prospective family child care providers would involve redoubled efforts in outreach and engagement to the workforce, given that many of the participants in this study had many years' experience, but still did not know about all the existing education benefits and workforce supports available to them. These insights led to several suggestions for further development of an early care and education system designed to support providers' economic wellbeing at a time when there are critical workforce shortages (Schlieber et al., 2022; Schlieber et al., 2023).

Family child care providers need more support through professional learning on business practices as part of initial licensure and training to a greater degree. If horizontally and vertically aligned business practices resources supports were more widely accessible in multiple languages and shared by state agency managers and professional learning organizations, family child care providers could get earlier support in learning basic business practices. These efforts have been underway and yet need further support. In 2019, the DCYF partnered with three professional learning organizations; Child Care Aware of Washington, The Imagine Institute, and the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges; to develop community-based business practices training and pilot it with center-based and home-based providers in Spanish and Somali-speaking communities (Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, 2020). Their work improved access to voluntary trainings and incorporated some business practices training

into two ECE courses within the state's college-based child care certification program. However, additional funding is needed to promote access for those who choose not to attend college, and earlier access for all child care providers new to the workforce. As DCYF's Child Care Business Practices pilot report indicated, "Incremental support will not yield the large-scale system-wide changes that are necessary to incentivize and sustain high-quality programming" (DCYF, 2020, p. 10).

In addition to voluntary trainings and integrating business practices content into the community college certification and degree courses, it would be highly valuable to train all Early Achievers coaches who serve family child care programs in business practices. By training Early Achievers coaches to be capable of training providers in business practices, coaches could impart guidance and resources as in the context of their day-to-day coaching interactions. During the interviews conducted for this study, although only one question in the protocol referenced learning to start a business, participants' stories repeatedly revealed themes related to their lack of comfort with business practices as a significant source of stress. In other words, challenges running the business relate to many areas of their practice and not far from top-of-mind. For this reason, coaches could be business development resources if they had the knowledge and skills necessary to impart, for example, information about outreach, marketing, and recruitment as they discuss a family communication plan. Another example could be supporting providers with annual income and expenditure planning as they discuss purchase items to improve the learning environment.

Statewide survey work on the wellbeing of child care providers, including those operating family homes, conducted by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment in Florida, Oregon, and California revealed that the need for increased knowledge and skill in

business practices was not unique among providers in Washington (Schlieber, Petig, Lopez, & Jones, 2023; Schlieber, Knight, Adejumo, Petig, Lopez & Jones, 2022; Muruvi et al., 2023) and was related to providers' economic and emotional wellbeing. Even though this need is well established, and some are making steps within the early learning field to address it, it is important to realize that the entirety of small business supports need not be provided by the agencies, organizations, and scholars who advance the interests of early care and education providers. It is also necessary to build new and better partnerships among those partners with related business support resources. For example, the Washington State Department of Commerce (Commerce) and local chambers of commerce could be better engaged to support the needs of family child care providers. Currently available supports for small business owners may be widely overlooked by family child care providers, who simply do not know where to look. For example, Commerce established the Small Business Resiliency Network to "ensure business owners from all communities could be informed about important resources and programs available to them" (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2023). This network emphasizes supports for historically underserved business owners, speakers of languages other than English and people of color, which are designed help individuals overcome barriers to knowledge and access to business development skills, resources, and services. Local chambers of commerce may not only have interest in supporting child care providers as small business owners in their communities but also because local economies rely on parents having access to high-quality and reliable child care that they can afford. This shared interest in child care providers' success as business owners may prompt novel collaboration and innovation strategies to help family child care providers thrive economically.

Developing new collaborative initiatives and raising awareness of current efforts to support family child care providers as businesses are both necessary. Many providers in the study did not know about the range of business practices supports available, so improved outreach is needed. State agency managers and professional learning organizations could better engage and support the existing workforce as well as improve efforts to recruit new members to the child care provider network at the same time. State and county Employment Security Departments could be enlisted as partners in this work. They regularly interface with individuals in need of employment who also need guidance on what options may exist. By assessing current outreach efforts, state ECE agency managers and professional learning providers could create tailored outreach strategies and collaborations to connect with individuals who may be looking for careers in human services, broadly, but may not have thought of being an educator.

Ongoing Professional Learning

Participants in this study found learning opportunities through agencies, non-government organizations, colleges and universities, their peers, and through self-guided explorations on the internet. A strong theme in their stories was that direct outreach from professional learning organizations was critical for their access to professional learning. Two related tensions arose through analysis of our conversations. First, even though there were many professional learning opportunities available and financial support to access them, providers often lacked the time to engage due to the long hours they work. Second, because they work long hours, they felt pressured by circumstance to prioritize learning that was both highly engaging and focused on the most acute short-term needs over long term educational goals. Not all providers will need the same options, but all providers do need options that meet their pressing needs in ways that are accessible, relevant, and engaging.

Participants in this study were strongly motivated by learning experiences which addressed challenges in their practice, made them feel more effective, and led to an increased sense of wellbeing. These insights suggested that by reviewing and evaluating professional learning programs and resources, state agency managers and professional learning organizations could support continuous improvement efforts to ensure family child care providers can find what they need, when the need it, without a great deal of effort. This professional learning needs to not only help providers address current challenges, but also to do so in ways that builds their confidence and centers their wellbeing. Though many providers explained the strains on their emotional and economic wellbeing, only one explained her efforts to incorporate routines and practices like breathing exercises, walking, and jogging to actively address the stress she experiences from her work life.

Applying Professional Learning

The second element of this study involved how providers applied professional learning to running their family child care programs. Each participant had her own background of formal and informal learning experiences, though they all spoke of having learned to apply many of same practices. When participants described their experiences applying professional learning, three overarching themes arose that involved (a) applying learning to practices prevalent in the literature, (b) applying learning to practices less prevalent in the literature, and (c) their role of their perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1978) in relation to professional learning; each of these exposed tensions warrant further discussion.

Applying Professional Learning to Areas of Practice in the Literature

The literature reviewed for this study focused on the relationship between providers' professional learning and the quality of their program as assessed with measures of environment

and interactions as well as children's learning outcomes, particularly in reading and math. Researchers have found that ECE providers' level of education might matter to literacy and language learning more than it does for the provision of high-quality environments. Literacy skills at kindergarten age have been found strongly predictive of later outcomes in reading and writing and children in families with low incomes often enter kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers in areas that predict later literacy. However, whether children are able to learn and practice language and literacy skills before kindergarten depends upon how their care provider and the setting promote literacy and language development. However, ECE providers education level has not been consistently associated with language and literacy outcomes in research studies. Early et al. (2006) found no relationship between teachers' degree and children's outcomes in a six-state study involving 237 providers, but Son et al. (2013) found that teachers' education was related to children's early reading ($b_{StdYX} = .22$, $p < .05$, $n = 259$). Gerde and Powell's (2009) multi-level model showed teachers with higher levels of education ($b = 13.76$, $p < .05$) and teachers who majored in early childhood education ($b = 10.81$, $p < .05$), were likely to use more book-focused comments, and that children in classrooms with more book-focused comments were more likely to improve in receptive vocabulary ($b = .49$, $p < .05$).

Researchers have also had mixed results examining whether level and type of professional learning among providers related to math-related academic outcomes for the children they cared for. Children whose teachers had a BA gained more in math over pre-k year than children whose teachers had associate degrees ($d = 0.26$) (Early et al., 2006), although in Early and colleagues' (2007) meta-analysis of seven large-scale found that five of these seven studies found no association between early math skills and either teacher's highest degree or whether the teacher had a BA degree at all. One study found children whose teacher did not have

a bachelor's degree scored higher on the Woodcock Johnson Applied Problems test than children whose teacher did have a bachelor's degree. Findings from this study reflected these results in that regardless of whether their learning was derived from trainings, coaching, or college; providers learned many of the same practices. So, where they learned them and for how many hours was likely less important than how and from whom in terms of whether they felt confident to apply new practices and do so in ways that led to positive outcomes for children.

The literature examining the relationship between providers' professional learning, program quality, and children's outcomes focused on several areas of ECE practice, most notably developing learning environments, fostering enriching interactions, and providing early experiences with literacy and math. Published research reviewed for this study examined whether and to what degree particular kinds of learning experiences (training, coaching, or higher education) led to measurable improvements in providers' or children's learning in these areas. However, for providers in this study, it may have mattered less where they learned – college, training, or coaching, and mattered more how and from whom they learned. Participants who had taken no college courses, some college courses, and those who had earned advanced degrees all described using very similar practices to develop their environment, interact with children, and promote children's early literacy and mathematical thinking. This exposed the tension that participants learned similar practices regardless of what type of learning experience, yet some learning experiences were more valued by policy and regulations for example initial licensure orientation and Early Achievers coaching.

This did not broadly suggest that in all cases there would be no difference in the practices learned between different types of professional learning for early childhood educators in general, it may suggest instead that in the State of Washington the professional learning supports

available to the providers I spoke with were aligned. Seen through the stories of these participants, trainings, ECE college coursework, and quality improvement coaching have been developed in horizontal alignment to the degree that the same practices are reaching providers, no matter where they hear them. Horizontal alignment connects the information across different types of professional learning outlets. This was evident when providers had training hours waived based on their having equivalent college credits. Vertical alignment was also apparent when providers described building momentum in their professional learning, particularly related to earning college degrees. The combination of incentives and stackable sequences of learning led to motivation to continue toward further certificates and degrees in ECE. This was evident when providers received initial college credits through training pathways and when they earned shorter certificates that could assemble into associate degrees with credits that were transferable to bachelor's degrees.

These insights led to the several suggestions for improving the ECE professional learning system. We need clearer horizontally aligned professional learning for family child care providers. By collaborating to develop evidence-based standards, practices, and knowledge for family child care providers, state agency leaders and professional learning providers can provide clear and horizontally aligned professional learning supports that create flexibility for a workforce that needs it. By collaborating to develop well-articulated, well-guided career pathways; state agency leaders and professional learning providers, can support access and opportunity for education experiences that help family child care providers build momentum to achieve their goals through their professional learning experiences.

Applying Professional Learning to Additional Areas of Practice

Providers in this study also mentioned applying professional learning to improve their practice and program quality that were not prevalent in the professional learning and quality improvement literature such as - interacting effectively with families, running a business, supporting children with special needs, or providing outdoor learning opportunities. A theme emerged; learning that was critical to their sense of improvement did not always involve measurable indicators of quality or outcomes as defined by Early Achievers or licensure requirements. Rather, they sought and applied professional learning to address areas of practice that scared them, felt difficult, caused stress, or otherwise depleted their sense of wellbeing. In other words, providers sought learning when they did not feel effective in their practice, or when their practices were not leading to the outcomes they wanted, or when things just felt too hard. The tension this exposed was that sometimes the professional learning participants needed most, was not highly available nor as valued in terms of the state's QRIS and licensure system. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to suggest a particular course of study or amount of learning providers needed, these insights suggested that state agency managers and professional learning organizations could be better equipped to tailor what they offer to what providers need. To do so would require strong efforts to gather information about providers' needs in ways that are not a burden for providers, which would suggest coordinated statewide and regionalized survey efforts. By reviewing and evaluating providers' needs alongside system wide and localized patterns in professional learning participation, state agency managers and professional learning organizations could be better equipped to tailor what they offer to what providers need.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Participants' stories of professional learning centered motivation and self-efficacy, central ideas in Bandura's (1978) self-efficacy theory. An understanding of self-efficacy theory assisted in understanding how family child care providers sought and applied professional learning experiences in the context of their practice. The theory held that "psychological procedures, whatever their form, altered the level and strength of self-efficacy" (Bandura, 1978, p. 191). One's perception of self-efficacy refers to their belief that they can be effective when applying a particular behavior or practice in their context. Bandura hypothesized that a person's perceptions of their efficacy determined whether one would initiate coping behavior or change, how much effort they would expend, and how long they will sustain even in the face of obstacles. Their expectations of efficacy were integral to participants' willingness to take on new learning or apply new practices. In their work on motivation and social cognitive theory Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020, p. 3) emphasized, "Self-efficacy does not suddenly emerge. Efficacy appraisal is a cognitive process which individuals use information sources assess their self-efficacy. These sources are performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, forms of social persuasion, and physiological/emotional indexes" (Bandura, 1978; Joët, Usher, & Bressoux, 2011). For providers in this study, encouragement through, advising, coaching conversations, and modeling increased providers' self-efficacy and motivated them to make changes that were difficult.

Bandura (1978) clarified that in this theoretical approach, there is a distinction between efficacy expectations and outcome expectations. In this outlook, an individual's expectations of their efficacy in carrying out a behavior, such as learning new ECE practices, were distinct from their expectations that the behavior would lead to outcome they intended (Figure 1). Providers'

expectations of how well they could apply new practices were different than their expectations that those practices would lead to outcomes they wanted, which means those sets of expectations could be aligned or in conflict. Participants described impactful learning experiences as those that motivated them and supported their confidence that they would be successful, for example, pursuing higher learning, running their own business, earning a high-quality rating, supporting their own children the way they wanted to, or satisfying their parent community *and* when they saw alignment between their belief that they could effectively change practice and their belief that changed practice would produce a better outcome.

This observation set the central tenets of Bandura's (1978) self-efficacy theory in context of family child care providers' professional learning within a statewide early learning policy system and exposed two tensions. The first tension related to having enough support to feel effective; if coaching support were scarce or lacking, and professional learning requirements were high, providers could hear about new practices, yet not have the self-efficacy to try them or apply them effectively. Relatedly, self-efficacy theory, and social cognitive theory more broadly have faced critique that theory was not intended to be context specific but apply across context and culture. However, the research was conducted with populations less diverse than the family child care population in Washington. Cross cultural examinations of self-efficacy theory suggest that western research participants from the US and Canada, for example, tended to judge their self-efficacy as higher than research participants from Japan and China (Klassen, 2004; Chiu & Klassen, 2010). Applied in this context coaches or other professional learning providers must not only be trained to develop motivation and modeling strategies, but also be capable of differentiating these strategies in culturally responsive ways to serve the diverse population of Washington State.

The second tension revealed through the lens of self-efficacy theory related to the distinction between providers' efficacy expectations and their outcome expectations. Providers could be encouraged through coaching to feel effective in applying practices without believing that those practices led to outcomes that mattered to them. For example, the provider who appreciated outdoor learning and children's budding scientific discoveries in nature did not believe that bringing rocks and sticks in the house as prescribed by her coach would lead to better science learning, but rather, she thought it would just lead to a mess in the house.

Providers' need to not only be supported as individuals to feel confident in the practices they are taught, but they also need to learn practices that align with outcomes they understand and care about. Recognizing the central role of perceived self-efficacy to behavior change enabled a view into how to design professional learning experiences that providers will apply to their practice. Although these findings did not lead to a prescription of an exact amount or format of how much professional learning should be required, these insights did suggest that state managers and professional learning providers could better ensure that providers have job-embedded opportunities to apply professional learning through the kinds of support that enhance their perceptions of self-efficacy by further developing the coaching workforce to be more widely available and specifically trained to understand how to apply theoretically sound and culturally responsive motivation-building support strategies (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Bandura, 1978; Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997).

Although the professional learning supports that emphasize relationship-building and individual assistance have been created and implemented in the state of Washington by the DCYF and its professional learning partners, there continues to be room to improve. When providers involved in Early Achievers cannot find a coach, or a coach who is consistent, trained,

and committed their results may be less effective. If a coach or trainer does not see, hear, and value the cultural perspective and backgrounds of a provider, they will be less effective in helping that provider build self-efficacy. Since Early Achievers is voluntary, additional person-to-person options are needed for providers who do not participate in the QRIS. By developing novel professional learning opportunities that allow providers surface and share their motivations and challenges and that increase their self-efficacy, professional learning organizations can create more consistently effective and impactful learning experiences.

Relationship Between Professional Learning and Program Quality

The third element of this study focused on how providers themselves characterized the relationship between their professional learning and quality in their programs. Participants' stories included two main themes (a) how they related to professional learning and quality improvement framework and (b) how professional learning and quality improvement were related to their own sense of wellbeing.

Tensions in the Program Quality Improvement Framework

This study focused on the work of family child care providers within a conceptual framework linking professional learning, program quality, and child outcomes. Providers described how they understood the relationships between professional learning and changes in practice, between changes in practice and program quality, and between program quality and program outcomes. For participants in this study, each link in this conceptual framework had its own embedded tensions. Here, I describe each link and the tensions revealed.

Professional Learning Changes Practice. Professional learning experiences improved providers practices, up to a point, regardless of how they learned. There were two related tensions in their descriptions. The first, professional learning experiences could be useful in

improving participants' practices, however more and more professional learning with higher and higher requirements did not guarantee continued and ongoing changes in practice. For each provider, there was a point at which they stopped applying what they heard, or even stopped reading the feedback they had been given to their coaching videos, for example. The second tension involved how and where they learned. Even though there can be more pressure to participate in one kind of professional learning over another (e.g., Early Achievers, college course work, training; DCYF, 2024), many of these experiences provided the same opportunity to change practice, and all had their limits. As participants described it, the changes they made were not dependent on where they learned but by whether they had affinity for the practices, whether they felt confident to implement them, the amount and type of responsive support, or how much they believed changes in practice would lead to outcomes they understood and cared about.

Changes in Practice Improve Quality. Changes in providers' practices did lead to changes in their programs' quality, by some measure. The tension in this element of the conceptual framework was that narrow, measurable, research-based measures did not account for breadth of providers' experiences with quality improvement. When participants talked about changing their practices to improve quality, they tended to reference quality in terms of learning and environment and interactions – the Early Achievers measures that have been associated with child outcomes in the academic literature. However, in addition to the research-based quality measures, providers also had their own definitions of the quality of their program such as the intentionality with which they practiced, having a stable clientele, and parents' satisfaction. The differences in what the QRIS valued and what they provider valued could also be heavily laden with cultural significance.

Researchers and practitioners have questioned how and in what ways QRIS programs, such as Early Achievers, are and are not culturally responsive. Concepts of quality in ECE as a universal attribute that can be assessed agnostic of its context have been questioned since at least the later part of the 1990s (European Commission Child Care Network 1996; Evans 1994; Moss and Pence 1994; Munton, Mooney, and Rowland 1995; Pascal, Bertram and Ramsden 1994; Pence 1992; Williams 1994; Woodhead 1996). Across states that implement QRIS, conceptions of quality have reflected a definition that is demonstrable by providers and knowable and measurable by experts. Moss and Dahlberg (2008) described this construction of quality as "an attribute of services for young children that ensures the efficient production of predefined, normative outcomes" (p. 3). Some researchers have continued to caution against this "acultural and colonialist" view of quality based on predefined and normative outcomes that Anglo-American, middle-class values (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011) (Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018, p. 204). This caution is particularly important in discussion of the family child care population among whom (a) voluntary participation in QRIS has been lower than their center-based peers (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2015; Child Care Aware of Washington, 2024), (b) QRIS ratings are likely to be lower, and (c) participation in available supports is also likely to be lower (Smith et al., 2010; Tout et al. 2010). These considerations reinforce the notion that personally connected, invested, culturally responsive professional learning supports are critical for providers efforts to build self-efficacy toward new practices that lead outcomes that they understand and care about for their own reasons.

Participants in the study described quality in ways not discussed in the QRIS quality standards. They discussed quality in relationship to their own level of stress and sense of wellbeing. For providers in this study, not all quality that mattered could be measured and the

pressure to advance measured quality could lead toward frustration and away from engagement. For areas of practice involving standardized and measured quality, there was a point at which changing practice to improve quality was worthwhile to providers. However, the steps needed to raise measurable quality could become too cumbersome to do when they judged the changes in practice were not likely to produce tangible benefit for them. The tension could be seen, to a degree, in the Early Achievers ratings held by these participants. Of 12 participants, 11 had been in Early Achievers, nine of whom had been rated. Eight of the nine had earned the same quality rating score, even though their years of experience and levels of education were vastly disparate. In several examples, providers settled for middling quality ratings because the steps needed to raise the scores were too much work compared to the benefits. They judged that the extra effort would be extensive, would not lead to more clients or higher earning, and may involve changes to the program they were not willing to make. In other words, there came a point for providers when the extra effort to improve measured quality came at too great a cost. However, when discussing aspects of self-assessed quality such as children being at ease, well-cared for, connected and happy; parents being engaged and satisfied with the provider's service; or having a low-stress work life, providers did not discuss examples of having too much, or the wrong kinds of professional learning. Rather, in these areas of practice, they sought as much training as they could find and applied it readily, even if it was less available and not incentivized.

Improving quality improves children's outcomes. Providers discussed their practices related directly to children's literacy and math learning as well as their social-emotional development. However, participants seldom mentioned quality in direct reference to children's academic outcomes, even though QRIS definitions of quality were developed to lead to academic outcomes for children. Participants explained whether and how they made books accessible, how

they read books, what kinds of questions they asked children about books, and where they learned to do so; but they did not explain what goals they had for the children in terms of letter recognition or phonemic awareness, for example. They spoke mainly of improving quality in terms of Early Achievers rating, in ways that related to the sustainability of their business, or in ways related to improving their sense of wellbeing. They spoke less, if at all, about what outcomes they hoped their program would bring because of the work they did. The tension that emerged was that twofold. First, even though links between standardized quality measures and child outcomes can be primary for researchers or policy makers, these program outcomes were not top-of-mind for providers. This may be related to a cultural disconnect between standardized versions of quality and the individuals, or simply providers' personal preferences. The second component of this tension was that even though providers highly valued program outcomes related to their wellbeing and children's wellbeing, neither of these were part of standardized quality measures nor a focus of their professional learning experiences. What mattered most to several participants was not what was measured by the rating tools.

These insights suggested that providers can better understand what quality means for them and how learning can improve their sense of wellbeing and their program goals by reflecting on their goals, motivations, needs, and sense of wellbeing. Professional learning providers can help family child care owners do this by intentionally designing learning experiences to include self-care strategies such as breath practices, regular exercise, and meditation related activities. Though these practices can be difficult to master, they are easy to practice and could be incorporated into professional learning on any content area. By better understanding how individual providers define and seek quality improvement, professional learning providers will be better able design learning experiences that meet providers’ needs.

Providers' Wellbeing

Neither the research questions nor the interview protocol focused on providers' wellbeing, however, providers' sense of wellbeing emerged as an important theme with two facets, each with unique tensions. Providers described their wellbeing in terms of (a) their own relationship to their professional learning experiences and (b) the broader policy context of professional learning and quality in ECE.

Wellbeing in Professional Learning Experiences. Participants described how professional learning experiences could influence their sense of wellbeing, for better or worse. They shared experiences about how coaches could visit before a rating and make them feel at ease; how licensors could encourage them to reach for goals they never thought possible; how trainers could give them insights to make their daily work feel less stressful; and how college professors' flexibility could make it possible for them to work, parent, and study. These experiences increased providers' sense of wellbeing as well as their perceptions of self-efficacy. They also explained how college courses and homework after long workdays could be exhausting, how trainings with droning lectures could be frustrating, how coaching experiences that did not acknowledge their strengths could be dispiriting, how licensure requirements could be cumbersome, and professional learning requirements could be vexing. These experiences decreased their sense of wellbeing and self-efficacy. Providers also described that the pressure they felt coming from outside themselves to seek and apply professional learning could be stressful, and that the professional learning they took did not provide insights into supporting their own wellbeing. Both the pressure they felt and the content of the professional learning they experienced were both factors related to the larger ECE policy context.

Wellbeing Within the ECE Policy Context. Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1978) was well-fit to build understanding about providers' learning interactions, however it did not shed light on how these learning experiences were situated within the broader statewide ECE program quality improvement policy context. Ripley's (2010) model of the policy process provided a model to analyze the broader interactions of government and social policy actors involved, in ways that revealed insights about how to better support providers' wellbeing (Figure 4). Ripley's approach has been considered a hybrid approach to policy implementation theorizing because it suggested there was both a top-down and bottom-up influences on policy process and implementation (Hottenstein, 2017); there were mandates and requirements coming *down* from the state that influenced professional learning requirements and choices at the same time as there was information coming *up* from providers about their needs and preferences in learning experiences. Ripley's (2010) general model emphasized the two-way connections between the government and social policy actors, and among these actors and the environment where professional learning happened. These connections can be seen in Figure 4 depicted as two-way arrows coming from circles representing the influence of social policy activity and government policy activity on the actors in the environment.

Applied to this study, the Department of Children, Youth and Families represented government policy activity in its implementation of licensing regulations, professional learning qualifications requirements, and the Early Achievers program. Social policy was activity carried out by the network of non-profit organizations such as Child Care Aware who implemented the coaching; higher education institutions such as the University of Washington who implemented the rating and the local community colleges who offer ECE courses; as well as the Service

Employees International Union, The Imagine Institute, and community groups such as Providorees Unidas who advocated on behalf of family child care providers.

The arrows represented connections among government and social policy activity and the professional learning environment of the providers. The prevalence and strength of these connections influenced both how providers engaged in professional learning and how their feedback may have influenced to state policy. The two-way arrow connecting the government policy and the professional learning context was represented by the mandates, benefits, and communications that providers received from the state department about their professional learning. This arrow also illustrated information and feedback from providers in response to the government policy action. The strength of this connection involved how regularly communication was provided by the state, the clarity of that information, as well as the degree to which providers communicated openly with agency representatives and how information about providers (e.g., their reasons for Early Achiever uptake or rejection) was collected and integrated into government or social policy activity. Although this model did not account for every aspect of the interactions between policy activity and providers' experiences of professional learning, these insights do suggest that state program administrators will be better able to calibrate incentives, mandates, and rating schemes by better understanding providers' sense of wellbeing and ideas about program quality. As well, state agency managers and professional learning organizations could design and schedule professional learning experiences that meet practical and pressing needs of providers, in ways that ease their burden rather than adding to it, by focusing on family child care providers wellbeing while designing and scheduling. State officers can support providers at a pace and in a manner that enables providers to develop the self-efficacy to change practices that improve outcomes, and the do not come at the expense of

providers' wellbeing, by ensuring strong, two-way collaborative connections between government policy activity and providers' professional learning environment. Doing so can help surface providers' needs so that social and government policy can be designed in response, rather than the onus to be on the provider to self-advocate against a complex statewide ECE policy system.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included a challenge accessing the breadth of the diverse family child care provider population in the state, participants availability, and my own positionality as a researcher affiliated with the University of Washington (UW). Washington State's family child care provider population includes individuals who do not speak English, though this study did not involve translation or interpretation. Primarily due to the time and resource constraints associated with this unfunded research, I did not translate outreach materials or hire interpreters for the interviews. The participant group included seven native speakers of English, three primarily Spanish speakers, one Somali speaker, and one Chinese speaker. Regarding availability, family child care providers work long hours and extremely engaged throughout the course of their workdays. It can be challenging for them to give up time to participate in research; this accounted in some cases for shorter interviews. Although follow up interviews with each provider, may have added detail, schedules of providers were a barrier to any additional data collection.

Implications for Further Study

This study examined family child care providers' experiences with professional learning, how they apply what they learned, and how they understood the relationship between professional learning and program quality. Through this work, possibilities for further study that

broaden the participant group and dive deeper into professional learning program evaluation and ECE learning policy could be fruitful. Important findings about the similarities and differences in providers' experiences emerged. Enlarging the participant group to examine differences across regions, providers' ages, and their unique program approaches could lead to a deeper understanding. Future research may include replicating the present study with more providers and focus analyses on these comparisons to better assesses QRIS policy impact and to tailor professional learning options.

Novel professional learning formats have also emerged in recent years, suggesting further study of the options and opportunities they may afford. A mentoring program operated by The Imagine Institute, though not a registered apprenticeship, has operated in the last five years in King County, Washington to provide support to new FCC owners from experienced FCC owners. This program primarily operates in one area of the state, but evaluation, feasibility, and replication study could shed light on how to provide more access this program. Across the country efforts are underway to combine ECE professional learning systems with state and federal departments of labor, which could bring an increase in funding for ECE professional learning systems. The Early Care and Education Pathways to Success (ECEPTS) organization emerged in 2019 to launch ECE apprenticeship programming in California support individuals across the country to establish registered apprenticeships for child care providers. Though most of these programs emphasize center-based providers, so far, there is one registered apprenticeship in the US exclusively supporting family child care providers. Located in the State of Maryland and cooperatively designed through a university-community partnership between Johns Hopkins University School of Education and the Family Child Care Alliance of Maryland

(Wolf, 2024). Evaluations of these programs, and those that emerge subsequently, could support efforts to expand access to novel professional learning formats and programs.

This study focused on the perceptions of family child care providers because their voices were largely absent from the professional learning quality improvement literature. Another group of relevant actors in this arena included those who provided professional learning such as coaches, professors, and trainers. Further study of their experiences and perceptions of the relationship between learning and quality could be fruitful to better understand how the overall ECE learning and policy system and could improve program quality and support early childhood educators' wellbeing.

Additional research could also examine the lack of relevant competencies in business practices; and relatedly, providers do not enter the field with business mindsets. Further study could explore how and in what ways providers could be better supported with this knowledge. Future research could also examine whether and how better messaging and broader outreach could attract additional individuals to the family child care field.

Throughout the conversations I had with participants during this study one observation rose to the fore – what mattered most to providers, above quality rating, above business success, above even parent satisfaction was the children’s wellbeing. Yet, providers’ wellbeing did not appear to be a focus of the regulations and policies that affect them. The study revealed a critical need to continue to examine providers’ emotional and economic wellbeing as related to their daily practice, to their professional learning experiences, and to the ways in which the wider ECE policy environment influences their choices and opportunities. Scholars at the University of California, Berkley’s Center for the Study of Child Care Employment have done recent and powerful work focusing on providers’ wellbeing within state ECE systems (Schlieber et al.,

2022; Schlieber et al., 2023; Muruvi et al., 2023). Continued investigation of this type into how and in what ways professional learning and program quality efforts can center providers' well-being are needed urgently.

In addition to research into approaches to providing professional learning for family child care providers within the current policy context, further critical examination of the role of culture and context in defining and understanding program quality is warranted. Early care and education program improvement efforts built upon measuring quality and providing incentives have reflected broader exchange-based perspectives policy compliance, external reward systems of incentives, and competitive values entrenched in the U.S. education and free market system. Quality rating scales were developed with the intention to promote competition among providers by attempting to indicate to parents which programs offer the highest value for their children. This competitive orientation reflected in part Anglo-American and competitive capitalist values, which may not actually be helping parents even though it does seem to be adding unhelpful stress to providers.

The widespread use of these quality measures seemed to suggest the dubious proposition that state and university-based experts could be counted on to know better than parents, families, and providers what makes a program high-quality. Regardless of which tools or instruments are used to measure quality, the very concept of measuring quality deserves further scrutiny. If quality within a program were to be defined for the providers and the children in that program by state or university experts, what does that say about how the experts view providers, and how providers are taught to view themselves? In contexts in which quality is measured and regulated by policy, quality will be defined by those who do the measuring, and those who have power to change policy, not necessarily by those who are involved in the programs. Further critical inquiry

into the phenomenon of quality ratings and high-stakes professional learning within the US ECE policy context could help further illuminate why family child care providers do what they do and what supports they believe would help them most. These lines of inquiry could extend to critical examination of QRIS policies and how they are implemented in states.

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Tables

Table 1

Characteristics of participants.

Characteristic	Number of Participants
Region	
Central	1
Eastern	2
King County	3
Northwest	1
Olympic Peninsula	2
Southwest	3
Age	
36-45	5
46-55	5
56-65	2
Years' Experience	
6-10	4
11-20	3
21+	5
Language	
English	7
Spanish; English	3
Somali; English	1
Chinese; English	1
Race / Ethnicity	
White	5
Black / African American	1
Hispanic / Latino	3
Asian	2
American Indian / Alaska Native	1

Table 2

Participant characteristics

Part.	Region	Age	Years' Exp.	Language	Higher Education	Distinct Program Features	Early Achievers	Additional ECE Roles
1002	Eastern	35-45	21	Spanish; English	CDA[a]; AA[b]; BA[c]; MA[d]	-	3	Trainer; union representative
1022	Eastern	35-45	16	Spanish; English	AA; working toward BA	-	3	ECEAP[e] home visitor
1066	Olympic Peninsula	45-55	19	English	CDA; AA	Montessori;	3	-
1077	Southwest	45-55	24	English	AA; BA	-	3	-
1091	Southwest	55-65	28	English	-	-	3	-
1111	King County	35-45	7	Somali; English	ECE Initial Certificate	-	3+	-
1116	Central	45-55	25	Spanish; English	Working toward Initial Certificate	-	3	-
1126	Northwest	45-55	6	English	Horticulture degree	-	3	-
1133	King County	35-45	7	Mandarin; English	Working toward BA	Mandarin Immersion	Participating, unrated	-
1134	Olympic Peninsula	35-45	11	English	BS[f] child psychology	Play-based	Participating, unrated	Navy child care provider
1136	Southwest	45-55	8	English	MPA[g], Montessori teacher training	Montessori	No longer participating	Montessori clinical supervisor
1143	King	55-65	23	English	AA	Enrichment Curriculum	Has never participated	ECE[h] trainer

[a]Child Development Associates certificate; [b]Associate degree in early childhood education; [c]Bachelor's degree in early childhood education; [d]Master's degree in early childhood education; [e]Early Childhood Education Assistance Program; [f]Bachelor's of science; [g]Master's in Public Administration; [h]early childhood education.

Table 3

Participant interview detail

Participant	Interview Date	Interview Length	Transcript Pages
1002	02/14/2024	1:02:18	23
1022	02/08/2024	00:46:41	16
1066	02/16/2024	00:50:03	24
1077	02/29/2024	00:23:17	10
1091	03/01/2024	00:31:11	13
1111	03/01/2024	00:30:21	8
1116	02/14/2024	00:51:28	20
1126	02/08/2024	00:44:31	13
1133	02/15/2024	00:35:50	15
1134	02/07/2024	1:04:23	22
1136	02/08/2024	00:35:32	13
1143	02/05/2024	1:07:34	28

Table 4

Research question 1 codes and subcodes

Code and Subcode	Definitions
Learning to provide family child care*	
Deciding to enter the field	Descriptions of why providers decided to open a family child care home
Initial orientation and training	What and how providers learned at their initial state licensure training and orientation
Knowing sources for professional learning*	
State agency representatives and resources	Licensors and other state representatives
Non-government organizations	Non-profit professional learning and advocacy organizations
Peers	Other family child care providers
Professionals in other fields	Professionals they know in different fields
Parents	Parents in the program
Colleges and universities	Institutions of higher education
Internet searching	Self-guided exploration for online resources
Finding professional learning possibilities	
Knowing where to look	Active search from known sources
Responding to direct outreach	Passive receipt then active follow up
Making professional learning choices	
Requirements and convenience	Choices made to satisfy requirements as easily as possible
Interactive learning format	Choices made to optimize learning through social interaction
Relevance to problems of practice	Choices made to address acute issues, questions, or challenges
Evaluating professional learning experiences*	Identifying preferences and priorities to form opinions about the relative value of different professional learning experiences

*A priori codes

Table 5

Research question 2 codes and subcodes

Code and Subcode	Definitions
Learning environments*	
Clutter	Explanations of changes to the environment involving removing unnecessary items or rotating materials
Stations	Explanations of changes to the environment involving setting up distinct centers, or areas, focused activities – art, music, books, science, soft materials
Children's choice	Explanations of changes to the environment involving children determining how to arrange items and materials in the space
Interactions among children and providers*	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to improving the interactions among children and providers
Literacy*	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to literacy
Math*	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to math
Family engagement	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to communicating and collaborating with families
Business practices	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to administrating the business aspects of the child care program
Supporting children with special needs	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to helping students and families who have special needs
Outdoor learning	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to maintaining and using outdoor environments in the family child care
COVID learning	Descriptions of experiencing and applying professional learning related to navigating the COVID-19 pandemic while operating a family child care home

*A priori codes

Table 6

Research question 3 codes and subcodes

Code and Subcode	Definitions
Participating in Early Achievers	
Deciding to join	Descriptions of why providers decided to participate in Early Achievers
Benefits and hassles of participation	Explanations of how participating has benefited theme and the challenges they have experienced
Navigating changes to the program	Discussion of how they interpreted and responded to changes in the program, in particular participation mandates and rating scale changes
Providers' experiences with coaching	Stories about participants experiences participating in Early Achievers coaching activities and the coaches themselves
Professional learning and program quality*	
Professional learning and ECE practice	Providers discussion of the connection they see between professional learning experiences and their own practices
ECE practice and program quality	Providers discussion of the connection they see between their own practices and the quality of their programs
Program quality and program outcomes	Providers discussion of the connection they see between the quality of their programs and the outcomes of their programs
Learning, quality, and wellbeing	Explanation of how providers interpret and discuss their experiences with learning and quality as they relate to their wellbeing

Note. *A priori codes

Table 7.

Code: Learning to Provide Family Child care

Subcode	Example quote
Deciding to enter the field	
Having a way with kids	"So, I have always been that person that kids are attracted to, and I just thought it was this weird phenomenon." (1134)
	"She said that I have a way with the kids. I would go in and I would sit down with the kids before I before I pack them up and leave and we'd all sit in a little group circle, and they throw books at me ... and so I'd read them and so they all like got excited when I showed up. She goes, you should open your own daycare." (1077)
Developing a passion for child care	"When I get married with my husband, my mother -in -law, she was doing that job and I spent two years living in her house...I love to see how she works with the kiddos. And I was like, I want to do that." (1116)
	"And my dream was just like, I want a child care and I want it to not be all the things that I don't like about other places. So ... I built a brand-new house, and I was like, I'm gonna open my child care. And I did. Like, so that's where it's at." (1066)
	"So, I just decided to open my own child care because I just find the passion for children and teaching children and same time, I wanted to have my son with me all day." (1022)
	"I have a master's in public administration. I always thought when my children were older, I'd go back into that, but I just really fell in love with Montessori." (1126)
	"Part of my motivation besides being there for my daughter before and after school... was I wanted to provide a safe, fun environment for kids. That was a big part of my motivation was to give local kids what I didn't have." (1126)

Table 7. (Continued)

Code: Learning to Provide Family Child care

Subcode	Example quote
Deciding to enter the field	
Doing similar daily work already	"I realized that when I became a parent for my first child, the housework that I was doing is similar as the work." (1111) "I think it's very convenient, you know, I can work at home. And even though my son not in my program, not in my program anymore that time, I can play around my time, I can pick him up from school and the job him off, you know, because my time is more flexible." (1133) "My son never had a good time or a good experience with the child care providers. Every week it was something different... my son used to cry... he was never happy. I was switching him to the different child care providers. And every time it got worse and worse and very difficult for me to leave him with a child care provider, but I had to go work. So, at that time I took a year off work. So, I stayed with him at home. And then I decided to work with children." (1022) "I was a single mom. I got my daughter registered for kindergarten, and I found out that there were zero options for her after school that there was no after school programs. And I thought it would be a good occupation for me to keep doing until I retired. Horticulture is physically demanding. And being in child care, picking up babies is demanding. But it's not as demanding" (1126). "Okay, when I started, I didn't have not even a high school diploma. I was a dropout. Because I got pregnant. And then back then, my husband, you know how Latinos are like, 'No, you're going to stay home, you're not going to go back to school'. So, my [ex-husband] wanted me to do daycare and I'm like, 'No, I don't want to.' I didn't want to do babysitter...And then my mom showed my ex-husband a check and she's like, 'this is what she can earn.' So, he pushed me into it, like you should do it… this and that…! And I was like, 'Okay then, so if I'm already doing it, then yeah'"(1002).

Table 8.

Code: Finding Professional Learning Opportunities

Subcode	Example quote
Knowing where to look	"I am a member of the American Montessori Society, so they do a lot of training... They have like webinars and zoom live trainings as well as recorded. I go to them a lot and then I think that's where I've done all the trauma" (1136). "I was planning [to start school again] this year. I spoke to already my coach for my new coach and she's like, yeah, I'm going to go back to the classes and then go back to my school so I can start it, whatever I need to be done for me." (1111) "But typically, what I do at the beginning of the year is I go on [Imagine Institute's] website and sign up for some classes so that I make sure that I cover my teaching and education hours. I don't ever have to wait until the last minute." (1126) "Usually through Imagine Institute or through Child Care Aware, they are the two biggest ones that I find interesting. And they're always having so many different types of training." (1091)
Responding to direct outreach	"[a]DCYF sent us invitation if we want to be part of those trainings." (1116) "They actually emailed me and offered it, so I took it. There you go." (1077) "And then the other one is my licensor person. She was calling me, telling me about trainings, about school, about classes in the college, or those type of things that I needed, like that I was interested in. She was calling me. We call it a hotline [laughs]. She was calling me and letting me know about training." (1022)

[a]Washington State Department of Children Youth and Families.

Table 9.

Code: Making Professional Learning Choices

Subcode	Example quote
Requirements and convenience	"We need 10 hours continuing education for every year; we have to pick it up, we have to get started." (1111) "I'm like, what can I do to get by to keep my [training hours] up." (1143) "Most in -person classes I have to drive to ... I've driven all the way to Tukwila for class before. Never do that again. That's a long drive. I have to get up really early in the morning to get down there." (1126)
Learning format	"Yeah, so I mean, it's nice to do in person. It really is because then you kind of network with other providers when you do that. But then also it's like not possible to do it because your schedule is so crazy. I mean, I work at least 13, 14 hours a day." (1091) "I like hands-on. hands-on, it has to do with the trainer tone. And just try to keep having your audience up and going. But honestly, I hate those lecture trainings. They're just like, 'blah, blah, blah'. You feel like that Peanut movie. La, la, la. That's how I feel, honestly. It's like, la, la, la, la, la, like, oh my God. And then that's what other providers said too. Even myself, what did I learn? I didn't learn anything because it was old lectures. And I think if you go straight to the point, the shorter straight to the point, and then hands -on, then that's what is going to help the provider." (1022) "And they're good at asking us to participate, and that helps. They were long... every night. I worked 10 -hour days, 7 to 5, or 5 tens. And by 7, 8 o 'clock, my brain is shutting down. I'm tired, and it's hard to concentrate and to pay attention … I'll be trying to focus and stay awake listening to someone talk about record keeping and taxes...". (1126)

Table 9. (Continued)

Code: Making Professional Learning Choices

Subcode	Example quote
Relevance to problems of practice	" [I learned] to be prepared with everything, she always taught me, you need to have food ready. You always chop your vegetables, making small pieces and you just put some flavor for the taste, and it will be okay and chop the meat because she always teach me like if we give the chicken like a big piece, like a leg or a thigh, they're not gonna have interest to eat the chicken. So, you always chop the chicken. Okay. So, and you know, all those tricks work really well." (1116) "Right now, I'm going through, which I believe has changed my practice tremendously. Have you heard of conscious discipline? Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I am retaking this course. The first time I took it, I had three kids that were just, I couldn't figure out how to stop their behaviors." (1134) "Yes, I am doing a class with the Imagine Institute. It's next month. Charting your course in early childhood education. On record keeping and tax taxes. The class they're providing on business practices." (1126) "I had a big outdoor backyard, huge backyard. And then I don't know what to do. Now I don't have playground. I have a lot of bikes out there. There was a training called like outdoor setting setup, right? So, I got on that training. I feel I didn't learn much. I still don't know what to do." (1133) "So, when I go online and I look for something for early learning, I try to find the best way… something that is something I've never seen before. And it's hard, because I've been around a long time." (1143)

Table 10.

Code: Evaluating Professional Learning Experiences

Subcode	Example quote
Interactivity in learning experiences	"There was a training called like outdoor setting setup, right? I got on that training. I feel I didn't learn much. I still don't know what to do. And then they I think they probably try to sell the product or something...I just wasted my about two hours on there. We keep talking because the person who was, I think she probably, I forgot her name like a professor. She started talking about herself, like probably 40 minutes or so." (1133)
	"I think that's where people probably get the most out of it is when you communicate with other educators" (1066)
	" And when people is just talking and don't give me the opportunity to interact, that gives me anxiety. I just can't deal with that very well. I just love when I have an idea; and I need to interact." (1116)
Finding value in learning experiences	"You know…I think because I pick and choose which ones I take, I think that I haven't taken one that I haven't taken something from it." (1091)
	"You're waking up to pay attention in there…Gotta get something out of it." (1126)

Table 11.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Learning Environments

Subcode	Example quote
Sharing space with home and work	"Well, a lot of it's the environment and like setting up my environment in a way that's going to work for teaching. And you know, just setting up to where your environment is, your teaching tool, basically. So, and I would have never thought about, you know, environment being so important as I do now." (1077)
	"We took and cleaned out the garage. We had these [people] come in and inspect it, make sure it's a good space. Then we rebuilt; we did everything. We put a playground in the back. We did all of that. All to the specs." (1143)
	"The rules kind of got to the point where it's pretty tough to live in your house and have a daycare. It's doable, but it's not very easy." (1091)
	"I have a relatively small house. I have child care literally throughout my whole house. My kitchen, living room, and the playroom is all just [child care], like my living room is the classroom. I have two cribs in my living room. And so, I don't have a real classroom like at a center." (1126)
	"Some of the [a]WACS are like, you have to put a lock on your refrigerator. Even though kids can't access it, you have to have a lock on it." (1091)
Reducing clutter	"I used to have my shelves packed full of stuff, but all that stuff fell on the floor and the cleanup was awful. Now I have a lot less, I still have a lot." (1134)
	"Well, I had so much to learn. I had to learn that the kids didn't need everything. They don't need all this." (1066)
	"Oh yeah, in the beginning I was like, I wanted all the toys, my house was small. It was awful because I wanted, you know, I wanted them to have all the things I didn't have. And then I realized it's overwhelming for all of us. And so, I have a lot less toys, I rotate out toys and all the ongoing education has been really helpful. I've learned a lot." (1126)
	"My class is really open so the boys can run. I let them run around because I understand that." (1143)

[a]Washington Administrative Code

Table 11. (Continued)

Code: Applying Learning Related to Learning Environments

Subcodes	Example quote
Setting up activity stations	"And also, we learned like, also, that we have to change the toys and then there's appropriate toys and we can divide the toys like areas, music area, I mean, music area, arts area, math area, reading area, we didn't have all that kind of sections." (1111)
	"Now all my areas are already, they're already organized. Like my dramatic play, the blocks, and then that's two things from Early Achievers, from my coaches, knowledge about what toys to have and why toys not to have". (1002)
	"That was one of the things where I was like, how do I set up stations? I have a relatively small house … And so they talk a lot about centers. It's a little more challenging for a provider like me. I do more centers outside." (1126)
	"We have to have all specific areas for children, like mud area, science area, literacy area, science area. That's what I learned with working with my coach." (1022)
Children's choice	"Focusing on the environment's fine, but they should still be about the children. So, the [Early Achievers] quality standards were like, everything had to have a home so like if [the evaluators] came … it was, 'Wait! The block area could not have dinosaurs." (1066)
	"The children should be able to set the room up the way they want it. And they should be able to put it the way they want, this is their space, this is their childhood. I think that it needs to be revamped that we're looking at relationships with the children, not if they're putting their blocks back at the block shelf." (1066)
	"The teaching strategies that I really value was making the classroom belong to the children. So, like, making them know that they own the place. It's their comfort zone. It's their place to not have to be afraid or worry about anything." (1077)
	"So anywhere in my daycare that the kids are supposed to go, anything they can grab, touch, pull down; they can play with." (1134)

Table 12.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Interactions Among Children and Providers

Subcode	Example quote
Intentional approaches to interaction	"[One of] the changes that makes the greatest impact was just to tell the child what they *can* do [instead of what they cannot] and it's so simple and it changes everything rather than the chasing children around telling them what they can't do. People have these habits... and no one has ever pointed it out." (1136)
	"And the lady that taught it used to be a licensed child care showed a lot of videos of adults interacting with children and discuss the child's reactions to the different interactions. I kept thinking, 'Wow, I didn't realize that!'" (1126)
Questioning the CLASS assessment tool	"Do you make sure that your words that you're saying is never a yell, even if you didn't mean to and it just came out slightly? [If not] ... then you're an awful provider." (1134)
	"So, with CLASS, with the CLASS thing, if the kids had conflict where we were being rated, we would lose, we would go to the lowest level on that area because it would be a negative environment. I realized that recently, about six months ago, maybe, I was like, oh, I'm still doing that naturally. Just trying to make sure there's no conflicts.... So anyway, I've been stepping back and they have some conflict...and we have really good social skills." (1066)
	"I mean, you have to learn the word *no*; a lot of things happen in life. And it's the first time I'm hearing that the State doesn't want you to say *no*. No, it's always supposed to be a positive and, you know, you're supposed to *redirect*. You're not supposed to, you know, I mean, it's always supposed to be a positive. And that's like, okay, sometimes in life, it's not always positive. It's like... that child is throwing someone's hair! I'm supposed to just say, Oh, now Johnny, please don't do that. Right?!" (1091)

Table 13.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Literacy

Subcode	Example quote
Early exposure	"You thought, you know, oh, just teaching them to read...It was like way more than that. Once I figured that out, it's been a lot better." (1091) "I have taken courses and especially I have re -taken the fundamentals of early childhood reading. And children need to be exposed to literacy very early on." (1134) "Sometimes, you know, reading books is great. Everyone should do that with their kids, but you need to do more... like you need to do open-ended questions and like have conversations with kids and, you know, get them familiar with books and like there's just a lot to it, more than just reading a book." (1091) "I was in the [community college], you know, in my in -person training classes. I learned the most about literacy in there because they're working in their facility and they're watching them the way they do things and doing my actual practicum in there." (1077) "It was in Early Achievers, the importance about reading. That's where most of it hit." (1002)
Literacy in everyday interactions	"I look for their choices and we talk about colors and shapes and numbers and letters, but it's more organically of where you have a red block in your hand, and it had the letter B on it. Oh, I see you have the letter B in your hand. Wow, B says, and its red." (1134) "You count while you're playing, you talk about different letters while you're playing. And then they instead of workbooks and worksheets and activities and things, but I'm play-based because from through the classes I've taken, I've learned that kids learn more through play than through sitting down at the table and doing a workbook." (1126) "I just learned like having many different books and different cultures. It is just to have an open door for the kids, how to feed their imagination and how to give them the opportunity to see different things just with a book."

Table 14.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Math

Subcode	Example quote
Early exposure	"When I have mixed ages … I don't have to do the teaching at all. It comes from the kids. My little ones, they're almost two now, they can count to five or six because of [older children] counting." (1134)
	"I work with them with math also, they just have their materials to count to recognize colors and shapes. And all those good things." (1116)
Math in everyday interactions	"We eat at the table for breakfast. We talk about things. If the child had an interest with cars this week, our whole week is about cars. And then the cars contain numbers and colors." (1133)
	"Yeah, one of the classes I took at [the college] was math for children. I learned a lot. For me I didn't realize that math, it's everywhere. You know like if the child is looking at the window you know that the window is a square so there's a good chance to say okay do you implement more math every time, we just speak with them." (1022)
	"Math? Oh, we're always doing math. So, you know, kids learn the best through playing. It's like counting your cereal in your bowl. I mean, math is like huge." (1091)
	"We don't have any number lines. We don't have any calendars anymore. We will count and see who's here. We will count out like, hey, we'll check in to see how many chairs we need. And then we also have things like, we have lots of scales, we have all kinds of scales." (1066)
	"And in books, when you're reading books, then you're like, oh, my goodness, I see we have, let's count the frogs on the page. And one, two, three, four, five frogs. All right. And then through songs, their favorite song right now is the Five Little Ducks." (1134)
	"And everything has to be associated with their play or learning because that's how kids retain. Kids play. They play and learn. They don't learn and then play." (1143)

Table 15.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Family Engagement

"What motivates me [to learn more]? I have hard families." (1111)
"Since I've been educated more and since Early Achievers started, I feel like I'm more of a family advocate and a child advocate. And I feel like I support them more, you know, mentally and anyway, again." (1077)
"I have taken like maybe few classes for like interacting with families because or area they don't offer as many trainings or classes for like interacting with families, but not that many, but it's hard to work with families more than with children. Well, like I say, nothing is easy with families." (1022)
"You know, there's some parents that have to have the written word down to comprehend. Just saying it from me because I'm not PhD or master's program or a doctor, they're going to need a staple of professional written word versus mine." (1143)
"When I do those [a]ASQ, I have to share that information with the parents. And then in case the children, it's a little bit ... lower level so I explain them okay this is the area where we need to work most and some of the parents, they don't accept they say, 'oh no my child is very smart, or he don't have a problem in this area just don't do anything." (1022)
"I have a parent handbook that states the policy and that's what's in between the parents and I; for that book so it's like hey this is not it for my time, so I have to take a break." (1111)
"It didn't happen on me but there were some there were some providers that there were there was complaints about having some of the licensors coming in and then looking in places were not even supposed to and then about parents too having parents in and then not paying in like private parents and not and were not they would some of them not to pay the amount of the full amount for the for the cost. What they some of them when they did is that they will call they call CPS, and they made a false allegation on those providers." (1022)
"And I think we already did family events from the beginning. But now, just because it's changed, because the society's changed, we do less family events because people are so busy. They don't want to come as often." (1066)
"[Early Achievers] helped, it added gave me more ideas and it showed me to not be afraid on how to talk to the families because they don't talk to you, you gotta pull it out of them. So, when you recognize signs or signals or whatever you want to call it, you gotta say, hey, it's everything okay and start the conversation." (1077)

[a]Ages and Stages Questionnaire

Table 16.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Business Practices

Subcode	Example quote
Business background	"When I was baby, my family were business owners. So, I always have a business education on my planner." (1111)
	"My family has different businesses, [I knew] you just had to put money into it to make money. I put all my money into the business to open it. After that, it was just a lot of trial and error." (1066)
	"I'd had a business before, but a landscape maintenance business is really different than a child care business. I really didn't feel confident in that aspect. And so, I keep taking classes just to make sure I'm doing that part right." (1126)
Lack of business background	"Yeah, because I mean you go into it with your heart like that's what you love to do. You don't go into a thinking of it as a business. When I started, I wasn't a business owner, I didn't, I didn't think of my daycare as a business, I thought of it as taking care of children." (1091)
	"I'm not too good in this. You know, I love my business dealing with the kids. I don't like the business with numbers and taxes." (1116)

Table 16. (Continued)

Code: Applying Learning Related to Business Practices

Subcode	Example quote
Challenges with business practices	"So, then I was going to have another person help me out…and so I became a corporation. And that was at first, I'm like, 'Okay, I can do this'. And then... 'I'm not sure how to do this' I cried the first tax return. It was so hard." (1134) "So, the business part was a little bit tricky, so my husband runs his own business, but my brother he is a financial manager for [an insurance company]. He's one of the big dudes up there. So, he had sat down with me and mapped out my spending - How much? What I could … how much my supplies were, what I could spend every month what? How my taxes would go? So how many employees I could employ? And then my husband helped me walk through employment, taxes, I mean taxes and things like that." (1143) "But under the business, they can help, they go after my business. And my business name will be smeared; mine won't." (1134) "And then after that, it was just a lot of trial and error. Yeah, okay. I worked a lot, especially with staffing."(1066) "And then, and, you know we are at risk of false allegations, but I could say that running a daycare is a blessing." (1002) "I'm focused on getting another, um, I'm considering getting an outdoor child care provider license and hiring. So that is something I need to learn how to do." (1126)

Table 17.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Supporting Children with Special Needs

"Along with my mom who was also, she also worked with special-needs-kids when I got into elementary school and higher. She was a para educator and she worked with special-needs-kids. And so, then I was exposed to them and scared, scared out of my mind like this child's gonna hurt me, but they don't. But I've never been exposed to it. So, through her working with them and showing me it's safe, then I took that into my practice and had had many, many, many special-needs-kids come through my care. And I was able to help them because of her foundation." (1134)
"I also did special needs training or special needs care so I had a contract also with DDD services which is the Department of Developmental Disabilities and so I had kids through them too and they were like different disabilities." (1077)
"I took a lot of special needs kids over the years. Yeah. So, no, our children get thrown out of other sites. They'd appear. And it's certainly my best, but that was really like changing moment of like, I need to think alike. Like, their puzzle, what are their actions saying? And what can I do? It just changes the view of their behavior. If I could tell myself, hey, you know what, they're not trying to drive you crazy. They have a need or not meeting it. Let's try this. Oh, it didn't fit. Let's try it a little different. So, we're turning the puzzle piece. All right. Eventually it's like that piece doesn't fit. We got to try something else." (1066)
"Right now, right now I'm really interested to learn about the special needs. And I'm taking care, excuse me, I'm taking trainings with Washington University about that. Okay. So how to learn how to work with kids with ADHD, with autism, autism, I don't know how to say autism. Oh, yeah, autism. Because, you know, lately most of the kids have something. And we need to learn, we need to be educated to understand better and to be a good support for the family." (1116)

Table 18.

Code: Applying Learning Related to Outdoor Learning

"There's rocks outside and [Early Achievers] wanted rocks inside my house for a science. I'm like, do you not see this [motions to outdoors] that you go outside? But a lot of providers don't go outside and that's a big part of my program is to go outside. More than an hour a day that's my goal. Except for when it's really cool out, or really hot so above 100 or below 20 degrees. We're outside. We have rain suits. We put them on gloves rain boots snow boots snow pants. We're going outside all the weathers. So why do I want to bring all this stuff in my house?" (1134)
"We just used the Montessori curriculum. I was trying to add more like outdoor opportunities and enhance my outdoor space." (1136)
"I'm focused on getting another, um, I'm considering getting an outdoor child care provider license and hiring. So that is something I need to learn how to do". (1066)
"So, I've really been focusing on my outdoor classroom space, and I would like to have an employee so that we can team up and have the littles inside and the bigger kids outside especially for the summer. So, I'm focusing on outdoor education. (1126)
"There was like I'm still had a big outdoor backyard, huge backyard. And then I don't know what to do. I'm still looking for outdoor setup. What's the best way I can set up an outdoor environment for children like a more nature style? I know we can have greenhouse, we can have garden, and how about wintertime?" (1133)
"I'm not sure yet, but maybe I know they offer one training every year that it calls Great Outdoors. So, it's for, you know, because vacations come in and like three months, June, July, you know, so I might have to keep the children busy. And then they teach us, they give us a lot of ideas to make activities outside for children's school age." (1022)
"Yeah, of course. So COVID hit and we moved outside like about three, four weeks into it. My assistant was on break. And so, it was just me and I moved the kids outside and we had to wash everything at the time. Everything was supposed to be in washed. So I only gave the kids' stuff like traffic cones and whatever else we had, I felt like I could just spray off and that first week outside, my kids took all of this stuff just ran the parts around the yard and they made a car, this whole little group, they made a car and I was like, just like, oh my gosh, my kids are going to be fine." (1066)

Table 19

Code: Applying Learning Related to COVID-19

Subcode	Example quote
Program changes	"My [program parents] reached out to me and asked me if I would do the emergency COVID educational support program. And so, I did that. And what we did is we took Seattle public school children. We took six of them. And so COVID, we adjusted." (1143) "Well, I mean, everyone stayed home for March and in April. But then I think I had one kid come part time in April. Yeah, I had limit." (1126) "And then through COVID, I did just the four hours." (1066) "So, another way they changed was the non -essential personnel kids, they left my program. I didn't see half of them come back because they were mostly at that age where they were going to change into going to kindergarten. So, most of them proceeded on to school when they started coming back." (1134) "I did. I closed one month. Okay. And then reopen it. Yeah, and the family required they have to work from home. They promised they would keep them home; they will keep themselves safe. So, I had so I reopened it. I but I only enrolled, I mean, only I only allowed three children came back. So, I want to meet them. I don't want so many children at the same time at the during the COVID time." (1133) We stayed open. I had, So I had a few families. I had a teacher family, so the public schools were closed here, and so those children stayed home with their parents, so I lost a little bit of enrollment. (1136)
Challenges navigating COVID-19	"Well, COVID was a nightmare." (1116) "You worry about, like, oh, my God, what if it's COVID? What if it's this? What if it's that? And that's the most scary thing. But I think about because I'm the main support here in my home, what if I get sick? What if I have to close? What's going to happen… But yeah, I think about it's scary, and it was one of the most awful things that I have gone through because I didn't get it only one time. I got it twice" (1002).

Table 19. (Continued)

Code: Applying Learning Related to COVID-19

Subcode	Example quote
Unexpected Benefits	"But actually, other than the sickness and everyone being unhealthy and dying, actually, it was a really pleasant time. The children just seemed more peaceful and happy to be at school, and my theory is because they weren't going anywhere else. You know, sometimes kids get dragged around a lot of places, and they just seemed really happy and enjoyed each other." (1136) "When the family was in quarantine some of the healthy families go and take them food and it was so beautiful. It just taught us a lot." (1116)
Compliance with public health guidance	"Yeah, I've washed my hands, and even though we just do what you can, and then we, honestly, we disinfect our toys daily, daily no matter what, daily, the toys the kids are playing with, we just disinfect mostly everything." (1002) "Our coach was like, they are amazing, they are the one who take so much time to show us what we needed. And then we have to wear a mask and then they have to tell us everything and differently, that's how we can, yeah. They are the one who updated, everything that's really new in the WAC." (1111) "Another way I changed was I didn't let the parents in the house. So, I met them at the door, and they signed in and out at the door, which is very foreign to me because I want the parents to come in. I want them to see what the kids are doing because I'm not sending home worksheets." (1134) "Oh, what did I have to change for COVID? Well, I don't really want to say on record. "(1091) "I didn't do hardly anything that they told me that I should do. I should have masks, and I didn't because I think that is detrimental to children learning to speak. Babies learning facial expressions. And I thought, and I still do standby it, that not masking helped the kids in my care through this time when everybody was masking and being hidden from everybody. And it's so scary. So, I didn't mask that was supposed to. I sort of, at the beginning, I stopped doing sensory tables." (1134)

Table 20.

Code: Early Achievers and Quality Improvement

Subcode	Example quote
Deciding to join	"Yeah, [I joined] because I wanted to become a student again. I wanted to get my B.A." (1022) "It just sounded exciting to me. And I didn't know about the free schooling… I didn't learn about that until I actually signed up." (1077) "Well, in the beginning, a state told us, it's your choice if you wanna be Early Achievers member or not? Few years later, they told us you have to." (1116) "How did I start in the Early Achievers? I think we were required to participate for Early Achievers. So that's how I started." (1111) "I have to be in it because if you're not in Early Achievers, it's like a chess board, you can't really do anything." (1066) "Okay, so here's where I get negative. I can't take subsidy kids because I refuse to take Early Achievers. So, she came down, she asked me, why don't you do the Early Achievers and the scale rate? And I said, 'It's dumb'. It has no relevancy to me. You are literally taking me, a professional, who has already written a program that is a five-star program that I barely get ticked on with the licensors…they love my curriculum. So, you're gonna come in and tell me, this shouldn't be there. You should try this, you should do this, you should do that...I don't like the way they approach." (1143)
Benefits and hassles of participation	"I have never liked the way they see things, but I like the one thing that they do ... the beneficiary that they provide for those who are not educated. That is a good thing." (1143) "I think [Early Achievers] are the one who was..., I'm not sure if they were the one who was paid our classes when I was taking the classes for the AA degrees" (1111) "An observer could show up at any time, which was making me a nervous wreck because I don't like surprises. I don't like people just showing up at my door." (1126)

Table 20. (Continued)

Code: Early Achievers and Quality Improvement

Subcode	Example quote
Benefits and hassles of participation	"I got my rating and then I just didn't keep going with it. I mean if I thought it was going to improve or did improve. I would have kept doing it." (1136) "All the kids are going to act up when you have a stranger in your house. It just wasn't conducive of like what it really looked like. It was too much of a snapshot that was not really conducive to like what we do because the kids never are going to don't listen, I swear every kid felt they could stand on the table at one point, you know, I mean, they just, the rules are thrown out the door cause there's a stranger in your house watching you." (1091) "It's just so much. I mean, five-inch binder last time I did it, and I didn't even do all the stuff." (1066) "I think like that's what matters the most me is what I do with my children, and I don't even remember all that all the paperwork … of just everything else that was not directly related to interacting with children." (1136)
Navigating changes to Early Achievers	"I think that, well, I don't really recognize it as a change. I think there's more requirements, but I think the big change that I notice the most is the way they do their ratings." (1077) "Before they changed their, what they based their ratings on, it was awful. They were so far away from child development and being child-centered and all about the children, they were more concerned about how many blocks do you have? How many stuffed animals do you have for a child? Do you have enough of this stuff? *Stuff, stuff, stuff, stuff, stuff*. Now you get points by sending in an essay to let your program shine through your eyes and then just for writing down words, just for submitting it you get 20 points. But the thing that I've learned that I can't do is go back and read the feedback [that is given based on a rating of the video]. Because I know I'm a phenomenal teacher. I have great connections with my kids. And they marked me as a novice teacher! And I'm like, that's not novice! So angry about that!" (1134)

Table 20. (Continued)

Code: Early Achievers and Quality Improvement

Subcode	Example quote
Providers' experiences with coaching	"Well, I will say it easy because they provide us a coach. So, anything what I need to improve my child care, they always there to help me." (1022) "Some of the coaches are more helpful than others. I really wish that in the beginning my coach would have said more about my environment." (1126) "Okay, what was it like to have a coach? It was perfect. It was amazing, amazing. I was new to the child care and then she was new to the state. And she worked so hard." (1111) "[From coaches, I learned about] the observation and monitoring children in early childhood education. I find really helpful in curriculum and learning environment. That was one of the things where I was like, how do I set up stations? I have a relatively small house. I have child care literally throughout my whole house." (1126) "Now all my areas are already, they're already organized. Like my dramatic play, the blocks, and then that's two things to the Early Achievers, to my coaches and, and but the knowledge about what toys to have and why toys not to have." (1002) "And there's that and also we have posters around my wall that can even make it easy for my assistant so they can ask questions, open ended questions. Yes, ask the and even for myself. So, for example, we can say it's the reading area, kids' reading area. They say, what is this title of that book? And what does that cover tell you about the book?" (1111) "I think three days before my coach came here and then she just kind of practiced with me. She was like pretending she is the supervisor and then helped me a lot to relieve my nervous. That was a good experience too. She offered her time after hours of her work." (1022)

Table 21.

Code: Characterizing the Professional Learning and Program Quality Framework

Subcode	Example quote
Professional learning and ECE practice	"So, there's a quote that I love when you know better, you do better. I don't think that it's, was bad at the beginning. It's just not where I am now" (1134). "Well, I like my education I like to continue learning ... so that way it's easy for me to teach children. If I'm more prepared, I'll be ready to teach them" (1022) "And the lady that taught it used to be a licensed child care provider in [a small local town]. And they showed a lot of videos of adults interacting with children and discuss the child's reactions to the different interactions. And you're really...I found it really helpful. Oh, I didn't realize that. You know, like a lot, I kept thinking, wow, I didn't realize that. Oh, that makes sense." (1126) "I was looking at in behavioral development wise. So, I just guide them. I guide them through, you know, save the child and I'll guide them in that direction, and I'll sit down with the psychologist and things like that." (1143) Right now, I'm going through, which I believe has changed my practice tremendously. Have you heard of conscious discipline? Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I am retaking this course. The first time I took it, I had three kids that were just, I couldn't figure out how to stop their behaviors." (1134) "I'm a person that I likes to learn, and those who don't want to learn then that they're the ones that get stuck they get in trouble because they don't care about their jobs what they're doing and like I care about the kids I care about their about their learning." (1022) "That time I remember I was taking a class on child behavior. So, that's the name of the class. So, in that time, I had a child who has a special behavior. So, I just put in practice everything what I learned in the class, and then I was able to handle that situation." (1022)

Table 21. (Continued)

Code: Characterizing the Professional Learning and Program Quality Framework

Subcode	Example quote
Professional learning and ECE practice	"When I have something difficult, if I have a special need, if I have family problems and stuff like that. I can have a question and answer it to educate myself." (1111) "I just signed up for everything because there are other people's kids. I was barely into my 20s ... That's a big responsibility." "I'm going to say right where I'm at because I am needed more here [running the program] than anywhere else." (1077) "I am so done with being educated. I'm just, I'm like, what can I do to get by to keep my MERIT [licensure maintenance training hours] numbers up." (1143)
ECE Practice and Program Quality	"I noticed [quality improvement] because I have an actual teaching environment and I'm getting a lot of feedback from my parents and they are always telling me how great that I make them feel and that I'm a really big help in certain ways and yeah, it's just recognition." (1077) "Well, I think if you're just looking at it from the outside view, hopefully they would notice the quality of interaction, maybe not the program itself just by Facebook posts because on my public page, hopefully they would notice the quality of interaction is all about the children. People that visit, like my Early Achievers coach or if someone else comes to visit, they see the quality." (1066) "It's just like when I think back to what I used to be, um, it's just kind of like evolved, um, you know, before I was just the basic care and needs and now it's like more mindful." (1091) "The quality has improved for me because I honestly, everybody knows that when they come, so there's always a waiting list to get into my space." (1143) "Quality, I would say I'm getting better and better. I mean, children pretty happy and parents happy. I would say that's the quality right there. I got a lot of referrals. I don't do advertising anymore." (1133)

Table 21. (Continued)

Code: Characterizing the Professional Learning and Program Quality Framework

Subcode	Example quote
ECE practice and program quality	"I think it gets…I like to think it gets better every year. You get more experience and a better perspective on what ultimately matters at the end of the day, [children] and better at supporting parents." (1143) "I feel like we're a child care family. For the most part, all of my clients know each other. And the kids all like, they're all bonded. And I don't have behavior issues. In the beginning, I used to have more behavior issues with kids. And I feel like through the classes and the trainings I've done, I'm more relaxed and more confident." (1126) "How much is it going to really help me more? And do I really want to spend that kind of money? …[It's] a lot of it's time, you know. And I'm getting older and it's just, I don't know if I really wanna go do anymore. I know it's pretty, it's pretty rough to go for your masters. So, I don't know if I really wanna do that or if I just wanna keep doing these on the side trainings and stuff like that every time I get a chance to get that extra bit, you know?" (1077) "I had one girl that was going to get her early ECE, and she was working for me and doing her practicum and everything. I was teaching her what they were teaching her. Like I knew all of it. You know, from over the years of taking all these training and, just working with the state and the union and all the different entities that I knew, I already knew it all, like what they were teaching her. I mean, I'm like 58 now and it's like I really don't want to go back to school." (1091) "I do not agree with that...I wouldn't say the reverse is true, but I would say some of my very best [teacher education candidates] had no education. And I just don't think it's practical to keep telling people they need more and more education when there's already a child care crisis and these people aren't going to be paid any more." (1136)

Table 21. (Continued)

Code: Characterizing the Professional Learning and Program Quality Framework

Subcode	Example quote
Program quality and program outcomes	"I would say the way I teach them is more specific, like I'm taking more time and then I just do some assessments to them just to identify which area they need more help. And then just, I will say recognize what are the areas they need, do I need to work with them." (1022) "Because I did, I was like, okay, we're going to do, we ended up getting super involved in assessments. And it's just such a time wasted. So, we were super involved in assessments. We're making these portfolios. I got staff making these portfolios." (1066) "You count while you're playing, you talk about different letters while you're playing. And then they instead of, maybe we do workbooks and worksheets and activities and things, but I'm play based because from through the classes I've taken, I've learned that kids learn more through play than through sitting down at the table and doing a workbook. So, we do some of that so that they're ready for it when they go to school." (1126) "That's the problem about this country, because elementary schools, they're not taking bilingual seriously." (1133) "I wanted to provide a safe, fun environment for kids. That was a big part of my motivation was that give kids, local kids what I didn't have." (1126) "I mean, in just general and like the social emotional health and helping children not be anxious." (1136) "So, like, making them know that they own the place. It's their comfort zone. It's their place to not have to be afraid or worry about anything." (1077) "I guess I just feel like I'm giving a really good memories. I feel good about like, I've always been aware that there any moment could be a memory, but now I feel like I have a better chance that any moment they remember is going to be a good memory." (1066)

Table 22.

Code: Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

Subcode	Example quote
Positive learning experiences situated within providers	"And as I told you, it's been a blessing. It's been a blessing because they're giving us support in every, everything. Like in my case, few years ago, I was not able to touch a computer because I didn't know anything about a computer." (1116) "So, my coach, I love her so much. She just, she has a patience and time to come to my house and teach me like. How to send an email, how to answer an email, how to be in a meeting and how to do all those good things. And they're simple things. And now it's like, oh my gosh, this is a blessing. And if we don't have Early Achievers in our life, I just can't imagine. If now everything is through the computer, I don't know how to see myself without all those learnings about technology." (1116) "It is not, I don't want to say... less cluttered, but I recognize how to teach now. I've been, I recognized it 10 years ago. So now I'm just, I'm flowing, I'm riding on a nice cruise, you know, it's easy" (1143). "[I learned to] be prepared with everything, have food ready in the fridge…when it's time for breakfast, just open the fridge." "That's what I learned with working with my coach. Oh, okay. That makes the transitions easy during the day for children and then also easy way to learn. If everything is organized, so it's more easy to introduce them". (1022) I've learned all these tricks and tips through these classes, and it's made a big difference. It's reduced my amount of stress and the amount of cleanup that I'm doing and the amount of organizing that I'm doing. Yeah, it's a big deal." (1126)

Table 22. (Continued)

Code: Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

Subcode	Example quote
Positive learning experiences, situated within provider involving their wellbeing	"And as I told you, it's been a blessing. It's been a blessing because they're giving us support in every, everything. Like in my case, few years ago, I was not able to touch a computer because I didn't know anything about a computer." (1116) "So, my coach, I love her so much. She just, she has a patience and time to come to my house and teach me like. How to send an email, how to answer an email, how to be in a meeting and how to do all those good things. And they're simple things. And now it's like, oh my gosh, this is a blessing. And if we don't have Early Achievers in our life, I just can't imagine. If now everything is through the computer, I don't know how to see myself without all those learnings about technology." (1116) "It is not, I don't want to say... less cluttered, but I recognize how to teach now. I've been, I recognized it 10 years ago. So now I'm just, I'm flowing, I'm riding on a nice cruise, you know, it's easy" (1143). "[I learned to] be prepared with everything, have food ready in the fridge…when it's time for breakfast, just open the fridge." "That's what I learned with working with my coach. Oh, okay. That makes the transitions easy during the day for children and then also easy way to learn. If everything is organized, so it's more easy to introduce them". (1022) I've learned all these tricks and tips through these classes, and it's made a big difference. It's reduced my amount of stress and the amount of cleanup that I'm doing and the amount of organizing that I'm doing. Yeah, it's a big deal." (1126)

Table 22. (Continued)

Code: Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

Subcode	Example quote
Negative learning experiences situated within a provider, involving their wellbeing	"I don't have the time. I don't have the preparation to do all of this. And, and then my kiddos are just a stress because I'm a stress because I have so much to do. I have to do my homework. I have to do classes. Some days I finish my class at nine in the late in the night and at nine. And next day I need to be ready to be with my kiddos. I cannot be happy because I feel tired." (1116) "A lot of it's time, you know. And I'm getting older and it's just, I don't know if I really wanna go do anymore. I know it's pretty, it's pretty rough to go for your masters. Yeah. It's rough. So I don't know if I really wanna do that." (1077) "Whereas with a lot of the Early Achievers coaches, they give you resources and things to read, but they don't actually give you suggestions. And I have dyslexia and I don't do a lot of reading. I like reading, but it takes me forever. And because I work so many hours I'll lay down and I'll try to read something and I fall asleep. And on the weekends, you know, I have my own life to live." (1126)

Table 22. (Continued)

Code: Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

Subcode	Example quote
Program improvement notions situated within providers, involving their wellbeing	"I went through a hate relationship with them and I absolutely love them." (1134) "Oh my gosh I was like so scared but the thing that I carry on with me is that the licensor that we got, she said, I don't want to see you guys just being there to stay still and just doing daycare. Think about keeping going, keeping going like on education, like just don't stay there. Just try move on, move on. And then, so I still carry that with me." (1002) "And the person, if I look back and see the [me] in the and then before, how she didn't want to do it. If I had a chance to go back to that time and say, 'Hey girl, you don't know why you're going to miss. So it's been a really a long way, but you know what, it feels good when you have achieved most of it, what you really wanted to finish. Cause I was, like I said, I was a dropout. I was a dropout and, and now I have a master's and I have to be thankful to what I do." (1002) "Through the classes and trainings I've done, I'm more relaxed and more confident." (1126) "The edu-caring, so even changing a diaper, like everything about that interaction, you're teaching the child about the world. And so sometimes I'll find adults want to rush through the caregiving tasks to get to the learning, but everything is the learning. And so that's another piece that's great." (1136)

Table 22. (Continued)

Code: Learning, Quality, and Wellbeing

Subcode	Example quote
Program improvement notions situated within providers, involving their wellbeing	"It's been hard for me. You know, always change is hard. That is human; sometimes we don't wanna put effort, you know? But with all the love and patience, my coach teaches me how to do better in my job because she told me, "Anyway you're doing this job, right? And you say you don't wanna change your job". I say, "No, I wanna do this until the end of my life". She was like, "Well, you learn how to do better". And she's always my fan. She's always told me like, "Oh my goodness, I'm so amazed how you deal with this!" And she's so helpful. She's so good." (1116) "That's where I got my bachelor's about dual language. So I wanted to learn more. And then my advisor and my teacher, they're like, [Provider], you should go for your master's. You should try. You could be good. And I was like, okay. So I went for my master's and I got it. I just graduated. It will be in March a year ago. And then they, and I'm still debating if I want to go for my PhD and I'm still debating it. So it's most likely that I may go for it, but it's because, you know, the learning doesn't end. It never ends." (1022)

Figures

Figure 1

Professional learning and program quality conceptual framework

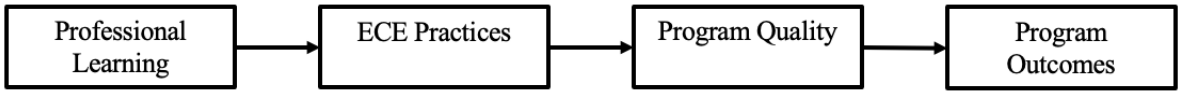


Figure 2

Self-Efficacy in FCC Providers' Professional Learning (Adapted from Bandura, 1978)

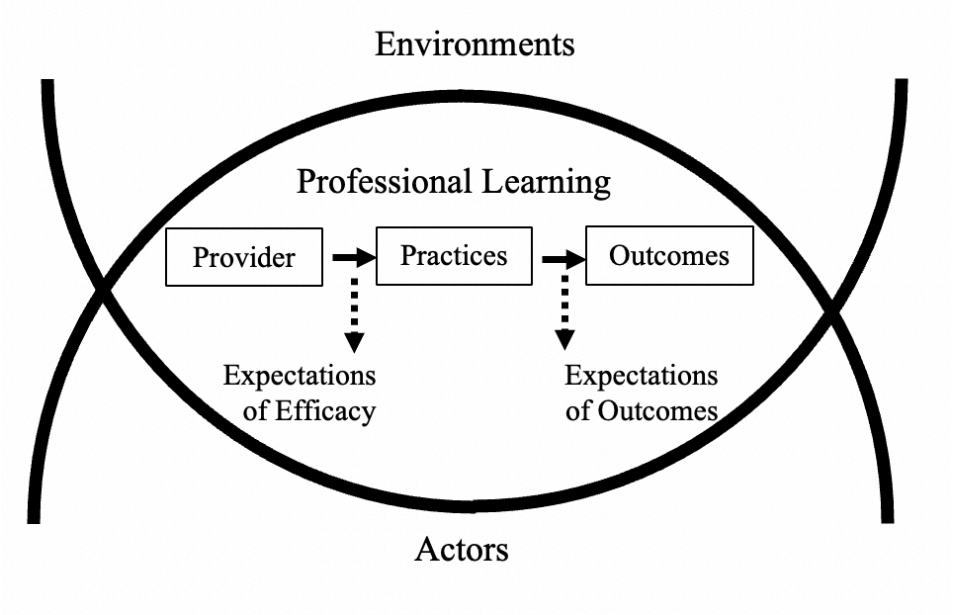
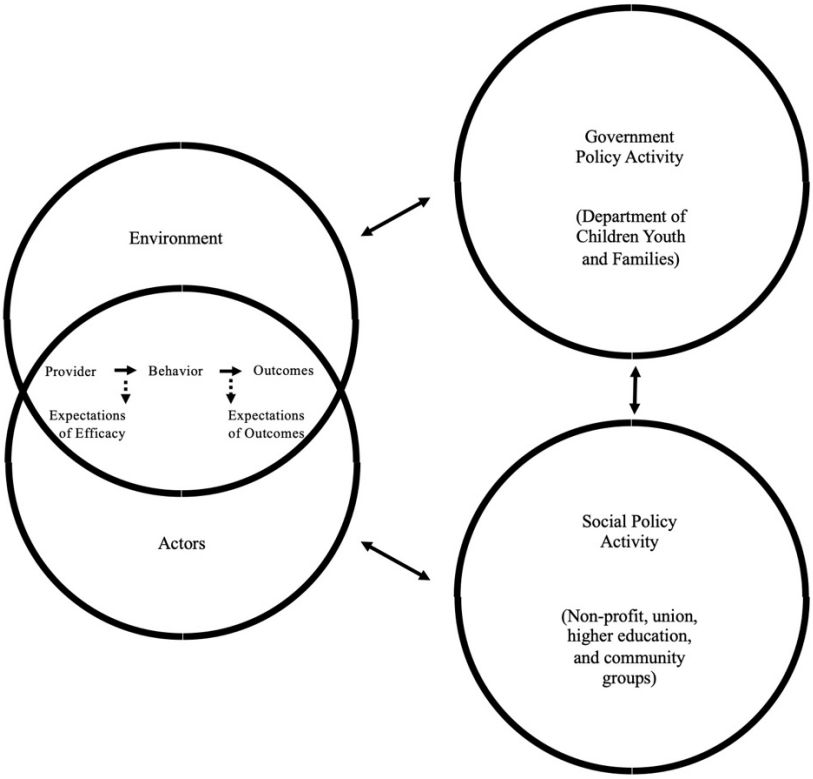


Figure 3

FCC Providers Professional Learning in the Wider ECE Policy Context (Adapted from Ripley, 2010)



Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Opening Question

1. How is it for you to be a family child care provider, at this time?

Background Experiences of Educator

2. Can you tell me about yourself, how did you come to be a family child care provider?

- 2.1 What motivated you run a licensed family child care program?
- 2.2 Did you spend time in a family child care program as a child? / Was someone in your family growing up an early childhood educator?
- 2.2 How long have you been a family child care provider?
- 2.3 Have any of your FCC program routines or practices changed since you began? In what ways?
- 2.4 Would you say the quality of your program has improved? [If yes: In what ways? What did it take?] [If no: clarify/summarize and move on]

3. How did you learn how to run a family child care program?

- 3.1 Could you tell me about some of your learning experiences earlier in your career?
- 3.2 How long, many, often?
- 3.3 What topics?
- 3.4. Where there any learning experiences that were particularly memorable? Why does it stand out?

4. Could you tell me about some of your more recent continuing education experiences focused on running your FCC program?

- 4.1 How long, many, often? What kinds? Costs involved?

- 4.2 How do you find out about and join access these opportunities?
- 4.3 What about Early Achievers, the state quality rating and improvement system, have you been involved?
    - Why, why not?
    - How long?
    - Stage in the process?
- 4.4 Have you changed anything about your program after any of these professional learning experiences? [If yes: could you explain what you changed and why?] [If no: Was the experience at all useful for you?]
    - Setting up the environment?
    - Interacting with children, helping them interact with each other?
    - Literacy?
    - Mathematical thinking?
    - Communication and collaboration with families?
    - What about running a business?
- 4.5 Is there anything that you learned in your professional learning classes that you cannot apply to your own program?
- 4.6 Are there any upcoming learning events that you are planning to or would like to attend? [If yes: Which? Why these? Are you looking forward it/them?] [If no: Do you anticipate participating in any more FCC learning experiences at all in the future? Why? Why not?]
- 4.7 What motivates you [if any experiences were mentioned] to continue learning about providing your FCC program?

Experiences with how Professional Learning is Offered

5. Will you talk about your interests and preferences in kinds of learning experiences?

- 5.1 What were some of the teaching strategies involved some of these learning experiences?
- 5.2 How would rate the value of these experiences for you?
- 5.3 What makes different ECE learning experiences valuable to you?

6. [If involved in Early Achievers] Could you tell me about your experiences Early Achievers?

- 6.1 What have been some of your memorable experiences?
- 6.2 Have you had experiences with coaching to improve your program?
    - What was the coaching like for you?
    - Did you think it helped you? Why? Why not?
- 6.3 Would you change anything about Early Achievers? Why?
    - Would you change anything about the quality standards?
    - What about the incentives offered?
    - What about the coaching program?
    - How about other professional learning resources?

7. Tell me what happened in your program as COVID-19 began and continued?

- Did you stay open?
- Did you have to learn anything new? What? How?