Supporting Quality and Longevity in Alberta's Family Day Home Educators:

A Qualitative Study

by

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Abstract

Quality and longevity are two integral components in early learning and childcare. However, for family day home educators working in isolated and decentralized environments, providing quality and longevity in childcare is easier said than done. The current research on early childhood education largely focuses on centre-based care, leaving a marked gap of knowledge on the strengths and challenges of educators working in family day homes, and the supports needed for them to thrive. The aim of this research is to help fill that gap. Employing a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, this qualitative study explores the strengths and challenges facing Alberta's contracted family day home educators, and the supports which enable them to offer quality and longevity in childcare. Five focus groups were conducted with twenty-six experienced educators and consultants working with licensed day homes in Alberta, and a directed approach to content analysis was used to analyze the data. The results of this study include educator strengths, challenges, and areas that can act as either strengths or challenges. Day home educator strengths include enjoying their work, networking and problem-solving, and advocacy. Challenges are guilt and worry leading to minimizing time off, day homes being treated the same as day cares, and misperceptions. Areas that can act as a strength or a challenge include relationships, inclusivity, and continuing education. This study's findings contribute to knowledge about day home educator strengths, challenges, and supports enabling them to offer quality and longevity in childcare. Consistent with a CBPR approach, the results of this research should prompt targeted practice and policy change for educators and their support systems, which will benefit children and families, and ultimately contribute to a stronger, more cohesive and healthy society.

Preface

This thesis proposal is composed of original work written entirely by Laura Woodman, at the University of Alberta, and under Dr. Adam Galovan's supervision. No previous publications have been made on any part of this thesis. The Research Ethics Board of the University of Alberta approved the research portion of this thesis, titled "Supporting Quality and Longevity in Alberta's Family Day Home Educators", project number Pro00110752, on August 6, 2021.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Family day home educators are an important sector of Alberta's early learning and childcare educators, caring for up to 7% of children using licensed childcare in the province (Government of Alberta, 2022b), and many more using unlicensed day homes (Breitkreuz & Colen, 2018). Unfortunately, this population is the least researched of all childcare providers. This has led to both significant gaps in our understanding of family day home educators' specific needs and to the creation of policies and supports which are mismatched to family day home educators' strengths and challenges (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011; Figuero & Wiley, 2016). As a result, family day home educators may struggle to provide the childcare required by Alberta families.

Day homes are a necessary part of a strong early learning and childcare system. Many families use day homes to meet their needs, out of choice or necessity (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). Family day homes can offer benefits not always possible in day care centres, including caring for mixed age groups, offering extended hours of care, and being able to provide more flexible and individualized childcare (Lanigan, 2011). While in certain areas—including most of the United States—day homes are unregulated and unlicensed, most provinces in Canada offer day homes the option to become licensed, either on their own or as part of a licensed agency (Prentice, 2016).

There is a strong need for more research on how day home educators can be enabled to offer quality early learning and care. Thus, this study is important to the field of early childhood education and family science in many ways. This research increases the body of knowledge on supporting quality and longevity in day home educators by using a qualitative approach to examine the factors influencing educator ability to provide quality early learning and care over an extended period. Focus groups allow for deep, rich descriptions of strengths and barriers

among day home educators, including those individuals with five or more years of front-line experience who are known to be community leaders. Including both day home educators and their main supports, agency consultants, allows for the comparison of lived experiences of outsider and insider understanding of support, and enable triangulation and comparison of internal and external supports.

The timing of this study is pivotal, because as this work was completed Alberta is actively planning to open 42,500 new licensed spaces across Alberta, and the majority of those are targeted to family day homes (Government of Alberta, 2022c). However, maintaining the current system, where few new day homes are opening despite the high demand for quality childcare, is not sustainable. Instead, the results of this research examining day home needs and abilities can be used to inform the creation of a system which is responsive to both the needs of existing day home educators and to those that the Government of Alberta hopes will begin offering childcare in the months and years to come.

The main goal of this study is to increase understanding and awareness of the strengths and challenges day home educators experience in offering high-quality care over an extended period of time. The aim of this study is to increase awareness of day home educator abilities and needs, influencing practice and policy change among day home educators, agencies, and other external influencers, including government licensing regulations, continuing education quality and accessibility, and societal perceptions of day homes. Ultimately, both strengthening areas that support educator ability to offer high-quality care and changing elements that pose challenges to family day home educators have the potential to boost the quality of life and wellbeing of educators, children, and families, which can bring benefits to the broader community (Porter et al., 2016; Porter & Bromer, 2019).

This qualitative study focuses on Alberta's needs by incorporating a community-based participatory research approach (CBPR; Israel et al., 2008) and using qualitative description methodology to address the current gap in the literature (Sandelowski, 2000). Consistent with a CBPR approach, this study began by engaging key stakeholders in the community and seeking input from major organizations and leaders in Alberta's childcare field (d'Alonzo, 2010). By meeting with key stakeholders, I was able design this research study to more fully respond to what is known and ascertain which factors are important to consider and the areas where knowledge is lacking. Consulting with key stakeholders in this way helped me to formulate two main research questions for this study:

1. What are the strengths and challenges impacting day home educator's ability to offer high-quality care over an extended period?

2. What supports are most effective in enabling educators to provide quality and stability in the family day home early learning and care environment?

Focus groups were held to determine family day home educators' specific challenges and strengths in providing early learning and childcare in Alberta. After conducting the focus groups, the data was analyzed using a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005),

Definition of Terms

Day Homes and Consultants

To provide clarity on the roles of people discussed in this study, I will begin by offering a brief description of the stakeholders involved. A family day home is a childcare setting where one educator cares for a small group of children in their own home (Government of Alberta, 2022d). In Alberta, day homes can operate privately and are referred to here as unlicensed day homes, or they can operate through a contract with a licensed day home agency. Previously,

terms such as "approved" or "accredited" day home were used, but currently the proper terminology for day homes working with a licensed day home agency is "contracted" (Government of Alberta, 2021c). Although childcare spaces in a contracted day home are licensed, the agency holds the license, not the day home itself (Government of Alberta, 2022d).

Day homes that operate with a licensed agency in Alberta must meet all licensing regulations, which improve safety, quality, and transparency for parents (Government of Alberta, 2022d). To ensure that those standards are met, and to offer support, the agency employs home visitors called consultants to conduct regular in-home visits and offer support, training, and other resources (Government of Alberta, 2021c). In contrast, unlicensed day homes are not mandated to meet any minimum qualifications, nor are they are monitored in any way.

However, both unlicensed and contracted day home educators in Alberta are required to ensure that they maintain a ratio with a maximum of six children in care, not including the educator's own children (Government of Alberta, 2022c). A day home that is contracted with an agency must also meet age requirements, where they can care for a maximum of two children under the age of two, and three children under the age of three (Government of Alberta, 2021c). Unlicensed day homes are not required to have limits on the ages of children in care. In Alberta's current system, there is no minimum educational requirement for either unlicensed or licensed home-based childcare.

In addition to describing the roles of the parties mentioned above, two main terms must be defined to provide clarity in this thesis. The importance of defining these terms stems from key stakeholder meetings, personal and professional conversations, and local and international research publications on family day homes (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta [AECEA], 2020; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Being specific about what the terms "educator," and

"training," mean, and detailing why those exact terms are used here, provides greater shared understanding of the topic at hand.

Educator

High-quality care extends far beyond basic custodial caregiving, and as such the term "educator" is the best choice to refer to any professional offering early learning and childcare, in accordance with recent recommendations from Albertan leaders (AECEA, 2020). The terms "childcare provider," "caregiver," or even just "babysitter" have been used to describe day home educators in daily conversation and academic papers, yet consciously choosing to use the term "educator" places early childhood staff in a strengths-based light indicative of their value and worth to our society (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Increasing knowledge about the importance of optimizing child development, and increased awareness of how much early childhood educators influence children's development, has created a movement for unifying and clarifying the terms used to describe these educators and the work that they do (Brain Story Certification, n.d.; Muttart Foundation, 2014). While there are many different types of educators—including those working in centre-based care, out of school care, and preschool—this thesis primarily addresses the unique population of family day home educators, who provide professional early learning and care for a small group of children in the educator's own home. As such the term "educator" is most often used as an abbreviation to describe this distinct group of childcare professionals.

Training

Continuing education, professional development, and training are all terms used to describe the workshops, conferences, or formal post-secondary courses an educator may receive. Putting one specific label on this topic has proven to be a contentious issue and was a subject of heated debate in meetings with key stakeholders. Some key stakeholders insisted that only the

more formal terms "continuing education" or "ongoing professional development" be used to portray educators as lifelong learners and underline the weaknesses of small workshops. They mentioned that the term "training" is problematic because it can be viewed as just basic skill provision.

It is vital to note that day home educators have many barriers to accessing any kind of training or education, therefore while individualized cohort learning with a specifically trained instructor is most valuable (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Jeon et al., 2018), meaningful continuing education of day home educators can occur in a variety of ways. Both skills and knowledge are critical components of educator ability to offer high-quality care (Beach, 2020). Thus, it is important not to exclude basic training like workshops or in-services as valuable components of family day home educators' continuing education.

Professional development has been primarily referred to in the literature as "training" (Helburn et al., 2012), though education, workshops, or simply "support(s)" are also terms frequently used (Bromer & Pick, 2012). With acknowledgement to the value in any training, and awareness that unique barriers may prevent day home educators from accessing daytime or formal post-secondary educational opportunities, this thesis intentionally interchanges terms of "professional development," "continuing education," and "training" to describe any skill or knowledge-based education received by family day home educators.

Importance of Quality and Longevity in Childcare

Importance of Quality

Many parents require childcare, and as young children are vulnerable and rapidly developing, quality childcare is highly impactful on later development (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Brain Story Certification, n.d.). When high-quality care is present, it supports optimal

developmental trajectories of children and the well-being of their families (Ang & Tabu, 2018; White et al., 2015). Positive outcomes of quality early learning and care may include improved cognitive functioning, language development, and socioemotional development (Perlman et al., 2016). When factors like education, support, or relationships are lacking, development is less optimally supported (Beach, 2020; Quality, Affordable and Healthy Child Care in Alberta, 2020). In worst-case scenarios, child neglect, abuse, or even death can occur (Hawkes, 2018).

Quality in childcare encompasses many factors and extends far beyond basic custodial requirements of keeping children safe and fed (AECEA, 2020). Quality childcare includes the environment and programming, both of which must be tailored to the children in care, responsive to their needs, and capable of meeting and scaffolding their developmental requirements (AECEA, 2020; Quality, Affordable and Healthy Child Care in Alberta, 2020). Quality care also includes educator qualifications, ratios, relationships, and educator working conditions (Beach, 2020; Perlman et al., 2017).

Six key variables have been found to predict childcare quality in family day homes: education, income, formal day home-specific training, networking through an organized system, age of the youngest child in care, and attitude toward providing care—with those who enjoy their work and intend to continue providing day home services providing higher quality care (Beach, 2020). Similarly, seven components have been identified as necessary for quality family day homes, including (1) protecting children's safety and wellbeing, (2) affectionate and supportive educators, (3) a collaborative and professional educator-parent relationship, (4) a setting that "looks and acts as a family day home" (Doherty, 2015, p. 158), (5) using the home and neighborhood for learning opportunities, (6) using mixed age groups as a learning opportunity, and (7) the educator successfully navigating challenges inherent to running a day home (Doherty,

2015). Experts agree that educator skills, stability, and knowledge are the most critical factors influencing quality of early learning and care (Beach, 2020).

Importance of Longevity in Childcare

Relationships that are established over time become stronger, more stable, and are characterized by trust and respect (Lanigan, 2011). In the family day home setting, longevity is not only important for children, but also for the creation of healthy relationships between parents and the educator, and between the educator and any external supports they may have, such as a licensing officer or someone offering continuing education (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Swartz et al., 2016). When those relationships grow strong and stable, increased trust and well-being can develop for educators, consultants, parents, and children (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Swartz, 2013).

While healthy relationships affect quality of life and well-being for parents, educators, and day home consultants, the stakes are much higher for rapidly developing children. In order for secure attachments that provide the basis of development for lifelong socioemotional health, children need to have their needs met in a consistent and timely manner by the same primary caregiver (Brain Story Certification, n.d.; Swartz, 2013). This allows for optimal brain development to occur, for a sense of safety to build, and for the creation of a worldview where children are seen as valuable, that their needs matter, and that people care about them and will help support and guide them (Brain Story Certification, n.d.).

When children experience high turnover of their primary caregivers, there is no time for those critical supportive relationships to develop. This is one of the main benefits of family day homes; a child can stay with the same educator for years, enabling healthy relationships to grow (Swarts, 2013). Indeed, this is one of the primary reasons that many parents seek out day homes over centre-based care, in which children change rooms and educators as they age (Ang & Tabu,

2018). In order for an educator to be able to provide quality care over time, they need support to navigate daily stressors and challenges that arise (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017). When that support is provided, both internally and externally, longevity in quality childcare can result (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016; White et al., 2015). This is highly beneficial for both the child and the educator (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). When support is lacking, unavailable, or insufficient, educator stress levels may rise (Jeon et al., 2018). This can decrease the quality of care offered, increase the rate of burnout and subsequent educator turn-over, or—in the worst-case scenario—contribute to circumstances of child neglect or abuse (Faulkner et al., 2016; Hawkes, 2018).

Stability is an integral part of quality care (Beach, 2020; Massing, 2008). However, many day home studies in the existent literature have not examined longevity as a part of quality. This could be because longevity in childcare is quite difficult to describe, and no clear consensus on a definition has yet been reached (Swartz, 2013). Longevity was referred to in a recent study as "long-term stability" (Swartz, 2013), which describes educator ability to provide consistent care over a lengthy period. In my personal practice, my personal goal with day home families was to accept a child into care when parents returned to work from parental leave, typically around age one, and to continue caring for that child until they entered school full-time in grade one, or about six years of age. This time span creates the possibility for a long-term relationship and secure attachment to build between educator and child, from infancy up to elementary school entry. Given this perspective, for the purposes of this thesis, longevity is described as a day home remaining open for a period of five years or longer.

Children need both quality and stability in order to thrive. Scholars have argued that family day home educators need to be better understood and supported in order to provide

consistent, high-quality care (Faulkner et al., 2016; Rosenthal et al., 2013; Swartz, 2013).

Exploring the supports and barriers experienced by day home educators in their work opens

important avenues for practice and policy change which have the potential to strongly increase

both quality and longevity of care in family day home settings.

The Current State of Childcare in Alberta

Providing an overview of the current state of childcare in this province provides

important contextual information to increase understanding of the specific historical and

locational influences on Alberta's family day home educators. I begin this section by describing

what is known about early childhood education in Alberta. Next, I outline recent changes in

childcare, including cancelling accreditation, updating licensing standards, the impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic, and the influx of new funding, including the federal-provincial childcare

agreement. I conclude by discussing current research and recommendations from leaders in the

field.

What is Known

Local studies on childcare in Alberta have created a large body of community-specific

knowledge, which adds relevance and depth to this study. This research explores how childcare

in Alberta is often a patchwork, relying on intense flexibility and accommodation to obtain

childcare due to the lack of affordable, available licensed spaces (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). Other

studies examine the vulnerabilities arising from unregulated care, where a lack of regulated

childcare spaces may expose children, their parents, and/or unregulated childcare providers to

challenging "physical, emotional, economic, legal and racial" stressors (Goodall et al., 2021, p.

247). Canadian parents with young children are often forced to rely on unregulated care,

resulting in both economic and non-economic costs in terms of relationships, care quality, and maternal workforce engagement (Breitkreuz & Colen, 2018; Colen & Breitkreuz, 2020).

Day homes are an important sector providing childcare in Alberta, and they are unique because they provide care for mixed age groups in a home-based setting (Government of Alberta, 2021a). Parents may seek out day homes for their ability to offer longer hours, more individualized care, a closer geographical location, or the ability to care for siblings together (Lanigan, 2011). In Alberta, there are two main categories of day homes: those that are contracted with a licensed day home agency, and unapproved or unlicensed day homes, who operate without licenses, government monitoring, or the support and supervision mandated by day home agencies (Government of Alberta, 2021b). Due to their decentralized nature and lack of formal system for monitoring enrolment in unlicensed day homes, there are no numbers available on how many Albertan families use unlicensed day homes to meet their childcare needs.

Contracted family day homes provide childcare for between 6% and 7.2% of children in licensed programs throughout the province (Edmonton Coalition for Early Learning and Childcare [ECELC], 2020; Government of Alberta, 2022b). Currently, there are approximately 55,072 licensed childcare spaces provided by Albertan family day homes (Government of Alberta, 2022b). In the past 13 years, the number of centre-based spaces in Alberta has increased significantly, while the number of contracted family day home spaces has remained relatively stagnant since 2008 (Beach, 2020). The growing gap between number of spots in institutional centre-based care and home-based family day homes is problematic due to the number of families preferring day home environments, and the number of families unable to access any

licensed childcare (Breitkreuz et al., 2019; Quality, Affordable and Healthy Child Care in Alberta, 2020).

Recent Changes

In order to fully understand the context that Alberta's family day home educators operate within, this section describes recent changes in the field. The removal of accreditation, updating of the childcare licensing act, the COVID-19 pandemic, and introduction of new funding have all heavily impacted day homes. While these changes are so recent that their effects are not yet fully known, in order to establish a holistic understanding of the contexts within which day home educators operate, each of these recent changes is described below.

Removal of Accreditation. Childcare in Alberta is rapidly changing, and the effects of recent changes in legislation remain to be seen. One highly impactful recent change was the sudden removal of Alberta's accreditation system on April 1, 2020 (Bench, 2020). The accreditation system was initially put into place to ensure that high-quality care standards, which go beyond merely keeping children safe, were in place, thereby promoting excellence in childcare (Government of Alberta, 2015). Due to the large amounts of time and staffing requirements needed to meet high standards of accreditation, the current Alberta government abolished accreditation entirely (Johnson, 2020). While some believe that removing accreditation would free up time and energy to devote more to the children rather than paperwork documenting the children and their program's experiences and learning, others fear that this sudden removal of quality care standards will result in more custodial caregiving and less quality care (Johnson, 2020). This large change was implemented within a very short time, and key stakeholders such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) were not consulted prior to the change being announced (Johnson, 2020).

Childcare Licensing Updated. Another major change happened when Alberta's childcare licensing regulations were modified on February 1, 2021 (Government of Alberta, 2021a). While many changes were made, only those directly impacting day home educators will be outlined here. Some changes were positive, such as changing the previous name "Act" to the new name, "Early Learning and Child Care Act" (hereafter referred to as the "new Act"), which reflects the importance of high-quality care and the role of educators as supporting critical development and early learning (Government of Alberta, 2021a). Other terms have also been helpfully updated, like changing from child discipline to child guidance, to reflect a strengths-based approach and similarity in language use across the sector (Government of Alberta, 2021a). Day home agencies are now licensed, rather than approved, offering clarity and similarity across childcare facilities; however, day homes themselves are still contracted with an agency and not individually licensed (Government of Alberta, 2021a).

The new Early Learning and Child Care Act requires day home agencies to support their educators through "training, consultation, information sharing, and problem-solving during home visits or other contacts" (Government of Alberta, 2021a, p. 19), by providing at least six opportunities per year for educators to do so while also decreasing educator isolation. However, there is great flexibility in how this is offered by individual agencies. As each agency can provide support differently—and some approaches are more beneficial than others—great disparity may result in the true number of targeted supports offered to educators contracted with different agencies.

Perhaps the largest change in the new Act is the increase in the number of children allowed in contracted day homes (Government of Alberta, 2022d). Previously, Alberta required day home educators to count their own children as part of the ratio, up to and including those age

12. This meant that an educator with children at home had significant limits on possible income, as their own child(ren) took up a space until they turned thirteen. The new change excluding an educator's own children from the ratio aligns unlicensed and contracted day homes, as prior to the introduction of the new Act, only unlicensed day homes could have six children in care plus their own (Government of Alberta, 2021a). While for some this is a welcome change, decreasing financial stress and increasing freedom to legally accommodate for their own children, others are concerned about how this will impact safety, supervision, and quality of care, as educator-child ratios are known to impact quality of care (Perlman et al., 2017).

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study was conducted during the fourth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (von Scheel, 2021). As a result, educators were experiencing increased workplace challenges and high stress levels (Crawford et al., 2021). Examples of how this specifically impacted family day home educators are detailed below. The largest changes to occur within contracted day homes during the pandemic were a significant drop in enrollment, severe restrictions on in-home monitoring and support, and an increase in the number of young children allowed in educator-child ratios. While some of these factors are resolving, others, like the change in ratios, are here to stay (Government of Alberta, 2021a). The effects of these changes largely remain to be seen.

First, the pandemic caused a 30% drop in day home enrollment, leading 23% of contracted day homes in Edmonton to close their doors, and more than half of Edmonton day home agencies to lay off one consultant (Fischer-Simmons & Buschmann, 2020). While the provincial government increased day home funding to help with decreased enrollment and increased workload caused by COVID-19, additional funding may be needed in order to ensure

that Alberta's contracted day homes remain available, affordable, and enabled to offer high-quality early learning and care (Fischer-Simmons & Buschmann, 2020).

During the pandemic, increased numbers of children in care due to changing regulations, combined with decreased monitoring caused by limitations on in-home visits, have raised concern about quality of care, supervision, and support (Fischer-Simmons, 2020). A return to in-person monitoring, and a crisis management plan for day homes going forward, are recommended to ensure that quality of care remains consistent even during such challenging times as the COVID-19 pandemic (Fischer-Simmons, 2020).

Influx of New Funding. As this study was progressing, two major shifts in funding for day homes occurred. First, the Alberta government equalized grant funding for educators working in day homes. While previously educators working in day homes could not receive the same grant funds for professional development that was available to any other educator working in a licensed program, day home educators can now receive up to $1,500 per year for post-secondary courses, and an additional $500 per year to attend workshops or conferences (Government of Alberta, 2022a). There is also new release time funding for all Alberta educators working with licensed childcare programs. This paid release time grant (Government of Alberta, 2022a) offers early childhood educators payments of up to $800 per course, and $17.50 per hour of workshops and conferences, up to 45 hours per year. This change in funding was implemented on September 1, 2021.

The second change to funding for Alberta's early childhood sector was announced on November 15, 2021, with a historic agreement between the federal and provincial government. This agreement seeks to lower costs for parents and increase access to licensed spaces across the province (Government of Alberta, 2022c). The agreement aims to lower childcare fees to $10 per

day by 2026, and to increase the number of licensed childcare spaces by 42,500. Importantly, the majority of the new licensed spaces being created are aimed at family day homes, because in areas that currently have little or no licensed childcare, populations are often too small to support entire day care centres (Government of Alberta, 2022c).

While these changes hold great promise in supporting Alberta's contracted family day home educators, they have caused intense increases in workload for day home agencies in the short-term. While the impact of these changes has not yet been fully documented, conversations in the field with educators and agency directors highlight a flurry of activity due to the resulting increase in administrative demands required to accommodate these changes. This led to increased work hours to connect existing contracted day homes with new grant funding, and a sudden surge of interest in unlicensed day homes applying to join a licensed agency. These increased work and time demands decreased capacity for some agencies or consultants to join in this study.

Research and Recommendations

The most current recommendations for Alberta are outlined in this section by exploring the recent Alberta-specific research. This includes educational requirements for educators, a position paper by the Muttart Foundation, and the death inquiry of a child in an unlicensed day home, which describes the extremes of what can happen when quality care is not supported and offers recommendations on how to avoid such tragedies from occurring (Hawkes, 2018).

Research Studies. A study by Massing (2008) of family day home educators in Alberta in 2007 revealed that many were concerned about income, recognition, long hours, and job stress. This study focused on recruitment and retention and found that 51.1% of contracted Alberta day home educators reported working more than 45 hours each week. Lack of breaks,

overtime, adult stimulation, and connection with other educators were also included as stressors. Need for support to attend personal appointments, and support regarding time to complete paperwork, was also mentioned, with educators noting:

> We are constantly being told to make time for ourselves so we don't burn out, but that is next to impossible when so much is expected and there is not even paid vacations…. This gets harder and harder with added expectations for training and paperwork. (Massing, 2008, p. 124)

Some educators found their agencies to be highly supportive, while others felt that they were overpaid or did not support educators, as the "parents are always right" (Massing, 2008, p. 125). Almost a third (29%) of day home agency consultants in this study had only worked for 1-2 years, while an additional 13% had worked for less than 12 months, equaling 42% of consultants having very little experience in the field. A quarter of consultants did not feel adequately prepared to consult on children with special needs, while 19% lacked preparation to support child guidance, routines, programming, or working with families.

While more than half of day home educators in this study reported feeling appreciated for their work, appreciation alone is not enough to support educators in the valuable work that they do. The top three changes called for by Massing (2008) to increase educator satisfaction were increased income, appreciation and recognition, and access to more education or training. Limiting time that children were allowed in care, being able to receive schooling through distance education, and access to benefits and in-home adult support were also mentioned as factors that would increase satisfaction.

Though this study was published over a decade ago, many of these same issues continue to challenge day home educators. For more than twenty years, a call to action has been made for

increased support through systematic and coordinated practice and policies (Doherty, 2000). A recent report by AECEA notes that many educators are working with "few opportunities for ongoing professional development … [and] low wages in challenging environments—often without health or disability benefits, paid vacations or pension plans, and often with little respect for the important work they do" (AECEA, 2020, p. 2). The difficulties in funding and accessing continuing education have led to low levels of child-care specific training among day home educators (AECEA, 2020). AECEA is now advocating for adequate working standards including paid preparation and sick time, ongoing opportunities for continuing education, the ability to engage in reflexive communities of practice, and more (Lysack, 2021). With initiatives for ten-dollar-a-day childcare underway, AECEA also is advocating for wage grids reflecting an educator's level of education (AECEA, 2020).

Educational Requirements. Much attention has been drawn to the topic of training and education that is required to ensure high capabilities in early learning and childcare educators. There is a large provincial movement towards increasing minimum standards for educators, with many stakeholders calling for requirements for educators to have both post-secondary education centered on early childhood and ongoing professional development, as these are the two major components of educators' qualifications (Lesoway, 2020). There is advocacy for both increasing minimum education requirements to require a two-year diploma and eventually a four-year degree and ensuring that post-secondary institutes have increased capacity to meet this need (along with the ability to reimburse tuition; Lysack, 2021). As mentioned, there is currently no requirement for any formal education for family day home educators working privately (unlicensed) or with a licensed agency (Government of Alberta, 2021c).

Currently, Alberta's educators meet UNICEF standards of 80% having specialized training, yet the goal of 50% of educators having three years or more of specialized education has not been met (Lesoway, 2020). However, many kinds of non-childcare-specific education, such as a diploma or degree in kinesiology, nursing, or rehabilitation, are currently permitted as educational equivalencies, lowering the number of educators that have actually received specialized training (Lesoway, 2020). It must be said that for family day home educators, increasing minimum standards is problematic. Early childcare in Alberta is already understaffed and undercompensated, and such a change may squeeze out many experienced, qualified educators or disincentivize capable educators from opening a day home. Improving qualifications, working conditions, and professional development supports are essential, yet the unique workplace challenges of family day home educators typically prevent them from accessing or qualifying for traditional supports (Lesoway, 2020). Additionally, this increased qualification requirement may not be realistic; in Canada, only program directors in Manitoba are required to hold a four-year degree (Lesoway, 2020). In contrast, many international countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and New Zealand have requirements for all educators to hold a minimum of a two-year diploma (Lesoway, 2020). The infrastructure, funding, and support has been established in those countries to allow this to occur, yet in Canada such critical infrastructures are not yet in place.

Core Competencies for Educators in Alberta. The Muttart Foundation, whose main goal is to support early learning and childcare, has outlined several core competencies for Albertan childcare educators, acknowledging that quality of care depends more than anything on the educator's ability to build strong relationships with children while providing a secure, responsive environment (Muttart Foundation, 2014). A report the Foundation released states that

educators must be reflexive practitioners, critically questioning and thinking about their work, and engaging with peers to build capacity (Muttart Foundation, 2014). Supports must be in place for this to happen, however; educators often experience poverty, depression, and poor health, all of which can impair their ability to provide quality care (Muttart Foundation, 2014).

In order to thrive, educators must be able to both link research to their practice and to engage in a democratic community of early learning and care (Muttart Foundation, 2014). This is also a key component of Flight, Alberta's early learning curriculum (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Knowledge of child development and diverse needs of children is critical yet must be tied to pedagogical practice (Muttart Foundation, 2014). Woven throughout this proposal of core competencies is the need for relationships; relationships between educators, between educators and their many supports, between children and educators, and between educators and families. These relationships tie together the elements influencing educator abilities and child development (Muttart Foundation, 2014). When these relationships are nurtured and supported over time, they can grow stronger, and strong relationships are a foundational aspect of educator ability to offer high-quality care (Perlman et al., 2016).

Death Inquiry. Recommendations for change in how childcare is supported in Alberta have arisen from one recent judicial report, the Woolfsmith Inquiry (2018). This report to the Minister of Justice is a public inquiry of the fatality of 22-month-old Mackenzy Woolfsmith. Mackenzy was in the care of an unlicensed family day home educator on May 2, 2012, when she suffered catastrophic injuries. Those injuries resulted in her death at 4:11 p.m. on May 3, 2012 (Hawkes, 2018). The death was ruled a homicide as a result of multiple blunt force injuries.

Mackenzy died "at the hands of her trusted caregiver" (Hawkes, 2018, p. 2), Ms. Jarosz. It will never be known exactly how she died; Jarosz states that the toddler fell down the stairs,

yet the medical examiner's report revealed many areas of bruising and evidence of "very forceful shaking … overwhelming evidence of homicide" (Hawkes, 2018, p. 5). Ms. Jarosz "had no formal training or certification in child care" (Hawkes, 2018, p. 4), beyond basic first aid certification. She suffered debilitating migraines, and stated that she needed support, but it was not available or accessible to her (Hawkes, 2018). Ms. Jarosz felt isolated, financially and personally stressed, and wished for formal government support and support from other day home educators, but she found applying for grants and other supports to be confusing and complex (Hawkes, 2018).

Several prior concerning incidents had occurred to children under Jarosz's care (Hawkes, 2018). She began working with a licensed agency, yet found that the agency offered little support; after an incident in September of 2010 when one child injured another, she left the agency and continued to offer care as an unlicensed day home (Hawkes, 2018). The next incidents occurred in February of 2011. The children in all three of these prior incidents required medical attention (Hawkes, 2018), and the incidents led to an official complaint and inquiry on behalf of Child and Family Services in February 2011 (Hawkes, 2018). Mackenzy's parents only knew about one of the incidents and stated that they would not have placed their daughter in Jarosz's care had they known about all of the incidences when children had suffered significant injuries while under her supervision (Hawkes, 2018).

This report outlined that younger children are at greater risk of intentional or accidental injury, and as such there needs to be a standardized reporting system for serious incidents in both licensed and unlicensed care centres (Hawkes, 2018). There is also a high need of support for caregivers, including more mental health supports and supports to reduce stress and isolation (Hawkes, 2018). Many recommendations were made as a result of this inquiry in the hopes of

preventing a future tragic death like that of Mackenzy Woolfsmith. Major recommendations include that children in both licensed and unlicensed care need to be protected from risk beyond merely regulating size but also increasing protective factors (Hawkes, 2018). Serious incidents need to be effectively tracked, timely interventions put in place, and parents and guardians should have the right to obtain information about serious incidences or significant injuries which have occurred in childcare settings. Finally, support and self-assessment tools should be "readily available and accessible" (Hawkes, 2018, p. 13), and mandatory help and support considered for all caregivers reported in critical incidents.

Summary

Recent policy changes illustrate how the face of childcare in Alberta is rapidly changing. Several studies have led to recommendations regarding the broader childcare field and educator characteristics, with some studies also including specifics of educators working in day home settings. From these reports, it is clear that educator ability to offer quality care hinges on issues of isolation and respect, support and relationships, and education. While much is yet to be learned about supporting high-quality care, one fact is certain: educators make an impact on children's lives, and when they have the strengths and supports they need, they are better able to offer consistent, high-quality care.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Qualitative research depends on data interpretation by human researchers, who by nature have their own history, experiences, and biases which may influence the way they make meaning of the world (Andres, 2012; Maxwell, 2012). As such, identifying researcher self-location and positionality is essential to rigor in qualitative studies (Holland et al., 2010). Through an examination of my own positionality as a researcher, I identify the personal lens through which I

approach this research. This section concludes with an exploration of the reflexivity I engaged in to ensure that researcher bias was minimal.

I adore working with young children and guiding their learning and development. My career working with children has spanned decades, beginning as a babysitter, continuing as a mother and then nanny, and culminating in running my own contracted day home for a decade. As a reflexive practitioner, I carefully noted my own personal strengths and challenges in offering high-quality care and dedicated my work to building on factors that enabled my abilities, while overcoming any challenges that presented themselves.

As a day home educator, my personal areas of strength included job enjoyment and satisfaction, connecting with peers and my consultant, and receiving continuing education part time. This was done as I progressed through my early learning diploma and then a bachelor's degree in Child and Youth Care, while continuing to run my day home full time. I also experienced many daunting challenges, including lack of knowledge and informed support, lack of respect from others in the field, and ongoing difficulties balancing my personal and work life while working out of my home.

I knew that day home educators' quality of life was integral to their ability to provide effective care (Jeon et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2016; Swartz et al., 2016), and that taking care of oneself enables one to take better care of others (Cothran et al., 2020; Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Merluzzi et al., 2011). However, I struggled mightily in those areas and found that many available trainings were inappropriate, uninformed, or irrelevant. I lacked support, and it impacted my ability to offer high-quality early learning and childcare. Others in my network shared similar experiences. Thus, I began to offer trainings myself at conferences and agency in-services, based on my experience and knowledge as a day home educator. This work, along with

the high-quality early care I offered children attending Sunshine Dayhome, led to me being awarded a Child Development Professional Award of Excellence in 2017.

Continuing this trajectory, I felt the need to further my education so that I could be a better advocate for the needs of family day home educators. It pained me to realize that, in order to support day home educators and become a powerful advocate on their behalf, I had to close my day home in order to further my education. While I miss playing with children all day, for family day home educators to be more successful, I believe change is required. From my experience, day home educators are told regularly things such as, "You can't have paid days off because you are self-employed." We are told, "Get used to having crayon on your walls." Day home educators are also asked to work long hours, with little to no breaks and low compensation (Faulkner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). They often neglect their own self-care, because closing for one day (or even a couple of hours) impacts their income and disappoints parents relying on their care. Yet, in order to provide excellent care for children, educators must also care for themselves (Nicholson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, family day home educators are routinely excluded in childcare research (Faulkner et al., 2016; You Bet We Still Care, 2013). Consistent with my experience, they are regularly overlooked as valuable educators, yet they provide licensed care for up to a third of Alberta's children (Sinha, 2014). Family day home educators are often disrespected, misunderstood, and alarmingly under-supported (Lanigan, 2011; Porter et al., 2016), which has implications for the rapidly developing, vulnerable children they care for. However, day home educators' needs matter, the quality of care they are enabled to offer matters, and the children they care for deeply matter as well. I began this study to learn more about the strengths and

challenges other educators face, and to gather empirical evidence to compel shifts in practice and policy to further enable day home educators' ability to succeed.

Positionality

Positionality informs the way that a researcher makes meaning of the topic of study, as personal experiences and beliefs can influence every stage of the research process (Maxwell, 2013). In qualitative research, describing researcher positionality is critical to uncover potential biases or interpretations of reality which may sway data interpretation (Maxwell, 2013). Here, I describe how my positionality may influence my analysis and conclusions.

The experiential knowledge and data that I bring to this study, as an award-winning family day home educator and leader in the field, can be used to enrich this research project in an approach with growing theoretical and philosophical support (Maxwell, 2012). As a researcher who has spent many years working in family day home settings and early learning and childcare support systems throughout Alberta, I have the benefit of prolonged engagement in this field. My background provides an in-depth understanding of normal and atypical day home educator experiences, strengths, and challenges (Mayan, 2016). Rather than separating my life from the research, I will use my background as "a major source of insights, hypotheses, and credibility checks" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 45).

I hold a position of privilege, as I am white, Canadian, and have completed a degree. I may be seen as having a position of power, because I am now in the role of researcher rather than in the role of day home educator. Also, research participants may be aware that I am a leader in the field and will be informed that as part of the research process that I will be disseminating the information from the study across the province. This can create a power imbalance between myself and the research participants, as I may be seen as an authority figure.

Reflexivity

It is clear that my experience has influenced the way that I think about both family day home educators' strengths and the challenges that they face in providing quality childcare. My insider perspective makes me uniquely qualified to explore this topic and investigate questions that may not occur to outsiders. Yet, in order to ensure rigour, I must remain aware of my own biases and be open to the experiences of others (Maxwell, 2013). To attain this, I have used reflexivity and critical subjectivity, to avoid researcher bias and imposing my own assumptions and values on this research (Maxwell, 2012).

Reflexivity has already led to two important discoveries. First, in a key stakeholder group, it was mentioned that many educators have English as a second language. I commented on how that must be a challenge and was deeply embarrassed and ashamed when one stakeholder said that it was also a strength. Having more than one language used in the day home allows for increased communication with parents and can be a leading factor in parents choosing a day home. Parents are known to seek out childcare that aligns with certain values, beliefs, or practices; a parent may choose a day home that practices a certain religion, speaks a certain language, or eats a certain diet. My self-image is that of a reflexive practitioner, aware of microaggressions and acculturation (Yearwood, 2013). I am aware of my own backpack of white privilege (McIntosh, 1995). When this was said, I realized how much I still have to grow.

However, the point of this study is to reveal that which is currently unknown. As a Caucasian English-speaking woman living in the country that I was raised in, I would not immediately have knowledge of how speaking a second language would both challenge and strengthen educator abilities. Reflexivity gave me the grace to accept this new knowledge, reorient myself towards others, and strengthen my commitment to be a lifelong learner.

The other critical piece that reflexivity brought up for me was the alarming exclusion of job satisfaction in my original drafts. I ran my day home because I loved it. This is also a theme that arose repeatedly in the literature (see Chapter 2). Yet, I was so focused on laying out strengths and challenges, internal and external supports, that I completely missed including perhaps the biggest support of all: how much people can love running a family day home. Reflexivity allowed me to open my tight lens on barriers and supports, to allow for the critical inclusion of this integral topic—educator job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation.

Finally, my personality includes a fiery passion for supporting educators and children and outrage over the continuing inequalities and difficulties that day home educators face. I am highly aware of the need to temper my passion and coolly discuss recommendations for change, rather than loudly mandate, "Things MUST change!". This is important both to act professionally, and to ensure that the results of this study are acted upon.

The Present Study

My personal experiences in the field, along with a review of the literature and input from key stakeholders, have informed the creation of this qualitative study on Alberta's family day home educators. This research uses a community-based participatory approach and qualitative description methodology to guide the study's process. The purpose of this research is to help to fill in the existent gap in the literature and provide direction for practice and policy to strengthen day home educator's ability to offer quality and longevity in childcare.

This study explores the strengths and challenges impacting contracted family day home educator's ability to offer quality care over an extended period of time. With limited research specifically focused on family day homes, the goal for this study is to help fill in the current gap in the literature on supporting quality in day homes, and to provide information which can

inform practice and policy change to strengthen day home educator ability to offer consistent, high-quality early learning and care. As discussed in Chapter 3, focus groups provided rich, qualitative data to uncover the major strengths and challenges educators working in family day homes face. Working with input from key stakeholders increased the strength and credibility of the study design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), while also ensuring that it was community-informed and specific to Albertan family day home educators.

Significance

This research is most significant to educators working as contracted day homes in Alberta, though results may also apply to strategies for promoting quality of care on a federal level, and may be significant for unlicensed day homes as well. Consistent with a community-based participatory research approach which is to generate and mobilize knowledge for practice and policy change, I will be sharing information from this study with the Ministry of Children's Services, post-secondary institutes offering early learning education, day home agencies, and educators themselves. The purpose of this dissemination is increasing knowledge of which factors support or diminish educator ability to offer quality early learning and care, allowing for the creation of targeted interventions that can enable day home educators to offer quality and longevity of childcare in day home settings.

In reviewing the extant literature, this study also provides information on how frameworks for success have been established in other geographical areas. It addresses concerns and areas for improvement brought up by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA), the Alberta Resource Center for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE), the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC), and in the death inquiry of Mackenzy Woolfsmith (Hawkes, 2018). This study will increase knowledge of the daily realities of day

home educators, a topic frequently excluded in empirical research (Faulkner et al., 2016; You Bet We Still Care, 2013). The timing for this study coincides with pivotal changes to Alberta day home standards and increased funding from the federal government (Government of Alberta, 2021a; Government of Canada, 2021). As such, it will be valuable for policymakers when making changes to expectations and supports for family day home educators.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Quality childcare plays a vital role in today's society. High-quality care supports optimal child development, enables parents to work consistently and reliably, and promotes optimal societal functioning in a variety of ways (Act, 2020). While much research has been done on defining and promoting quality care, considerably less attention has been paid to the factors influencing educator ability to offer such high-quality care over the long-term (Swartz et al., 2016). Additionally, though day homes provide licensed care for up to 7% of children in Alberta, these educators are routinely excluded from childcare research (Lanigan, 2011; Government of Alberta, 2022b). Yet, supporting family day home educator quality and longevity is critical for the health and well-being of children, families, and day home educators themselves (Faulkner et al., 2016; Sissol et al., 2019).

Family day home educators are a complex group to study because of the many contexts that surround them; they are early childhood educators, and also business owners. Not only do they own and run their businesses alone, they do so out of the family home – frequently while caring for their own children. As such, the factors influencing the quality of care they are able to provide are strongly interconnected, and difficult to dissect into individual categories. In this literature review, those challenges are addressed by first detailing the main points of what is known in the existent literature. Then, two frameworks for success used in the United States are briefly reviewed to offer examples of evidence-based support systems known to aid family day home educators and their support systems in providing long term high-quality care. Finally, two key theoretical frameworks are introduced to contextualize the factors influencing educator ability to offer quality care. By exploring what is known about family day home educator

quality, and describing gaps in the literature, this review seeks to increase understanding of this unique group of educators and provide directions for future research.

Isolation of Day Home Educators

By definition, day home educators are isolated – they work on their own, often for long hours, with small groups of young children. As such, day home educators frequently face complex challenges with little or no support (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011). These educators are also isolated or excluded from their peers, lacking the advantage of working alongside knowledgeable and supportive colleagues (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). This leaves them with no opportunity to take a real break, as there is no back-up care available as there would be in a larger, centre-based childcare setting (Swartz, 2013). Additionally, educators have no colleagues present that they can turn to in order to problem solve, brainstorm, or receive in-the-moment support from (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Swartz et al., 2016).

Day home educators are isolated not only from their peers, but also from external resources and supports. Many of the resources available to early childcare educators in other settings are inaccessible to day homes, or unavailable (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017). For example, large daycare centres may bring in pediatric occupational therapists or speech pathologists to regularly work with children or offer training to staff. Daycares typically have a central office with resources including educator-specific books and materials to enhance childcare, and while day home agencies may offer such items they are located at an external site where educators rarely visit. Finally, other training opportunities may only be available to large groups, excluding lone day home educators. Support is difficult to obtain and is known to be lacking in this population (Faulkner et al., 2016). Isolation can cause loneliness and depression,

and being isolated from peers, resources, and supports is a factor known to increase the stress levels and challenges facing day home educators (Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Jeon et al., 2018).

Finally, the isolated and decentralized nature of day homes often leads them to be systematically excluded from early childhood education research. As one Canadian study simply stated, "The survey sample did not include family child care providers" (You bet we still care, 2013, p. 3). Another study asserted that "[T]hough many children are in family child care at any given time, these sites remain the least researched of child care types" (Figueroa & Wiley, 2016, p.1). This ongoing exclusion from their peers and, by extension, often systematic exclusion from childcare research, has largely omitted knowledge of day home educators' experience from the existent body of knowledge in the early childhood education field (Figuero & Wiley, 2016; Swartz et al., 2016). This has led to a lack of awareness about the unique needs and challenges facing day home educators (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Bromer & Bibbs, 2011).

Lack of attention to or knowledge of the abilities and needs of day home educators by policy makers may contribute to the challenges educators face in their work, and decrease their ability to offer consistent, high-quality care (Lindsay et al., 2012). For example, licensed day homes may be mandated to meet the exact same requirements of a licensed childcare centre, yet in a day home there is no support staff filing daily paperwork, preparing meals, or cleaning. This could result in unreasonably high expectations placed on day home educators. If policy makers are not aware of the lack of breaks day home educators can take, this could explain a lack of policy supporting educator ability to maintain wellbeing. This highlights why so many previous studies have emphasized the need for policymakers and day home educator support staff to be informed about their daily realities, abilities, and needs (Abell et al., 2014; Bromer & Pick, 2012; Faulkner et al., 2016). Doherty (2015) summarizes this saying, "Successful development and

implementation of tools to support and enhance family childcare quality depends on respecting its uniqueness, understanding what providing family child care entails and acknowledging its opportunities as well as the challenges faced." (p. 164).

While isolation is challenging, it can be lessened when educators are connected to support networks (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011). Educators that have support, in the form of family, friends, or early childcare professionals, experience greater well-being and less stress (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). In addition, networking with others allows for educators to collaborate together, brainstorming and solving problems unique to day home environments (Doherty, 2015). As such, increasing opportunities to network, and increasing availability of day home-specific support networks, are recommended to enable educators to maintain their well-being while offering quality early learning and care (Bromer & Pick, 2012).

Importance of Respect

In addition to isolation, respect for day home educators is mentioned frequently in the literature. Educators who are treated with respect have higher self-esteem, a sense of self-worth, and motivation to offer high-quality care (Forry et al., 2013; Swartz et. al., 2016). This also impacts how they are perceived by others; if they are viewed as valuable educators, they are seen as important and influential in the lives of children, and "worthy of distinct professional development and respect" (Lanigan, 2011, p. 399). If, however, they are viewed as mere babysitters, day home educators may be treated with a lack of respect, and a lack of support (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2016).

This lack of respect may also interact with family day home educators' isolation and negatively affect quality of care. Small components of relationships, like being greeted with a smile and thanked or praised for a job well done, grow in importance as those moments build up

over time (Lanigan, 2011; Tudge et al., 2009). The way parents and consultants treat educators has a concentrated impact in day homes, where no other adults are present during the day. For educators who are single and living alone, such interactions may form the majority of their relational experiences.

Relationships and interactions that day home educators have with parents, consultants or other support staff, and themselves build their sense of being respected (Swartz, 2013; Swartz et al., 2016). When respect is present, quality of care is optimized (Lanigan, 2011). As day home educators are isolated, the relational interactions they have in daily conversations with parents, and monthly visits from agency consultants, increases in importance. This illustrates the idea from social constructionism that individuals create an image of the self in relationship to others (Burr, 2015). Thus, how an educator is treated strongly influences self-worth and impacts well-being (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017).

Importantly, the respect an educator has for themselves also influences quality of care. If they respect themselves and their time, they will be more likely to establish boundaries and routines that enable opportunities for self-care, a healthy work-life balance, and long-term stability in offering high-quality care (Lanigan, 2011; Swartz, 2013). Indeed, the research suggests that when educators view themselves as "just babysitting," they may have little incentive to offer quality care, or to seek out continuing education opportunities or support (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2016).

Impact of Support on Day Home Educators

Building on the idea of respect, early childhood educators working in day home settings need support just as much as educators in any other setting. Because of their isolation and the dual roles they possess as a business owner and educator, however, supports are frequently

misaligned, lagging, or lacking altogether (Jeon et al., 2018; Loewenberg, 2016). Support for day home educators exists on many levels and is a complex and intersecting topic, yet due to the gap of knowledge about day home educator abilities and needs, existing supports may be inadequate. The main known supports for day home educators are individuals like peers, consultants, and parents, policies from government and agencies, professional development opportunities, and their own ability to support themselves.

Peer and Consultant Support

Peer support is frequently cited as an important indicator of quality (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Bromer & Bibbs, 2011; Bromer & Pick, 2012). Peers who work in day home settings are uniquely positioned to offer targeted collaboration and problem-solving, because they know what it is like to work in the specific setting of a family day home (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Swartz, 2013). Lack of social supports like peers are known stressors for day home educators (Faulkner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). Increasing opportunities for connection, such as formal professional development or informal meetups at community playgrounds or play groups, are factors shown to decrease isolation and stress (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Lanigan, 2011; Swartz, 2013).

Day home consultants and parents are the other individuals whose support strongly influences educator ability to offer quality care (Jeon et al., 2018; Swartz, 2013). When educators are well-supported, valued, appreciated, and thanked for the important work they do, they are enabled to do their job well (Faulkner et al., 2016). Opportunities for regular support from agency staff are influential in the quality of care offered in day homes (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). Ideally, these supports are strengths- and relationship-based, culturally relevant, and delivered competently (Bromer & Pick, 2012). Yet frequently support staff is inexperienced and untrained on the unique working conditions and challenges inherent in day home settings (Lanigan, 2011).

This is a big issue when their job is working with a day home agency. Most commonly, support staff have no specific training or experience working with day homes; one recent study mentioned that most day home support staff had only been working for 1-5 years (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). As a result, they lack knowledge and experience of specific educator needs, and how those needs can best be met in the day home setting.

Interestingly, certain consultant duties like monitoring for safety and health or licensing regulations do not increase quality of care (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011; Doherty, 2015). In contrast, offering individualized support and training, through a continual relationship established over time, is shown to greatly increase both quality of care offered and job satisfaction for educators (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Jeon et al., 2018). Based on this information, ensuring that consultants treat educators with respect and support them with appropriate resources is a critical component enabling high-quality care (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017).

Finally, continuity of the relationship between consultant and educator is ideal because strong trust-based relationships take time to develop (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Cortes & Hallen, 2014). Support is best offered relationally over time (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Porter et al., 2016). Therefore, decreasing educator turnover to allow time for strong educator-parent relationships to form, and decreasing consultant turnover, so the educator-consultant relationship can become established, is an important aspect of supporting strength and quality (Swartz, 2013; Swartz et al., 2016).

Policies for Day Homes

Policies created by governments and day home agencies have the power to alter supports which are accessible to educators. Ideally this would involve increasing supports known to boost quality, removing supports shown to have no impact, and adding supports which are absent in

the current system. Ensuring that time and energy are allocated to appropriate resources and professional development for day home educators is critical (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). Yet currently these influential external supports are often absent or lacking, and there continues to be a large divide in the quality and availability of supports provided for day home educators compared to those working in childcare centres.

Importantly, one of Alberta's most significant funding inequalities has now been equalized. Grant funding for continuing education has been enabled for all educators working in licensed programs in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2022a). This has increased educator ability to access continuing education, thus increasing the quality of care they are enabled to offer (Lowenberg, 2016). However, continuing education that is primarily available frequently lacks a day home focus (Lanigan, 2011), and there are still many other barriers reducing day home educator ability to access continuing education such as lack of childcare, transportation, or ability to attend workday training opportunities (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011).

Unfortunately, under the new federal-provincial childcare agreement, contracted day homes are significantly under-supported. Licensed day home spaces receive 55% less funding per space than day cares (Affordability rates, 2021). This is strikingly disproportionate and perpetuates hierarchies of power and value that continue to see family day homes as less-than (Faulkner et al., 2016).

Policies from government which impacts educators include requirements for agencies to meet certain safety and quality standards (Province of Alberta, 2021). Although day home agencies must enact government policies and safety requirements, there is great flexibility in the structure that guides these processes (Government of Alberta, 2021). Policies can be created and implemented in ways that enhance or act as barriers in educator ability to offer quality care.

Health and wellness policies, for example, can be structured in a way that they support educator and child wellbeing, like requiring children with a fever or new unexplained rash to stay home to avoid potentially infecting others. In contrast, health policies can also be structured with a one-size-fits all approach, where children with lice and live nits are permitted to attend contracted day homes because although they are a highly contagious parasite, lice do not generally have a detrimental impact on child health. The presence of lice and untreated nits do, however, impact educator work and stress loads, and unlike in centre-based care, in a day home setting the educator does not have the luxury of leaving the workplace and returning to a clean, uncontaminated home environment – the work and home setting is one and the same.

Recommendations for policies in the existent literature includes ongoing support such as increasing consultant visits, providing opportunities for provider networking and support, and having clear expectations for participation from day home educators (Abell et al., 2014; Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Doherty, 2015). Finally, policies should recognize the need for different supports to meet diverse needs and acknowledge that specialized training and expertise is needed by support staff offering continuing education or consultation services (Bromer & Pick, 2012). Unfortunately, there is a lack of information surrounding family day home practices and policies, which limits possibilities for effective policy changes to be made (Sissol et al., 2019).

Professional Development

Professional development opportunities are critical for enabling high-quality care. Unfortunately, the training and education that is offered to family day home educators are overwhelmingly substandard. Often training is not even accessible, because it is offered in far-away locations requiring extensive travel, or during times when an educator is not able to attend (Abell et al., 2014). Barriers to training include lack of transportation, and also lack of childcare

if the educator has children of their own (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011; Bromer & Pick, 2012). Also, most day home educators do not have back-up caregivers, and as such are unable to attend training that is only offered during working hours (Abell et al., 2014). Parents need childcare so they can attend work, and an educator taking any time off is a serious inconvenience. As educators are self-employed, taking time off during the day typically involves a loss of income. This is problematic because their income is already low, and frequently training needs to be paid for yet is poorly funded (Helburn et al., 2012; Swartz et al., 2016). Thus, not only is an educator losing money, but they must also spend additional money to get the training needed to increase quality care.

Resources are another way that educators can be supported in terms of continuing education (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011). Resources are available through many different venues and range from being offered freely to being highly expensive, or even inaccessible to day home educators (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017). Moreover, day home educators in Alberta may not be aware of what resources are available to them. The decentralized nature of day home educators can lead to a lack of resources, a lack of knowledge about helpful community resources, or inaccessible resources due to the time or location they are held (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017). There may also be barriers like lack of childcare, transportation, or funds (Bromer & Weaver, 2016).

In addition to the above challenges, when an educator is able to access training or resources, they are often offered in a way that does not meet day home needs (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). For example, day home educators cannot offer one-on-one time with children, or if they do, it comes at the expense of a much-needed break, should an educator choose to provide individualized support to a child while the younger ones are napping, as these educators work

alone and offer care to mixed age groups (Lanigan, 2011). Therefore, in a training where open-ended access to art materials is encouraged, these challenges must be addressed, or the training will be difficult or impossible to implement; marker caps, pom poms, or other small art materials pose choking hazards for the youngest children in care.

Continuing education is often offered in the absence of understanding of these day home challenges, and those offering training are frequently inexperienced or lacking in knowledge of what running a day home is really like (Lanigan, 2011). For continuing education to be useful, it must be offered by experienced educators who are themselves specifically trained about day home realities (Abell et al., 2014). Training must be individualized, for each educator will have their own strengths and areas for improvement (Porter & Bromer, 2019). This can easily be done if agencies allow time for consultants to prioritize educator support during home visits, rather than focusing on "monthly home visits to check for licensing violations and/or discuss health and safety information" which are shown to have no association with program quality (Doherty, 2015, p. 163).

Offering a one-size-fits-all approach to day home educator training is not effective or targeted in supporting them. Finally, training and education needs to be relational, as one-off "pop-up" workshops where an instructor parachutes in, gives a one-hour training and a handout, and then leaves the community, are less beneficial in enabling educator ability to offer quality care (Porter et al., 2016). In contrast, relational training, where peers can collaborate together and relationships between educators and their support staff have time to develop and grow strong, is repeatedly shown as highly influential in promoting quality care (Bromer & Pick, 2012). This engagement in a community of practice is also highly lauded in *Flight*, Alberta's early learning and care framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

Internal Practices for Support

Much of the support mentioned so far has been external, implicating parents and consultants, government and agency policies, and continuing education opportunities. However, as day home educators work alone, some of the most important supports must come from within. It is well-established that unless a person takes good care of themselves, they will not be able to provide good care for others (Park, 2018; Park et al., 2020). Educator self-care, which includes making time for breaks, seeking out support, and establishing healthy routines and boundaries, is critical for their health and ability to provide high-quality childcare (Faulkner et al., 2016; Swartz, 2013). Taking regular breaks and time off for vacations, along with seeking support, increases positive mental health and well-being (Jeon et al., 2018). Creating and sustaining routines, which ensure that time is spent wisely and breaks are built in, increases long-term stability of care (Swartz, 2013). Having firm and clear boundaries, on issues like work-life balance, the amount of time care is provided, and with parent expectations, is critical (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Jeon et al., 2018). When government and agency policy support is lacking, internal day home policies can be created and upheld to ensure that a solid, effective support structure is in place.

However, policy and culture which inform whether an educator is treated with respect can impact how day home educators perceive the right to establish some of these internal supports. Day home educators, anecdotally, are sometimes not even aware that they have the capability to form their own boundaries and policies on issues such as nap time, vacation time, and more. Connecting with other educators and becoming educated about their own worth and value as described elsewhere in this chapter, can increase educator's perceptions of their rights and increase their ability to identify and then create supportive internal policies.

Support for early childhood educators is important. It allows for the provision of quality care and also increases educator ability and well-being (Porter et al., 2016). For isolated day home educators and the children they are caring for, this is even more critical than for educators in centre-based settings. Low mood and negative affect, along with stress and depression, are known to decrease the quality of care that an educator can offer (Forry et al., 2013; Jeon et al., 2014). If an educator is experiencing low mood and high stress, educator responsivity to children may decrease and result in children's needs being unnoticed or ignored (Bridgett et al., 2013). Stress and depression can also cause a caregiver to react harshly and punitively with children (Jeon et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2016). Both decreased educator responsiveness and increased harsh, punitive treatment of children impair relationship quality between educators and children, can hinder optimal socioemotional development and the establishment of secure attachment (Jeon et al., 2018). In a larger childcare centre, the presence of other educators can buffer these impacts. Yet, in a family day home, no other educator is present. For the health and well-being of both children and their educators, self-care and supports like those established above must be in place.

Perhaps the most influential internal support is educator job satisfaction. This topic arose frequently in the literature, where there was mention of educators loving their jobs, caring about the children, and feeling satisfied in their role (Cortes & Hallen, 2014; Faulkner et al., 2016). The intrinsic motivation linked with a desire to do their job well is a large driving force in educator's inclination to provide high-quality care (Forry et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2016). Specific elements known to cause educator job satisfaction are relationships with parents, relationships with children, and the socialization and satisfaction that come with being able to engage in a community of practice (Cortes & Hallen, 2014; Faulkner et al., 2016; Lanigan,

2011). Anecdotally, many other factors also contribute to educator job satisfaction, such as playing with children, being creative, going outside, freedom and flexibility in curriculum planning and routines, and the ability to care for your own children in your own home while offering meaningful work that enhances child development and optimal outcomes.

Unique Needs of Family Day Home Educators

Early childhood educators working in family day home settings are unique, as they care for groups of children in mixed ages out of their family homes by themselves. As such, they face workplace challenges that are not experienced by those working in larger centre-based organizations. Specific challenges of managing time, balancing roles, and low wages and funding are frequently cited in the existent literature, and due to the isolated nature of their work, these challenges often exacerbate one another, causing increased risk of mental health or stress issues (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Faulkner et al., 2016). Unfortunately, lack of knowledge and understanding of these challenges, and lack of awareness about how to help day home educators to promote quality are also heavily referenced (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Figuero & Wiley, 2016; Jeon et al., 2018).

Managing Time: Long Hours and Many Tasks

Lack of time is a challenge also frequently cited in day home studies (Dev et al., 2020; Lanigan, 2011). Educators often work long hours and may feel pressured to stay open longer because of parental work demands (Jeon et al., 2018). Lack of time to prepare nourishing food, and time to arrange the environment and ensure safety, are issues that directly impact the quality of care offered (Dev et al., 2020; Sisson et al., 2019; Zbarskaya, 2012). Additionally, because educators work out of their own homes, they are immersed in their work environments even after formal business hours end. As a result, many day home tasks, from tidying to food preparation,

financial management, and more, spill over into hours when children are not actually in care. This increases already-long working hours, while decreasing time for self-care, family, and simple relaxation (Gerstenblatt et. Al, 2014). This means that to increase quality of care and educator wellbeing, routines and boundaries must be in place (Jeon et al., 2018). Routines ensure that time is allocated for each essential task—from safety proofing and cleaning the environment, to ensuring that breaks and self-care are built into daily routines (Swartz, 2013). Using routines has been shown to markedly increase quality of care and educator wellbeing (Swartz, 2013).

Boundaries around time are also important. For example, certain activities, like menu or activity planning, food preparation, and tidying not only can be completed during hours, but if those activities are done with the children, they can actually increase quality care. For example, program planning based on children's interests and input, also known as an emergent curriculum, is a marker of responsive care and encouraged in Alberta's early learning curriculum, Flight (Makovichuk et al., 2014).

Other activities, like vacuuming, grocery shopping, or mowing the lawn are essential but dangerous or inappropriate to include within hours that children are actively being cared. Careful choice around when day home duties happen, including duties that can be conducted either in or outside of formal operating hours (e.g., advertising and having interviews with new families, documenting children's learning, financial management) can create boundaries around time which limit already long working hours, while protecting essential family and personal time (Swartz, 2013). These ways of maintaining a healthy work-life balance both promote quality in care, and ongoing educator wellbeing (Porter et al., 2016).

Balancing Roles and Maintaining Professional Boundaries

Educators serve multiple roles, as both owners and operators of a childcare centre. These roles also include parental advisor, child development expert, administrator, CEO, chef, childcare worker, or even second parent (Gerstenblatt et. al, 2014). If an educator has children of her own, she must additionally balance parenting and childcare duties throughout the day (Swartz, 2013). Viewing the family day home educator holistically introduces even more roles which require balancing. An educator must delineate work life as separate from home life, establish and maintain boundaries for parents as clients and not friends, and determine which family needs should or should not be met during the workday (Faulkner et al., 2016). On top of this, day home educators are most often wives and mothers, and as such tasked with gendered issues of creating and maintaining an environment both for the day home, and as a comfortable family home. As such, professional boundaries and identifying which family needs are handled outside of formal operating hours, are important to keep roles balanced (Gerstenblatt et. al, 2014).

Balancing these various roles is an ongoing process. Once a healthy boundary is set, it must be clearly and consistently upheld, or the boundary will fail. Unfortunately, boundary violations occur so frequently among family day home educators that mental health issues and high stress levels are commonplace (Forry et al., 2013). Working long hours, managing many roles, and trying to do many tasks with a limited amount of time take their toll. Balancing roles can come with overlapping stressors, like meeting day home children's needs while also responding to family requirements like signing permission slips, doing laundry, making appointments, or preparing dinner. The accumulated stressors from balancing the tasks associated with many roles being undertaken simultaneously threatens educator health and well-being, day home quality, and optimal child development (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Swartz,

2013). The integration of work and family, and its impact on child well-being, is an area where much more knowledge is needed (Jennings et al., 2013).

Stress, Mental Health, and Quality of Care

Sadly, high stress levels, low mood, and frequent reports of educator depression are present in the literature on family day homes (Faulkner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). Stress can arise from low wages and funding, isolation, caring for mixed age groups alone, or lack of support (Faulkner et al., 2016). Stress also comes from creating and maintaining boundaries, managing multiple roles simultaneously, and perceived status if they are seen or view themselves as mere babysitters (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

Low mood and depression may result from isolation, lack of support, lack of appropriate educational opportunities, and the ongoing challenges of caring for mixed age groups alone (Faulkner et al., 2016; Jeon et al., 2018). Depression and stress are known to lower quality of care, and increase the likelihood of educator turnover (Swartz, 2013). Both of these can negatively impact the formation of children's secure attachment, where low mood or depression can cause educators to ignore or respond harshly to children's needs (Bridgett et al., 2013), while high turnover is problematic because child-educator relationships needs time to develop and grow strong, and time for those secure attachments to form (Horm et al., 2018; Ruprecht et al., 2016). In the absence of the buffering presence of other caregivers, day home educator stress and negative affect has higher potential to negatively influence socioemotional development (Forry et al., 2013).

The prevalence of stress and depression among family day home educators heightens the need for self-care. Maintaining a strong work-life balance, taking breaks, taking time off regularly, seeking out support, and finding ways to reduce isolation are all important strategies

that support educator mental health and wellbeing (Cortes & Hallen, 2014). Both internal and external supports, like policies, access to peers and targeted training, and ensuring regular breaks are taken all help to reduce stress levels in day home educators (Faulkner et al., 2016; Sisson et al., 2019).

Issues of Low Wages and Funding

Low wages and funding are highly problematic in the early childhood education field. Low wages can lead to educator stress, burnout, and subsequent high turnover (Faulkner et al., 2016). They can decrease educator incentive to provide high-quality care, as educators may feel overworked, underpaid, and undervalued (Jeon et al., 2018). In addition, low wages and funding decrease educator ability to access continuing education and other quality supports (Lowenberg, 2016). For day home educators this issue is even more problematic. It is difficult, however, to compare the financial struggles of day home educators with the issues facing other early childhood educators, or the issues facing owners of large, centre-based care, as day home educators both provide childcare and are also business owners. As such, wage and funding comparisons are a complicated issue.

When comparing educator wages, it is important to note that day home educators do not actually receive a set monthly or hourly wage. Instead, they charge a fee per child, yet because they must purchase materials and food, and pay for housing and other bills out of that money pool, it is very difficult to compare the earnings of educators in day homes and educators not working out of their home. It is known that in Alberta, all early childhood educators receive an equal amount of government subsidy in wage-top up (Government of Alberta, 2020b). This increases with educational level, and happily also includes an extra 8 hours per month for day

home educators, an acknowledgement of the vast amount of work completed outside of formal operating hours when children are in care (Government of Alberta, 2020b).

When comparing funding for day homes and centre-based care, one common argument is that day home educators get to write off many expenses as small business owners. Yet, day homes charge less per child than centre-based care (Fischer-Summers, 2020; Macdonald & Friendly, 2020). Approved Albertan day homes also receive less funding. In the current system, day home educators receive an average of $101 per month less in government subsidy than those operating a childcare centre receive, even though day home educators are open for much longer than centre-based care, increasing their workload and reducing their hourly wages significantly (Government of Alberta, 2020b). Additionally, day home educators have poor or nonexistent benefit plans (Faulkner et al., 2016). They may lack funds to provide environmental enhancements or high-quality food (Carter, 2018). Their earning potential is also limited, as they can only care for so many children at one time. This is a source of financial stress, contributing to educator burnout and lowering the quality of care educators can offer (Faulkner et al., 2016).

Below I further compare wages of educators working in centre-based care and educators working in a day home. The average hourly wage for a Level 3 early childhood educator in Alberta is $18.95 per hour, before government wage top-up (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, 2021). The average fee per child charged by contracted Edmonton day homes (as no data is available on the province as a whole) is $855 per month, with the agency taking a fee of up to $150 per child (Fischer-Simmons, 2022). Given the current ratio cap of six children in addition to an educator's own, this is up to $5,130 dollars per month before the agency fee of up to $900 per month per day home. After the agency fee, educators may make

approximately $4,230 per month. Although, they have to purchase food, toys, and other day home materials out of those funds.

As they do not have support staff like janitors or cooks, many hours are spent on the day home beyond formal operating hours when children are actively being cared for. Typically, day home educators to work 10-12 hours per day (Fischer-Simmons, 2022). Assuming a standard month with 20 working days, this equates to an hourly wage of $21.15-$17.63, before additional operating expenses or taxes are taken into account. In a month with 22 business days, which is five months every year, a day home educator working 10 hours a day and charging the median recommended agency fee of $700 per child (Fischer-Simmons, 2022) earns approximately $19 hour before expenses. If they work 12 hours per day, this equates to $15.90 per hour before taxes. This does not, however, take into account under-enrolment; currently, agencies are filling only 89% of their licensed spaces across the province (Fischer-Simmons, 2022). Given just one less child, a day home educator might make $3,525 in a 20-business-day month before expenses, which equates to between $17.63 and $14.68 per hour before taxes. Many day homes also charge lower than average fees or offer sibling discounts, resulting in total monthly fees as low as $490 (Fischer-Simmons, 2022).

Considering that self-employed individuals are recommended to set aside "15% on the first $47,630 of taxable income" (Wealthsimple, 2022, para. 9), someone making $4,230 per month before operating expenses must set aside approximately $634.50 for taxes. This reduces their monthly income is $3,595.50 per month. Conservatively, if they work 200 hours, they earn $17.98 per hour. In addition, food costs are rising; a family of two adults and only two children can expect to spend approximately $1,200 per month on groceries alone (Stolte, 2021). Accounting for this, if an educator cared for five children at the average recommended agency

fee of $700 each per month (Fischer-Simmons, 2022), after paying expenses they would likely be earning less than minimum wage.

As noted, low wages and funding also negatively impact educator ability to receive training and continuing education (Swartz et. al., 2016). This is exacerbated in Alberta because professional development funds are available to educators working in any other licensed or contracted centre but not for day home educators (Government of Alberta, 2020a). Lack of funds also restricts educator ability to offer high-quality materials and nutritious food for the children and decreases day home potential for offering a high-quality environment and materials or fun, enriching activities or programs (Carter, 2018; Swartz et. al., 2016). Despite this lack of financial support, educators face high expectations to offer excellent care (Faulkner et al., 2016).

Frameworks for Success

While most of the above examples feature day homes working alone, two frameworks from the United States emerged from this literature review that illustrate the value of providing wraparound supports to educators and thereby significantly increasing quality of care in family day homes. These frameworks have striking similarities, and both are built on empirically based studies of factors shown to increase quality of care and educator quality of life (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016). The approaches used in each effectively address almost all of the unique needs and challenges established above, and both use a relational, ecological systems lens described below to organize their support networks. Briefly reviewing the structure of these two targeted support systems provides guidance for future research and policy change.

Philadelphia Family Child Care Collaborative

The first framework comes from the Philadelphia Family Child Care Collaborative, a collaborative network of agencies that has the capacity to coordinate services for family day

home educators (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016). Within this collaborative, there is a central hub that strengthens services and also offers asset mapping, improved inter-agency communication, and increased partnership opportunities. This collaborative has a steering committee with educator and agency leaders, as well policy makers. This network provides business supports such as peer support and coaching, shared services like liability and health insurance, and also back-up caregivers. Specialized financial management services are offered beyond just basic bookkeeping. There are also webinars and training workshops available to educators, including trainings on business and money management (Porter & Bromer, 2019).

Peer support strategies include creating a talent bank, having peer mentoring, and adapting "parent cafes" for family day home educators. This system also develops shared data, assesses the impacts of policy change, and then uses a rapid cycle approach to implement change (Porter & Bromer, 2019). The framework has a website with a calendar of training meetings, which consider non-traditional venues while developing community partnerships to increase resources. One of the collaborative's central tenants is that educators need to have a voice; there needs to be a family day home educator perspective, not just input from outsiders looking in. Opportunities for this include encouraging educator voice at meetings, acknowledging and supporting emerging leaders, increasing support for informal provider-led groups, and helping formal groups get funding and grants. This collaborative addresses the majority of the issues raised in this literature review and has empirically shown success in improving educator ability to offer high-quality care (Porter & Bromer, 2019).

All Our Kin Family Child Care Network

The second example, the All Our Kin Family Child Care Network, is a free network supporting both sustainability and quality of care in New Haven, Connecticut (Porter et al.,

2016). It connects family day home educators to community stakeholders and resources to increase opportunities for accessing "health providers, mental health providers, school systems, libraries, museums, food banks, [and] legal clinics" (Loewenberg, 2016, para. 6). This network began as a lab school which started due to the 1996 welfare reforms in the United States. Parents brought their children to the lab school as they learned and trained to become ECE's, while interacting with each other's children (Loewenberg, 2016). This enabled jobs for parents and increased childcare in communities, as the graduates opened their own centres or worked in other established ones.

Later, a need grew for a family childcare network, because of the unique demands of this population (Loewenberg, 2016). That was when the All Our Kin network began, as an accessible, affordable, culturally diverse, and flexible framework for success. Funding, specialized support, cohort learning, respectful strength-based relationships, and specially trained staff with knowledge of child and adult development, including unique strengths and challenges of day home educators, is integral to this framework (Loewenberg, 2016). Their biggest challenge is convincing stakeholders of the quality and importance of family childcare (Porter et al., 2016).

This framework also encompasses almost every family day home educator challenge discussed previously. A study of educators supported by this network found that the quality of those supported by All Our Kin was significantly higher, with more intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and intention to remain in the field. This is notable because self-efficacy is linked with motivation, social supports, and intention to remain in the field (Porter et al., 2016).

Summary of Literature Review

The factors influencing day home educator's ability to offer high-quality care include isolation, respect, support, and unique needs. The diverse dynamics, unique needs, and distinct challenges of day home educators often occur on a spectrum, where certain elements like isolation can be reduced, while others such as respect, support, and targeted continuing education can be increased to boost the quality of care day home educators are enabled to provide.

Family day home educators are self-employed. Thus, they are frequently seen as business owners who are solely responsible for figuring out how to navigate the workplace challenges described above (Forry et al., 2013). Their unique challenges are extensive, and very often their needs, as people and educators, are not met (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011). As their roles are unique and they are isolated from regular support and their peers, educators often lack the knowledge or ability to successfully navigate this complex myriad of challenges on their own. Additionally, because they are business owners, in Alberta the response to this has been anecdotally reported as: "This is your business, you figure it out." And yet it is not just the educator's business that is impacted. It is educator health, the quality of care, children's development, family dynamics for educators and the people they provide care for, and also day home agencies and government policies which are intended to help meet educator needs and boost quality in day homes.

Importantly, each of these frameworks offers excellent examples of the outcomes that can be achieved when diverse stakeholders and community leaders come together to form collaborative support networks. Both the Philadelphia Family Child Care Collaborative and New Haven's All Our Kin Family Child Care Network clearly demonstrate ways that day home educators can be enabled to offer higher quality care by offering wraparound supports (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016).

Theoretical Frameworks

Ecological systems theory and relational theory are two key frameworks that I have used to study day home educator quality and longevity. Each theory serves to ground and contextualize the findings outlined in the literature review. Ecological systems theory is specifically cited in several studies on this topic (Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Swartz et al., 2016), and relational theory is also mentioned repeatedly in the literature (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Lanigan, 2011; Porter et al., 2016). These theories provide a comprehensive viewpoint for understanding the intricacies of relationships, supports, and challenges impacting educators, and together establish meaning, relevance, and guidance for future research and practice.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory describes the bidirectional interactions which take place in an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). To understand another's perspective and unique life circumstances, it is essential to consider both protective and risk factors in each realm of their life. Bronfenbrenner conceptualized this in his original theory with a series of concentric circles representing different aspects of individuals' contexts, with the individual and their personal characteristics at its core (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

The microsystem includes elements of family, peers, and work, while the mesosystem consists of interactions or connections between microsystems, such as a parent picking up their child, a day home consultant offering support, or opportunities to connect with peers. Exosystem variables include policy, mass media, and industry, while the macrosystem describes cultural beliefs and attitudes, as well as the influence of macroeconomics. Ecological systems theory has also evolved to include the chronosystem, where historical events and the influence of time

affect and change other layers of the ecological system. Each of these systems impacts the others bidirectionally and has the potential to influence proximal and distal risk and protective factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

In the family day home setting, individual perceptions such as mood, affect, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth are highly influential in impacting quality of care (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Swartz et. al., 2016). As the educator works alone, these individual characteristics are some of the most important aspects of quality care, and further provide evidence of the importance of regular, ongoing self-care (Gerstenblatt et. al, 2014). Microsystem elements including family support, work-life balance, and access to peer support also proximally influence caregiving ability (Jeon et al., 2018). Mesosystem interactions, most significantly between educators and parents, and educators and their agency consultants, can be sources of strength or barriers to providing quality care, depending on the longevity, trust, and respect established in those interactions (Lanigan, 2011). Exosystem policies, both from day home agencies and from the provincial or federal government, affect day home educators in more distal ways. Continuing education availability and quality also exists in the exosystem, while macrosystem economics and beliefs of early childhood educator worth and value influence the entire ecological system. The chronosystem describes the influence of time and historical events on the changing system as a whole, such as Alberta's new federal-provincial childcare agreement (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

One other addition to Bronfenbrenner's original theory is the Person-Process-Context-Time model, or PPCT (Tudge et al., 2009). This model highlights the importance of interactions between people and environments over time, and the context in which they take place. A person's individual characteristics are highly influential in this model, and as

family child care [educators'] attitudes, beliefs, and practices are not tempered by

supervision, oversight, or policies determined by others within the care environment . . .

the most proximal influences on quality in family child care settings are likely providers'

personal and professional characteristics (Forry et al., 2013, p. 895).

These characteristics may include professional beliefs and resources, as well as educator

resources and stressors.

Processes describe the interactions between people, such as those which occur when

parents drop off or pick up their child. Other interactions for day home educators occur when

they meet with their consultant or agency or receive guidance and training from early childhood

leaders offering professional advice or training. For family day home educators, processes might

also include balancing home life and work life, because their professional business is situated in

the family home. The quality and characteristics of these processes impact educators in positive

or negative ways. For example, if boundaries are lacking an educator may be convinced to work

longer hours than they can comfortably provide, which can lead to stress or burnout (Swartz,

2013). If interactions with parents are supportive and helpful, though, they can buffer the

stressful experience of working long hours (Lanigan, 2011). These factors describe the context in

which interactions occur, and how over time such processes can result in helpful or detrimental

relationship dynamics and mental health (Tudge et al., 2009).

Parental interactions are one of the largest stressors that family day home educators face

(Faulkner et al., 2016). In this field, it is widely known that the problem is often "not the kids,

it's the parents" (Faulkner et al., 2016, p. 285). If parents are disrespectful and do not abide by

the educator's boundaries, this may increase the stress levels of the educator, decrease the quality

of care they are able to offer, and increase the chance of burnout (Rosenthal et al., 2013). The

reverse is also true, where educators who are treated as valuable professionals worthy of respect develop higher self-esteem, more efficacy, and greater incentive to offer high-quality care (Lanigan, 2011). As parents and consultants provide the majority of adult interactions an educator experiences in the workday, the impact of those relational processes between people over time is larger and more influential than it would be for someone working in a childcare centre, where other adults could buffer suboptimal interpersonal experiences.

Both ecological systems theory and the Person-Process-Context-Time model helpfully describe the proximal and distal influences on day home educator ability to offer quality care. These bidirectional forces, which often can act as positive or detrimental factors, are visually depicted below in Figure 1.

Figure 1:

Ecological System Impacts on Family Day Home Educator Quality

Chronosystem: Changing Beliefs of Early Childhood Educator Worth and Value Over Time
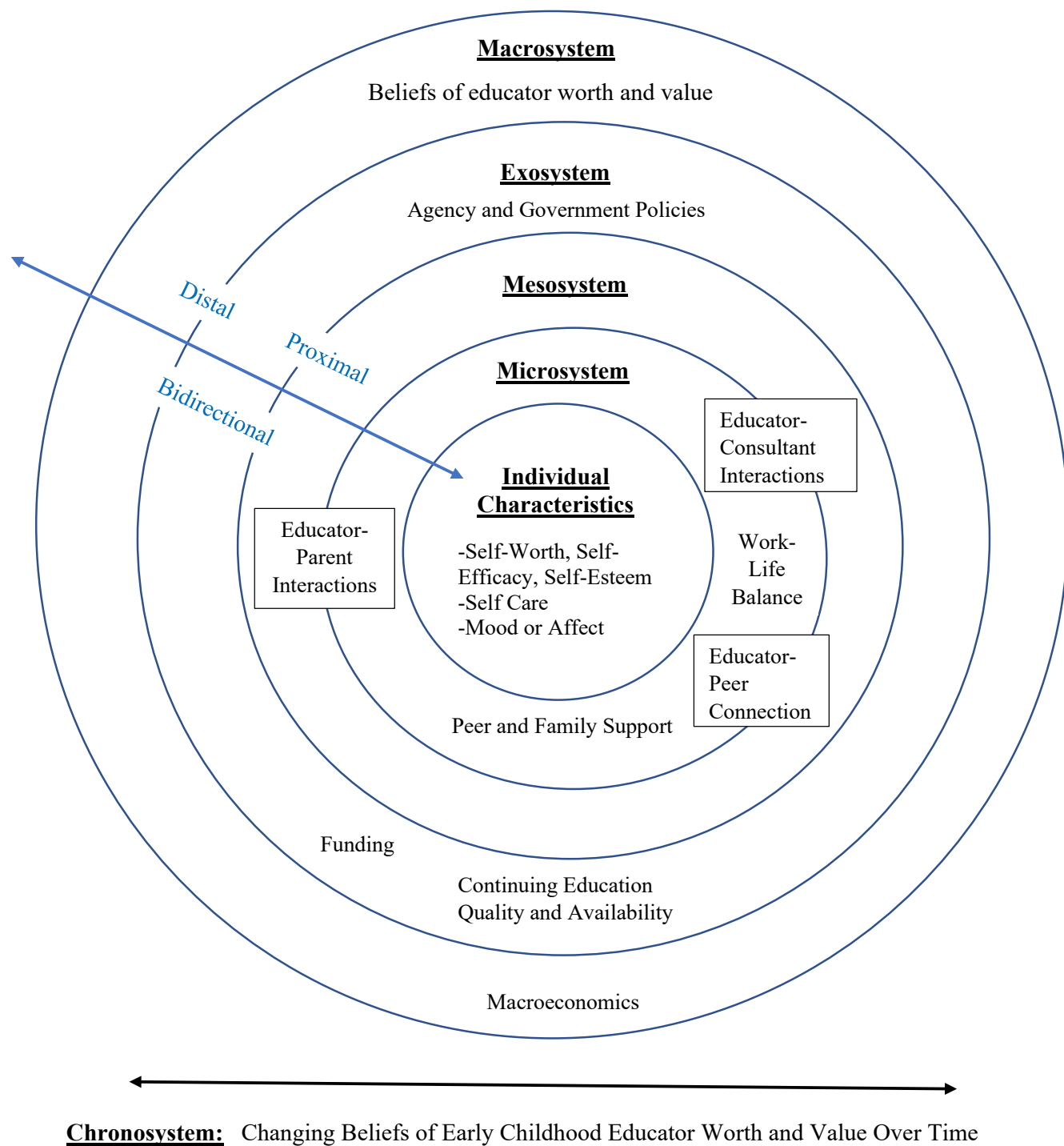
Using a framework of ecological systems to explore family day home experiences and abilities is useful because it situates them within the larger societal context in which they operate. Understanding day home quality and longevity, which is enabled not only by educators themselves but also bidirectionally according to influences from all of the other systems, is clearer when situated within the ecological systems framework. Given this, Figure 1 not only depicts the context that day homes operate within, but also highlights opportunities for strengthening useful supports, and creating targeted policy and practice change to form supports which may be currently misaligned or absent. Viewing day homes in accordance with the ecological systems framework shown in Figure 1 provides many vantage points for change, where day home quality and longevity can be acted upon from a myriad of proximal or distal system points.

Relational Theory

Relational theory is also heavily cited in the existent literature on family day home quality (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Porter et al., 2016). Relational theory emphasizes the importance of time, which allows trust and respect to grow between educators and parents or consultants, and secure attachments to form between educator and child (Cortes & Hallen, 2014; Lanigan, 2011; Schaack et al., 2017). When these relationships are disrupted, the trust and collaborative support which may have had a chance to grow over time are severed. New relationships with consultants, parents, children, and educators are less established, lack roots which require time to grow, and do not include elements of trust and respect that may have formed in a previous long-term relationship.

Childcare quality is deeply reliant on relationships (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Bromer & Bibbs, 2011). For the family day home educator, their main workplace relationships involve the parents,

children in care, and their day home agency consultant. As these educators are isolated in their workplace, the quality of interactions experienced over time are highly influential forces acting upon educator stress and resilience (Tudge et al., 2009). Indeed, relationships between the educator and parents are complex and pivotal (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Faulkner et al., 2016). Positive parental interactions result in more positive caregiving traits, while negative interactions with parents are shown to cause more detrimental caregiving styles (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011; Lowenberg, 2016). If parents and the educator can build a strong, healthy relationship based on trust and respect, quality childcare will follow (Forry et al., 2017). This is one reason why longevity in childcare matters; because relationships take time to develop, and trust takes time to grow.

The quality of relationship and interactions between educators and children is critically important for child development. Much has been written about secure attachment, and it is widely known that continuity of care provided by the same caregiver or educator over time, is highly supportive of secure attachments and the optimal development which follows (Horm et al., 2018; Ruprecht et al., 2016). Thus, longevity or long-term stability is critical in family day homes. Most large centre-based childcare organizations have children changing rooms as they change in age. As this disrupts the continuity of care being offered, parents may also choose day homes because there is an opportunity for continuity of care to occur beginning in infancy, when a child enters the day home, and ending years later when the child enters school. Additionally, day homes care for children of mixed age groups, meaning siblings can be cared for in a home-like setting (Lanigan, 2011). This allows time and trust to build between children and educators and between parents and the educator, providing an important relational foundation supporting quality and longevity.

Relationships between consultants and educators also matter a great deal. Several studies cite the importance of having one main support person over time, as it allows supportive, trust-based connections to develop (Porter et al., 2016). When consultants value educators as knowledgeable childcare experts, it causes relational interactions characterized by respect that are shown to increase educator ability to offer high-quality care (Swartz, 2013). Indeed, how consultants treat educators, and the quality and amount of support they offer, strongly influences educator ability to deliver high-quality care (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Swartz et. al., 2016).

It must be acknowledged that not all long-term relationships are positive. If parents are demanding and disrespectful, or if consultants treat educators as though they have little worth and do not provide them with appropriate resources required to thrive, the quality of care in the day home will suffer (Faulkner et al., 2016; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Yet, if relationships between the educator, parents, and consultants are supportive, respectful, and positive, this strongly influences educator ability to offer high-quality care (Ang & Tabu, 2018; Forry et al., 2013). This reinforces the import of examining not only educator quality, but also stability and ability to provide long-term care. When turnover is low, relationships have the chance to become established, strong, and ingrained with long-term, established relationships of trust. Though every study cited here mentions quality of care, and many studies mention the importance of stability in relationships, this literature review uncovered only one study which examined longevity in family day home educators (Swartz, 2013).

Connection Between Ecological Systems Theory and Relational Theory

Relational theory emphasizes the importance of strong trusting relationships which are built over time, through supportive and empathic interactions (Blustein, 2011). Ecological systems theory, and particularly the PPCT model, also centers on quality of interactions between

people that establish a bidirectional relationship over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Tudge et al., 2009). The literature clearly shows that these relationships have the power to significantly impact educator ability to offer high-quality care (Cortes & Hallen, 2014; Jeon et al., 2018; Lanigan, 2011). Considered separately, both ecological systems theory and relational theory clearly describe the forces impacting educator quality of care in positive or negative ways. Considered together, these theories build on and strengthen one another, lending depth and meaning to the study of family day home educator quality and longevity.

Future Research Directions

Filling in the gap in the literature on unique family day home educator needs, working environments, and supports is called for by many studies included in this review (Schaack et al., 2017; Swartz et. al., 2016). Specifically, focusing research on the family day home context, quality of care they are enabled to offer, and how they can be most fully supported are repeatedly and explicitly identified as areas for future research (Jeon et al., 2018). As this review did not find any study based in a Canadian context, identifying which of these factors is valid and generalizable for Alberta family day home educators, and conducting more research on Canadian day home educators, is an important avenue of exploration.

Conclusion

Family day home educators provide licensed care for a significant percent of Alberta's children (Sarlo, 2016). The quality of care offered to those children has the potential to influence their development along optimal trajectories. However, little is known about the unique needs and challenges that family day home educators face. This lack of knowledge has led to a lack of effective practice and policy implementation, both internal and external, that could bolster educator ability to provide high-quality care.

This literature review has revealed many factors influencing quality and longevity of care in family day homes, including isolation, respect, support, and unique needs. Increasing known supports and decreasing barriers in educator ability to offer high-quality care, improve both capabilities in educators, and developmental outcomes for children. As the studies which emerged from the search methods used were mainly completed in the United States, it remains to be seen how applicable these factors are to a Canadian, or Alberta-specific, context, yet one clear requirement for future research mentioned in almost every one of these studies is the need for more research on the unique working conditions and distinct needs of family day home educators.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

A qualitative description methodology (Sandelowski, 2000), guided by a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach (Israel et al., 1998), was used in this study to answer the research questions, 'What are the strengths and challenges impacting day home educator's ability to offer high-quality care over an extended period?' and, 'What supports are most effective in enabling educators to provide quality and stability in the family day home early learning and care environment?' Qualitative description was used because it stays close to the data and surface of words and events, while producing a "complete and valued end-product" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 334). Qualitative description uses naturalistic inquiry to gather straight unadorned answers to relevant questions, and is "characterized by the simultaneous collection and analysis of data whereby both mutually shape each other" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Specifically, I used a directed approach to content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), where analysis of the data started primarily with the framework I have created based on my personal experiences and the existent literature (see Figure 2 in Appendix D), which offered guidance for initial codes. This allowed me to build on what is known in the literature, combined that with my personal experience, and use those as an entry point to the dataset. In this way, data was analyzed both iteratively and deductively, then checked with participants for verification and accuracy.

Qualitative Research Rationale

Qualitative research enables greater understanding of the meaning, contexts, and processes that influence people and their actions (Maxwell, 2012). It is particularly suitable for community-based participatory research, as qualitative research centers on participant contexts and meaning (Maxwell, 2012). As little is known about family day home educators and their

ability to offer consistent, high-quality care, qualitative focus groups are an ideal way to gather information about educator experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

The qualitative approach of using open-ended questions and moderated group discussion to gather evidence offers a more inclusive and open way of gathering data than would be possible with a quantitative survey (Mayan, 2016). Focus groups can provide more information and better-quality data than interviews as well, due to the advantages of synergy, snowballing, and stimulation created from group interaction (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Groups can increase feelings of security and trust, thus increasing willingness to disclose information (Einiesdel et al., 1996). Focus groups also require less time and money to conduct than interviews, as they allow the potential for more ideas to be generated through discussion with others, and they have the ability to produce in-depth background information on a topic (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Given this, targeted focus groups of experienced day home educators and consultants were conducted to produce deep and rich data to better establish the main supports and barriers impacting educator ability to offer high-quality care in Alberta.

Community-Based Participatory Research Approach

To increase the credibility of the study, engagement of isolated day home educators who might otherwise be excluded from the research, a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was used. CBPR is lauded for its ability to increase the voice of marginalized populations whose experience and opinions otherwise may not be heard (Puddu, 2019). Using a CBPR approach creates opportunities for increasing the knowledge of unique community needs in populations like decentralized and isolated family day home educators (D'Alonzo, 2010). Collaborating with key stakeholders and community leaders to inform and guide the research process allows for knowledge co-creation that has the potential to increase capacity for

researchers and community members alike (Attygalle, 2020; IAP2, 2018; Israel, 2008). Finally, CBPR is an approach that aligns research with specific needs of individual communities, creating evidence that can be used to provide targeted support for community challenges (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014; Levin, 2013).

Through collaboration with key stakeholders in Alberta's early learning and childcare community, leaders in the field were invited to provide feedback and insight on the study design. The wisdom and guidance shared by these community leaders has greatly increased this study's applicability to the field. Aligning this research project with the known needs of Alberta's early childhood community, identifying what questions are most integral, and pointing out possible causes of concern for the study's success have all contributed to the strength and viability of the research design (Attygalle, 2020; Israel, 2008).

This project builds on previously established professional relationships through my work both as an educator and as a facilitator of early childhood workshops and training opportunities. Pre-existing relationships, such as these, strengthen community connections, and are an integral first step when conducting CBPR (D'Alonzo, 2010; Gokiert et al., 2017). CBPR requires strong, trust-based relationships to be established with the community, where spending time, making connections and learning more about the community allows quality research to evolve (Hacker, 2013; Tremblay et al., 2018). My professional relationships have enabled ease in identifying and engaging key community stakeholders and community leaders (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Van Eerd & Saunders, 2017).

Engaging the Early Childhood Leaders to Shape the Research

Community engagement for this project officially began in May of 2021, when every known early childhood organization or institution affiliated with family day homes in the

province was contacted via email with an invitation to participate and lend expertise and insight into the direction of the research. Each licensed family day home agency was also contacted individually, with the exception of four agencies whose contact information proved unobtainable. Every effort was made to connect with the Ministry of Children's Services personnel, though without direct personal relationships or networks into the Ministry, making contact proved to be nearly impossible until after I built partnerships with others who had connections.

Positive responses from those willing and able to engage in the research resulted in five initial key stakeholder meetings, held in June of 2021. The meetings were attended by a total of twenty-eight key stakeholders from nine organizations, one postsecondary institute, and eleven licensed day home agencies (see Appendix A). Some individuals held roles in more than one organization, and many had previously held roles in different early learning organizations. One day home agency sent their regrets; several key stakeholders mentioned that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was draining their abilities to participate. After hearing more in these meetings on the importance of including the Ministry of Children's Services and its licensing officers, several well-positioned stakeholders offered to pass the research invitation along. This led to two final stakeholder meetings, in late June and July 2021, attended by a licensing officer and a licensing officer supervisor from the Ministry of Children's Services.

The stakeholder meetings were pivotal in allowing for community engagement and input on the direction of the research. Community engagement helped to broadly create a richer image of the current state of childcare in Alberta and the unique conditions experienced by family day home educators, in particular. This process of community engagement has also increased knowledge of the study, and increased targeted recruitment for focus groups and will likely

increase widespread survey distribution among contracted day home educators across Alberta and opportunities for information dissemination.

The purpose of conducting meetings with key stakeholders was to inform me of where my research plan was on track, what else needed to be included, and what would be most helpful to learn through this study. The stakeholder meetings were both informative and influential in helping to set the direction for this thesis research. Below, I share a summary of these key stakeholder sessions and what emerged across the meetings. While an in-depth review of the meetings lies outside the scope of this thesis introduction, major research guidance is outlined below.

Stakeholder Research Recommendations. Points to include varied wildly. Several people mentioned educators for whom English is a second language, pointing out that this could potentially act as both a strength and a barrier. Day home agency procedures, which are offered in a myriad of ways within the loosely defined government requirements, could also act as supports or barriers to educators providing high-quality care – especially pertaining to the amount of paperwork and documentation required. Lack of government understanding of day home realities was brought up, along with the ongoing inequalities in professional development grants (Government of Alberta, 2020a). The importance of engaging educators from all over the province, and using every possible pathway to distribute the survey, was addressed to include the diverse experiences of educators across the province. Comparing urban and rural experiences and supports, family support or multigenerational family experiences, and the impact of mothers caring for their own young children alongside those registered in the day home were all mentioned.

Nuances of continuing education were discussed at length. Key stakeholders debated over not just the terms used to describe professional development, but also whether minimum levels of education should be mandated. Education reflects professionalism, where increasing education to a minimum of a diploma or a degree can create a field of professionals with increased capacity and ability for advocacy and higher quality care (Beach, 2020). However, educators can provide high-quality care without a formal diploma in early childhood education, and more licensed care spaces are needed; introducing such a cap would further decrease the currently inadequate amount of contracted day homes that are open. Finally, one insightful stakeholder advocated for asking educators what level of training they had upon opening their day homes, what level of training they have now, and what factors caused them to increase their education, if they did. This question seemed particularly apt and was integrated into the semi-structured focus group interview guide.

Others pointed out that barriers to training include lack of time or commitment, difficulties attending (even on evenings or weekends), and availability, where trainings on specific topics such as caring for mixed age groups or working as a sole educator, are not being offered. Several discussed the need to obtain training without closing the day home, mentioning that practicums should include day home settings as a placement for both those running a day home and those wanting to have their placement with an approved day home.

There were also some points to consider which, though relevant, may fall outside of the scope of this study. One stakeholder wondered about educator experiences with offering an inclusive environment and supporting children with different abilities, known to be challenging for educators (Wiart, 2012). Another focused on Indigenous children, families, and caregivers, wanting to make sure that they were represented in this study. While these topics may not prove

to be part of the main challenges in the majority of day homes in Alberta, each is an important avenue for future research.

Finally, many stakeholders inquired as to whether unlicensed day homes would be included. While it would be fascinating to compare the similarities and differences of supports and challenges in unlicensed versus licensed care, and intriguing to discover why educators prefer to work privately (unlicensed) or with an agency, such a comparison lies outside of the scope of this research.

Methodological Considerations

Discussion around methodology included several important considerations, ranging from specific approaches to inclusion criteria, to raising the issue of comparing day homes with larger childcare centers. Clearly outlining confidentiality and anonymity is essential to allow for freedom of speech and including explicit statements about these topics was identified as critical. Keeping educators and consultants separate, and dividing people from the same agency or geographical location between focus groups, was viewed as necessary to increase open collaboration and unencumbered sharing of experiences. Each specific consideration brought up by key stakeholders has been accounted for in the methodology of this study.

While every stakeholder strongly agreed that the research project methodology was solid, a point of contention with inclusion criteria was raised. Two different key stakeholders, one from a day home agency and the other a licensing official, made a strong case for including directors with significant front-line experience in the focus groups, as they hold a consultant role. They argued that many directors are very knowledgeable about daily educator experiences, often examine program documentation or conduct in-home visits themselves, and also may have insight about longevity in the field that consultants might not have. With the understanding that

such engaged directors do meet the research selection criteria of acting as a consultant for five or more years, invitations to focus groups will be sent to identified consultant/directors as well.

There are methodological issues with comparing day homes with day cares, or day home wages with day care wages. Day home educators are both front-line staff and business owners. They do not receive a wage, yet because they run a business out of their home and write off many expenses, their income cannot be adequately compared to day care center earnings. These issues are problematic yet important to consider.

Summary of Stakeholder Engagement Sessions

Key stakeholders offered much positive feedback, saying that the study was much needed and the presentation of my study objectives was well-done. Many agreed that family day home educators are unique, and as such they need to be treated as a separate group. Stakeholders shared that they felt that I clearly understood the challenges of family day home educators, and many commented that this is a perfect time to do such a study, as this information is greatly sought after and new federal funding is being granted. Several sincerely thanked me for initiating this research and said that this study was long overdue.

Key stakeholder meetings were valuable in identifying local research to include, incorporating Canadian studies, and ensuring that this research does not duplicate any previous work. Stakeholders reinforced several studies conducted by leading researchers including Rhonda Breitkreuz, from the University of Alberta, and Michal Perlman, from the University of Toronto. In addition, they also emphasized research briefs and position statements from the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQUE) that guide this project. Finally, they reinforced the Hawkes

report of the Woolfsmith Inquiry (2018), which has important policy and practice guidelines for day homes.

Participant Recruitment

This study seeks to increase knowledge about contracted family day home educator experiences in Alberta. As such, only experienced individuals working directly with a licensed day home agency were included in the focus groups. To allow for triangulation and rich descriptions of varying perceptions of educator strengths and challenges, both consultants and educators working with contracted day home agencies have been recruited (Creswell & Clark, 2017). To further increase strength of the research, participants were purposefully selected based on recommendations from leaders in the field (Krueger, 2014). The original target population for this research was that participants must have at least five years' experience running a contracted day home in Alberta, or at least five years' experience in a consultant role. Unlicensed day home educators were not included in this study, as they are not mandated to meet any provincial or agency standards of quality, and do not receive the same training and support opportunities as licensed day home educators.

The selection criteria for the study changed slightly during participant recruitment. Several highly experienced early childhood professionals, some with more than twenty years' experience in the childcare field, replied that they would love to participate but did not meet the selection criteria. Upon reflection, it is known that there is high turnover in the consultant role, and most have very little experience; in a recent study a third had only been in the role for 1-2 years, while an additional 13% had been in the consultant role for under twelve months (Massing, 2008). While I had hoped to recruit only consultants with five or more years' experience, such a tight focus proved to be excessively limiting. Thus, in the consultant focus

groups most participants had five or more years' experience in the role, while four had just three years' experience in the consultant role.

Participants in this study were selected according to informed judgement from myself as the researcher, and from expert opinions of community leaders and stakeholders. This reputational case sampling allows for the identification of highly informed participants based on expert advice from a variety of sources (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This approach allows for more depth of information than could occur by using random sampling.

In order to allow for diversity in experience, great care was taken to engage participants from a wide variety of backgrounds and geographical locations across the province. Diversity in focus groups is lauded as an approach to encompass a broad range of perceptions and experiences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). As day home educators are generally quite diverse and individualized as to their personal characteristics and day home realities, to further increase diversity I aimed decrease the number of educators or consultant from the same agency. I also tried to ensure that the focus groups capture the many cultural backgrounds present in Alberta day homes.

Key stakeholders mentioned that 50-70% of their educators were not born in Canada, and several community members mentioned that English as a second language should be examined both as a potential barrier to providing quality care, and as a source of strength. Indeed, some day homes are sought out for their integration of cultural beliefs, a certain language, or other sought-after ideologies and practices. This highlights the need to navigate language or technological barriers by reaching out to engage participants using the multipronged approach followed in this study.

Building on the relationships I have previously established with educators, agencies, and childcare organizations throughout the province, participants were recruited through mail and email via family day home agencies throughout the province. In order to ameliorate selection bias that may occur by only reaching out through email, physical cards and letters were also sent to every day home agency in Alberta, informing them of the study. These introductory packages included three postage-paid mail-out cards with letters of invitation sent directly to day home educators, and three attractive letters inviting experienced day home consultants to participate in the study. Unfortunately, some agencies chose not to pass the invitations along.

Each detail of this communication was carefully considered. A calligrapher hand-wrote agency addresses in turquoise ink, and the same color of ink was used by myself to individually sign each cover letter, which has been shown to garner higher response rates than using black ink (Walonick, 2016). Even the stamp was chosen with care; I sought out special cherry blossom stamps to draw attention to the envelopes. Every educator card was closed with a gold wax seal. Finally, each agency and consultant letter was sealed with a sunflower sticker, which I will use for continuity throughout the study's communications. This participant engagement process was used to increase the number of participants recruited for this research (Walonick, 2016).

Data Collection Through Focus Groups

The design for this study is based on approaches used in previous research, and on input from key stakeholders across the province. Building on what has worked for other researchers, and focusing this project with an Alberta context, allows for a research design that is proven and community informed. Thus, this study centered on conducting five focus groups with experienced consultants and educators of approximately three to seven participants in each.

Previous research has evidenced that day home educators are isolated and decentralized, which makes them harder to engage (Jeon et al., 2018; Lanigan, 2011). As such, in this study, the goal is not to achieve thematic saturation, because the scope of the study is limited, and participants are highly experienced, thus saturation can be achieved with lower sample sizes (Mayan, 2016). Rather, the purpose of these focus groups is to create a deep understanding of day home educator realities. In most cases, "up to four focus groups will suffice" (Einiesdel et al., 1996, p. 36). Thus, this study has strength and credibility provided by five focus groups with three to seven participants in each.

In focus groups, people are connected by their relationships to one another, and as such may behave differently in group settings than alone (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Focus groups work when people feel respected, comfortable, and able to share their opinions free of judgement (Krueger, 2014). In a group with greater homogeneity, cooperation and communication have been found to increase, while conflict decreases (Krueger, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Additionally, during community engagement key stakeholders shared concern that educators might be limited in their capacity to speak freely if they feared retribution or penalty from their day home agency, whom they rely upon to stay active as a contracted day home with a licensed agency. As such, this study consisted of two homogenous groups of day home educators, and three groups of consultants (Krueger, 2014). Focus groups were conducted in late September and early October of 2021, with data analysis occurring throughout.

Participant Demographics

This study used purposive or targeted sampling to identify and recruit focus group participants (Maxwell, 2012; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The targeted selection of individuals who are uniquely able to provide information on daily day home experiences, educators

themselves and their main supports, agency consultants, allowed for depth of knowledge that only rises from lived experience (Matthews & Ross, 2012). As such, only those with significant experience in contracted day home settings were chosen to take part in focus groups. This purposeful selection strategy allows for representativeness, increased heterogeneity that represents the range of experiences in day homes, and comparison to highlight diversity within this decentralized group (Maxwell, 2012).

Thirteen educators and 13 consultants working with licensed day home agencies from across Alberta were recruited to this study, with representation from eighteen different agencies out of a total of sixty-two active licensed day home agencies (Government of Alberta, 2021b). Agencies were both for and non-profit, with size ranging from thirty to over eight hundred licensed spaces. Agency locations are spread throughout the province, in both major cities and remote communities. This study offers in-depth perspectives of twenty-six individuals from the sector, representing five thousand and eighty-six licensed day home spaces, approximately ten percent of the total currently known spaces in Alberta's contracted day homes (Government of Alberta, 2021b).

Every educator in the study had extensive experience running a licensed day home, ranging from five to twenty-five years. Several of these educators also have experience working in day care or other childcare settings. The minimum experience day home educators in this study have of working with children in any professional capacity is nine years. On average, educators reported thirteen years of experience running a contracted day home.

Consultants in this study also had diverse backgrounds in childcare. In addition to working as a consultant, more than half had at least sixteen years of experience working in day care settings, and two consultants had also run a day home of their own. The selection criteria for

consultants changed slightly from the original plan; due to high turnover there were not enough participants recruited who had more than five years of experience in their role. However, the minimum amount of experience consultants in this study have is three years; the most experienced consultants had up to twenty-six years of experience working in this role.

One of the goals for participant recruitment was to increase diversity by limiting the number of participants from individual agencies. This was largely successful, as 13 agencies in this study were represented by a single participant, allowing for diversity. Two agencies had an educator and a consultant participate, one had two educators, one agency had representation from three consultants, and last was an agency with four representatives, three educators and one consultant. Whenever possible participants from the same agency were placed into different focus groups. Personalized follow-up letters were sent to each participant, to thank them for their time and participation and allow for participant checks to occur (Krueger, 2014; Creswell and Clark, 2017).

Data Collection and Procedures

After twenty-six experienced educators and consultants had been recruited, and no further recruitment was possible, five focus groups were conducted via Zoom based on participant ability. There were two groups of educators ($n = 7$, $n = 6$), and three groups of consultants ($n = 3$, $n = 7$, $n = 3$). One educator had technical difficulties preventing her from continuing, so the remaining questions were answered in a follow-up interview and the responses integrated into the data analysis.

The focus group guiding questions were based on the main experiences of family day home educators evidenced in the current literature, and created in accordance with guidance from key stakeholder input. Specifically, community stakeholders mentioned the importance of

exploring educator fluency in the English language, and education level to find out reasons why some people continued their education while running a day home and others did not. Focus groups also identified which of the traits from the literature review, largely evidenced in the United States, are also present for Alberta-based day home educators. Focus groups also allowed for the establishment of other strengths and barriers not known in the existent literature.

Due to Research Ethics Board timeline limitations, a rolling interview guide, where modifications to guiding questions are made based on experience from prior focus groups, was not possible (Mayan, 2016). However, listing specific probing questions allowed for meaningful tailoring of subsequent focus groups. Using the exact same interview guide each time enabled consistency across the focus groups, increasing strength and credibility of the study in a way that is lacking with use of a rolling interview strategy (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Focus groups started by warmly welcoming participants. Expressing value for diverse participant opinions, and reassuring them of anonymity, were utilized to ensure that rich data was collected (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). After a review of informed consent (see Appendix E), focus groups continued with an easy, icebreaker question. Then, detailed questions were used to guide the discussion. The questions were all broad, open-ended, and non-leading, which is essential for authentic examination of the issue (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Finally, focus group success depends on the number of questions asked, where twelve to fifteen questions per two hours are ideal (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). As such, in these ninety-minute focus groups, nine guiding questions were asked, followed by up to three probing questions each to delve deeper into a topic as needed (Einsiedel et al., 1996).

The main limitations of participant interaction in focus groups are lack of independent responses, and discussion being dominated by some participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Additionally, there is a risk of self-reporting bias, where participants focus on social desirability, emphasizing their strengths to appear more competent (Salters-Pednault, 2020). Lack of independent response limits generalizability, so to moderate this, care was taken to avoid having two or more friends in the same focus group, and to reduce participants from the same day home agency participating in any one focus group (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Discussions were guided with careful moderation to ameliorate outspoken or dominating participants. Specifically, using eye contact, minimal encourages like "uh-huh" or "hm", and reflecting back participant statements were tools used to draw out diverse opinions in focus groups (Einsiedel et al., 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). I also encouraged each individual participants to generate ideas, sought out opinions of members who were quieter, and asked that all people have the chance to speak. Finally, I verbally rewarded opinions of all members by thanking them for their input, to legitimize opinions and encourage engagement of any who might feel lower status (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Data collection during the focus groups included video recordings, transcription, and field notes recorded both during and immediately after the groups. Transcription initially occurred automatically through the Zoom program. Then the transcriptions were carefully compared to the original video recording, to ensure accuracy and to allow for inclusion of important nonverbal communication (Mayan, 2016). Careful attention was paid to capture the nuances of non-verbal communication both in field notes and during transcription (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Though being able to fully recognize non-verbal communication is compromised in a limited online meeting format, clues like as a sigh, eye roll, or shrug, were recorded to give depth and meaning to focus group communications (Stewart & Shamdasani,

2014). Emotion and word emphasis was also included in data transcriptions, enabling a rich description of focus group data.

After focus group recordings were transcribed and field notes documented, focus group transcriptions were anonymized. Each transcript includes a participant code number replacing their name, the date and time of the focus group, and page numbers in the header appearing on each page (Mayan, 2016). The anonymized data was analyzed as it became available, rather than waiting until all focus groups are complete before beginning analysis. This is highly recommended to ease the work of final analysis (Maxwell, 2012).

Analysis of Focus Group Findings

A directed approach to content analysis was used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), where analysis of the data started primarily with the framework I have created based on my personal experiences and the existent literature (see Figure 2 in Appendix D). This offered guidance for initial codes. Summative content analysis was also included, as I counted and compared keywords and content as shown in Tables 2-4, then went on to interpret the context in which these occurred (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis was used as a method of qualitative description because it is a flexible way to analyze data.

Key variables and concepts were first identified as initial coding categories. Then, definitions for each were created, with careful attention paid to allowing any new themes or codes to emerge from the data iteratively. In this way, themes like inclusivity and advocacy emerged, which were not part of my initial framework nor shown in any prior studies. Therefore, this initial strategy for coding did not limit or restrict data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Mindfulness, awareness of bias, memoing, journaling, and participant checks were utilized to ensure that data was analyzed holistically and inclusively.

The framework I created guided the formation and discussion of the findings, where newly identified themes further refined, enriched, and extended the initial theory (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this way, using a directed approach to content analysis allowed the existing framework shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix D) to be supported and extended. Findings from the directed content analysis used in this qualitative research study both strengthened my initial framework, and added to it with themes of inclusivity and advocacy. Small changes were also made to internal factors impacting quality and longevity, such as enjoyment and advocacy being added to the major category of "Initial Supports" shown in Figure 2 (see Appendix D).

While I started coding according to my personal experiences and what has been shown in prior research, as new categories and codes emerged, they were iteratively added to the coding. Doing several waves of coding, along with close checking between the developing framework (Figure 2 in Appendix D) and the data, allowed for clarification and modification of codes as data analysis proceeded. In this way I ensured that data was not lost or overlooked, partially because I focused on divergent experiences, similarities and contrasts, and allowed for unexpected findings to influence the codes as they were created and defined (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Directed content analysis altered the initial framework I created because it added evidence for new themes, specifically inclusivity and the need for advocacy (see Figure 2 in Appendix D). These new findings did not challenge the framework or provide non-supporting evidence, but rather strengthened and increased the framework to more fully describe the factors impacting quality and longevity in family day homes. Codes with exemplars along with counts and comparisons, using summative content analysis, are shown in Tables 2-4.

Data analysis began by writing field notes during the focus groups, then continued through transcription, which made sure to include nuances of body language, emotion, and vocal tone as indicated. This data was read through in a timely and sequential matter as focus groups are conducted, and memos written on initial impressions. Focus group data was analyzed initially using a priori themes emerging from researcher personal experience, the existent literature, and relevant theoretical frameworks (ecological systems and relational theory), and also purposeful inclusion of diversity or contradicting statements. These added to initial knowledge based on researcher experience and existing empirical knowledge, and avoided limiting the possibilities for capturing new and nuanced experiences (Mayan, 2016).

Data analysis occurred first with open coding (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me to note the topics rising iteratively from the data as substantive categories, or emic categories rising from participants' own words and ideas, were inductively created (Maxwell, 2012). Next, axial coding was employed, where one category became known as the focus, with codes falling under categories (Creswell, 2013). Finally, selective coding occurred where categories intersected to become the theory (Creswell, 2013). The same codebook was used to analyze each focus group, allowing for continual development of the emerging framework.

Data was also analyzed holistically and using cross-group comparison once all of the focus groups were conducted. After each focus group transcript was individually analyzed, the data was explored for themes using the scissor-and-sort technique, where all transcript sections applying to one research question were grouped together (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Then, the transcripts were reviewed as a whole to identify themes holistically. In this last stage of data analysis, similarity and contrast principles were used to analyze the data (Teddlie & Tashakkori,

2009). Discrepant data, negative cases, and supportive data were used to form conclusions of the study from a holistic and integrated standpoint (Maxwell, 2012).

Credibility, Dependability, and Rigour

This study ensures credibility and dependability in several ways. First, my experience in the early learning and childcare field has allowed for intensive, long-term involvement which has enabled observation and lived experiences to accumulate over time (Maxwell, 2012). As such, increased amounts and diversity of data are provided, as this research project allows for the chance to test and confirm my previous personal observations and empirically based hypotheses (Maxwell, 2012).

However, there is a definite risk of bias is this study, as I am moderating both collection and interpretation of the data. In moderating the focus groups, it is possible that I may unconsciously give clues as to which responses or group consensus is desirable (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). In data analysis, I may be subtly drawn to give more weight to certain topics that resonate with my own personal experiences and research. The best-known way of reducing bias is to have another set of eyes examine the data, to see if the same conclusions are reached. However, budget and time limitations restrict this study's abilities to do so. As such, reducing bias in moderation, data transcription, and analysis was key in ensuring the study's strength and viability.

Selecting data that fits pre-existing theories or conceptions, or selecting data which seems to stand out, involve researcher subjectivity (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, integrity in this research is maintained by explaining my own personal biases and how I will manage those (Maxwell, 2012). To minimize the risk of bias, I carefully prefixed this study by outlining my own background, experiences, and beliefs. To further establish an audit trail, I kept reflexive journals throughout

this research process, which will describe my approach, any changes to the methodology, and the reasoning behind it. Being open-minded, inclusive, and reflective are paramount in limiting bias (Mayan, 2016). As the purpose of this study is to draw out a rich and deep quantity of data about diverse educator experiences, challenges, and strengths, keeping that goal in mind by focusing on open-ended research questions will increase the credibility and dependability of this research.

Triangulation is also employed in this research to increase its credibility and dependability of this research. First, triangulated sources are used, where both educator and consultant experiences are studied to increase a holistic inclusion of multifaceted data (Maxwell, 2012). This triangulation through multiple sources is further strengthened by community engagement, where key stakeholders were invited to share their opinions and guide the direction of this research. This allows for member checks and insight to strengthen the study's trustworthiness.

Second, participant checks were used to further triangulate the data analysis and summary. Participant checks occurred via email, after themes from focus groups had been condensed and summarized. This allows for collaboration and convergence of data (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Outlining discrepancies between main educator strengths and challenges, and whether they are clearly described in the summarizing themes from the focus groups, is part of the triangulated methodology approach used here to ensure dependability and transferability of the research (Mayan, 2016)

One final credibility threat is reactivity or reflexivity, where the presence of the researcher and the focus group setting influences what participants say (Maxwell, 2012). While it is not possible to minimize this effect, avoiding leading questions, assuring confidentiality, and creating an open and accepting environment can reduce negative consequences (Maxwell, 2012).

As with researcher bias, reactivity needs to be ameliorated by exploring how the researcher may be affecting participant statements, and how this impacts rigor (Maxwell, 2012).

Dependability, transferability, and credibility will be increased through the inclusion of rich data produced through focus groups, which allow for full and detailed descriptions of the events studied here (Maxwell, 2012). Discrepant data and negative cases will be identified and analyzed, which may highlight imperfections in theory, or may prove to be not persuasive or meaningful (Maxwell, 2012). Examining both discrepant and supportive data allows for the formation of conclusions which are truly informed by the data (Maxwell, 2012).

In addition, discrepant data is highlighted with the use of numbers and comparisons. Numbers involve numerical results, or quasi-statistics, to make the implicitly quantitative nature of the data precise and explicit (Maxwell, 2012). Numbers enable an assessment of the amount of evidence present in the data, and whether or how many discrepant data sources are present (Maxwell, 2012). Explicit comparison allows for contrast to develop between internal experiences of educators themselves, along with the external beliefs of consultants. This is critical because there may be a disconnect between supports available and supports accessed, or even the awareness of supports which may be assumed available to educators. By comparing beliefs about day home strengths and challenges between educators and consultants, a more full, rich picture of day home realities can become established (Maxwell, 2012).

Chapter 4: Findings

In order to learn more about supporting quality and longevity in Alberta's family day homes, this qualitative study asked the research question, "What are the strengths and challenges of Alberta's contracted day home educators?" Data analysis from the focus groups resulted in nine main themes and 26 sub-themes iteratively derived using open coding, selective coding, and cross-comparison of educator and consultant responses. These themes are grouped into three main categories: strengths, challenges, and areas that can act as strengths or challenges (see Tables 2-4).

Throughout the focus groups, two other topics were brought up repeatedly; the COVID-19 pandemic, and best practices for agencies, consultants, and educators. While both areas are important themes for future research, I do not discuss them as main themes themselves, but rather I have woven them into the findings where applicable, which more accurately replicates the way each topic thread ran through the focus groups.

Building off the themes noted in Table 2, educator strengths include enjoying their work, networking and problem-solving, and advocacy for children and day home educators themselves. Sub-themes of work enjoyment include working with children, and developing relationships over time. Networking and problem-solving contains sub-themes of engaging with others online and in continuing education experiences. A final sub-theme here is problem-solving alone or with others. The last theme in the strength category, advocacy, consists of four sub-themes: advocacy as a strength and a need, advocating for themselves, for the children in their care, and for the profession as a whole.

Challenges day home educators face in their work include themes of guilt and worry impacting time off, issues rising from day homes being treated the same as day cares, and

misperceptions caused by lack of understanding of those working in day homes. The first theme includes the sub-themes of (1) guilt, (2) worry, (3) reducing time off whenever possible, and (4) lack of support for taking time off. Day homes being treated the same as a day care is a theme which includes the sub-themes of (1) continuing education, (2) policy and meeting focus, and (3) the same expectations, with the less support. The last theme, misperceptions caused by lack of understanding, includes sub-themes of (1) day home educators as professionals, not just babysitting, and (2) day homes being seen as lower quality.

The final category of themes which emerged from this research includes elements that may either strengthen or challenge educator ability to offer high-quality care. These three themes are (1) relationships with parents, consultants, and agencies, (2) inclusivity for children's needs and educator needs, and (3) continuing education experiences. The relationship theme is a large category which contains sub-themes of parents being supportive or challenging; individualized support and the consultant-educator relationship; and agency supportive practices, challenging practices, and notes. Inclusivity is a theme including two sub-themes, educator needs and children's needs. Sub-themes which are part of continuing education consist of consultant perspective, educator perspective, and notes. The theme of continuing education encompasses two large sub-themes, consultant perspective and educator perspective.

While findings from the strengths category are brief due to consistency in the findings and unilateral agreement between all participants, the other two categories - of challenges, and areas that can be strengths or challenges - are more complex. There are multiple perspectives to consider, there is diversity and dissonance in experiences that were shared, and there are multiple layers and many factors impacting these themes. As such, the findings in these latter two categories are more detailed and nuanced.

Strengths

Many strengths act as motivating factors for day home educators, supporting their ability to offer high-quality care over extended periods of time. These factors were agreed upon by every educator in the study and seconded by many day home consultants. Enjoying their work, networking and problem-solving, and advocacy were all mentioned frequently as important strengths enabling educator success and longevity.

Educators Enjoying Their Work

Day home educators deeply enjoy their work. One educator commented, "I just like being at home, I like being my own boss, I like the flexibility, not having to stick to a schedule that I assume I would have to if I worked in a preschool or daycare setting." Educators that work in day homes really enjoy their work, and this provides them with energy and motivation to continue offering high-quality care. This aligns with findings of many previous studies (Faulkner et al., 2016; Forry et al., 2013; Swartz, 2013). As mentioned previously, educator enjoying their work is one of the most proximal and influential factors according to Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory.

Working with Children. One of the biggest reasons day home educators enjoy what they do is because they are working with children. Educators commented, "My favorite part of day home is the kids, I just love working with children," and "I love working with kids, mostly because I can play." Consultants also recognized that, for the most part, educators love what they do. They discussed how much educators enjoy the children and families they care for, and more than one mentioned their "big hearts." Their comments indicated that working with children is a joy that provides high levels of satisfaction and an internal motivation for day home educators to offer quality and longevity in childcare.

Developing Relationships Over Time. Being able to encourage children's development over time, "building a village" with day home families, and celebrating life milestones together are important aspects of educators enjoying their work. Educators cite "working with the children, seeing their excitement and learning, [and] developing relationships with the families" as key strengths in their work. One educator explained, "What I love about it is the long-term relationships that I've been able to build. I have some children this year that graduated from high school that … are still my godchildren, and we have that connection."

Educators shared how they loved being "able to build a village around my [own] children with my [day home] families." In the focus groups, stories were shared of children growing up together, becoming best friends, and staying close even after leaving the day home. This was particularly beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when close contacts were few and connections between people were often severed. Educators discussed banding together with their day home families, creating cohorts where children could thrive and adults could support one another amidst the global COVID-19 crisis. In sum, working with children and developing relationships over time were mentioned as integral parts of educators enjoying their work.

Educators Networking and Problem-Solving

This study found that networking is a critical factor enabling educator sustainability and motivation. While educators do reach out to their consultants or agency for support as needed, educators preferred to connect with their peers, stating, "Sometimes you just need to talk to someone who's been through whatever problem you're trying to deal with." Peer connections provide not only networking, but also integral opportunities for relational support. This helps elevate decision-making, because "you can talk to your husband or you can talk to your friend, but unless they are running a day home themselves, they're not really getting it." Networking is

known to be highly beneficial to day home educators, and this finding adds strength to previous research (Bromer & Kormacher, 2017; Porter et al., 2016; Schaack et al., 2017). While educators in this study mentioned enjoying networking and connection at community events, playgrounds, play groups, and more, due to the pandemic the main avenues for networking are currently online, and (when possible) at continuing education events. The relationships that day home educators build through networking over time speaks to both the Person-Process-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), where relational interactions in the context of family day homes offer problem-solving and collaborative benefits, and also to relational theory, as the depth of strength and trust which ensues is made possible by repeated interactions over time (Bromer & Pick, 2012).

Online. The main way that educators' network is online, typically using social media platforms such as *Facebook*. Educators note that these groups have grown exponentially since the beginning of the pandemic and are strong sources of support as they allow connections to grow between educators near and far. Consultants reported that some of their educators also use apps like *Story Park* or *Flock* for networking. Some of these networks are private and others public; some are moderated by an individual or a day home agency, and others are not. Many educators described finding these networks on their own, and one agency mentioned that only a certain section of their day homes was connected with a supportive app.

Continuing Education. Another place where educators enjoyed networking was at continuing education opportunities, including conferences, agency in-services, and workshops. They would arrive early or stay late, taking advantage of the opportunity to brainstorm, problem-solve, and connect with their peers. However, this is one area greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consultants mentioned, "When we would do trainings in person they would stay and

hang around, bounce ideas off of each other, and talk about what they'd learned, whereas now, they're like, "OK bye!", and shut the laptop off." The pandemic has thus reduced educator ability to connect, network, and problem-solve face to face with one another.

Problem-Solving Alone or With Others. The ability to problem-solve was a strength and motivational factor frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Educators discussed brainstorming solutions individually, with one another, and in collaboration with their consultant or agency. Isolation and working alone prompted resourcefulness for solving issues ranging from general to specific, as was the case for one educator who recalled researching a rare syndrome in response to a child in her care who had just been diagnosed.

Educators described being able to recognize problems as they occurred, reflect on the issue, research solutions, and implement them. Educators appreciated problem-solving support from peers and their consultant, but acknowledged limitations, stating that when support was unavailable or inadequate, "I can continue to grow and develop on my own." This dedication to finding solutions - and the drive to seek out strategies from their consultant or peers - serves educators well. They are driven to find the answers to their problems, whether in collaboration with a consultant, peer group, or on their own. Problem-solving in this way serves as one of day home educator's biggest strengths.

Educator Advocacy

Advocacy as a Strength and a Need. Throughout the focus groups, educators and consultants brought up the topic of advocacy. Consultants refer to advocacy as an essential skill for day home educators, stating that educators "have to advocate for their own day home," and also have to advocate for their own needs with the agency. Educators mentioned the need to advocate for themselves, the children in their care, and the profession as a whole. According to

ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), elements of many proximal and distal systems such as government funding and agency policies have a bidirectional impact on educators (see Figure 1). This finding illustrates that though supports may theoretically be in place, educators must exert a lot of effort to attain them. The Person-Process-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) further explains this finding; if processes were smooth and streamlined, educators would not need to exert such effort to receive necessary support. Ideally educators working within the context of family day homes would see these processes improved upon over time, yet this study shows that this is not yet the case.

Advocating for Themselves. Participants noted that educators who run a day home must engage in advocacy to get their needs met. Educators advocate with their agencies to receive the support, training, and resources they need to run their day homes. They also advocate with parents, negotiating days off, hours of childcare, and other daily protocols. A consultant shared that her educators must "ask for [what they need], and ask again, just in case." Though agencies were created and are paid to support day home educators, much of the work to receive that support falls onto the shoulders of day home educators.

Advocating for the Children in their Care. Day home educators in the focus groups frequently mentioned advocating for the children in their care. One educator stated, "I frequently fight … advocate for my day home kids when they need support. I wish that it was more readily available, that I didn't have to advocate so much." Another educator simply said, "We have no help." While advocacy is a strength, the relentless need for it can be exhausting. Sadly, this has led to burnout and exodus from the field; one educator shared, "The majority of my friends have left ECE and moved on. [It's] just too much work for them."

Advocating for the Profession. Day home educators often advocate to change the perception of the field as a whole. Educators say they must "be willing to step forward and advocate for our profession," noting their work to change the perception of day home educators or raise their voices on issues like inclusion, continuing education needs, and the quality of care day home educators provide. Consultants joined them in advocating for the field, sharing anecdotes of how hard they have fought to change the perception of educators. They noted, however, that this is not easy, and can often feel like an isolated battle with nobody listening.

Challenges

The three main challenges day home educators mention they faced in their work are guilt and worry impacting their willingness to take time off, issues resulting from day homes being treated the same as day cares, and misperceptions of what educators working in day homes do. Each of these has a significantly negative impact on educator ability and wellbeing. While both consultants and educators discussed the latter two categories, consultants seemed unaware of the toll that guilt and worry take on day home educators, as neither was mentioned by any consultant in this study's three focus groups.

Guilt and Worry Impacting Time Off

This theme was frequently brought up by educators, triggered by a discussion of their inability to continually be able to offer care to everyone who needs it. Interestingly, consultants did not mention guilt or worry at all, even those who had previously spent years running their own day homes. This theme seemed to be the most concerning and problematic of all day home educator challenges. While time has been mentioned in previous studies as a challenge, due to working for long hours offering childcare and spending additional time outside of formal working hours on necessary day home tasks like cleaning or paperwork (Dev et al., 2020; Jeon et

al., 2018; Lanigan, 2011), guilt, worry, and their impact on time off have not been specifically addressed in prior research.

Negative Effects of Guilt. Almost every educator in the focus groups mentioned feeling guilty for taking time off. One commented, "I want to help people, right? So every time I take time off it's with guilt," and another added, "I have to say my boundaries are so terrible. I still feel guilty taking time off, but I do have it written in my contract now." Even those who write time off into their contract might not take it because, "Can I? Yes. Do I? No. Why? Because I don't want to put people out and put families out."

Only two educators shared that they have no problem taking time off when they need to, saying, "I don't want to ever feel guilty … I deserve those days off paid, no questions asked", or:

> I kind of got over the guilt pretty quickly. I learned very early on to treat it as business
>
> and not personal and everybody else takes vacation days and if I want to be viewed as a
>
> professional, I also deserve those. Just like anybody else in any other business - just
>
> because I'm self employed does not mean that I'm not entitled to that time.

Both expressed a strong sense of self as a business professional, who need time off to function well.

Negative Effects of Worry. Financial worry compounds the guilt that day home educators feel about taking time off, because when they take time off, they generally do not get paid. For example, one educator stated, "I can't take time off because I need my income and I can't be deducted." A consultant added, "They can take vacation, they do take vacation, but … when you're losing a week or two weeks of your income, I think that's challenging."

Educators may forgo much-needed vacation time as a result. As one explained:

That was my big struggle, and that was the reason that I didn't take time off because I

was like I need my income and I can't be deducted. I was like, 'Oh my God that's like

$50 every day for this child!', like the math in my head, and I couldn't spend my vacation

enjoying myself, because I was just like, I'm losing so much money!

This financial struggle is reinforced by some day home agencies, with educators describing that:

We have a clause in our agency contract that says, if I take that time [off], then I owe

credits to the parents for those days so each time I take a week of vacation or whatever

I'd ending up actually paying them for those days which gets kind of expensive.

Educators may worry not only about losing money but about losing families as well. If an

educator takes too much time off, they may be seen as unstable or unreliable, and lose the day

home families needed for their income. While this was not explicitly stated in the focus groups,

there was a strong undercurrent implied in these discussions. For example, educators discussed

going out of their way to please the parents. They reported wanting parents to be happy with

their childcare to such an extent that they neglect their own needs and wellbeing.

Reducing Time Off Whenever Possible. Educators also explained that guilt and worry

drive them to work when they are not at their best, saying, "I didn't take sick days if I could

completely avoid it", and, "Even though I'm having back troubles and I can't straighten my

back, I'll relax in the evening." Guilt and worry also cause day home educators to skip medical

appointments, "putting off those things I probably shouldn't have been putting off." This

includes not attending something as simple and basic as an annual physical exam. Educators long

for this ability, quietly sharing, "I wish we can have paid vacation days or at least one day, every

six months, so we can redo our prescriptions, or you know just go to the doctor, right?"

When educators have no choice but to seek medical care during day home hours, they avoid the guilt and worry of putting families out by bringing day home children with them or rushing back home to them. Educators even reflected on going for necessary medical appointments with a day home child in tow. One recalled:

It's interesting that you mentioned appointments because I remember taking a little boy to a mammogram because there wasn't any other option. They needed my care, and fortunately I had like an older daughter and [so he] didn't actually come into the appointment, but yeah it was very hard for me.

Another rushed home to continue working as soon as possible, even though, "My IUD was like turning around and almost ripped through my uterus and I was like, 'I'll be at home at 10 o'clock!', right, like I don't know why I felt the need to rush home."

Lack of Support for Taking Time Off. Day home educators described avoiding taking time off because they felt guilty about not being able to provide care for the children, and they felt worried about losing money. Some educators said that they attempt to navigate these issues by writing time off policies clearly into their own contract, which is additional to the standardized agency contract between educators and parents. However, even when such individualized policies for time off are in place, day home educators may lack support from parents, who can push back on educator policies, or the agency, which may or may not encourage self-care in the form of time off for sick days or vacation.

One educator who created her own time off policy described push-back from parents:

I've got three weeks' vacation written into my schedule, but it's still an issue, honestly. Like, parents ... thankfully the agency I work for has backup, no-one tends to want to use it, sadly. It's always like, 'Oh, well, you need a day off, what do you need that for, why

are you needing a day off?' so I think a lot of our stuff we put on back burners, because we don't want to let people down.

Other educators found their day home parents to be more supportive, sharing:

I'd consider myself like any other person with a job or a government job. I've been doing this for so long, I deserve time off and I deserve time off with pay. I take five weeks holidays … it took me a long time to figure that out, but I need that time off to be a good day home educator, and my parents have all been supportive.

Day home agencies also vary considerably in their view on educators taking time off, and the amount of support they offer. While every consultant in this study agreed that taking days off is important for educator health and well-being, recognizing, "Vacations are very important," and stating, "You cannot work a full year with no break whatsoever," each agency varied in their view of educators taking time off, and in the amount of support they offered enabling educators to do so, as discussed below.

For example, the majority of agencies involved in this study did not offer training and support helping educators create and uphold time off policies, paid or unpaid. One consultant said of paid vacation time, "That's not an agency policy, so for the most part, our educators are unpaid, but I do know we've got a very small handful of all those educators, probably less than ten, that do their own policy." Another consultant shared, "Over the last year or two some of our educators have been developing their own paid vacation policy but that's tricky." Educators contracted with these agencies are forced to create and uphold their own time off policies, because their agencies are not helping them.

Though educators in this study clearly articulated the need for time off (ideally paid), and note that, "It would be nice if agencies would take that on themselves," the current reality as described by one Alberta consultant is:

> We as an agency encourage annual vacation time because we know it's important for mental health. We can't force them though, to take vacation time, but it's not like when you're working for a company, and if they say, 'Hey you have to take your two weeks or you lose them.'. We can't force an educator to do that.

Other agencies actively support their educators in taking paid days off. For example, many agencies have paid statutory holidays for educators written into the agency contract. Others offer specific training that coaches educators through writing their own policies for paid sick and vacation days. A small number of high-quality agencies enable educators to take time off by offering back-up care themselves. As one educator shared:

> I've had a few doctors' appointments lately, our coordinator will come in and sit and cover those appointments for you, so you don't have to close - you don't have to find somebody - and so that's how they treat doctor's appointments.

A consultant and director of a small rural agency in this study described how she supports not only educator's physical well-being, but also their work-life balance and mental health by covering breaks:

> I will go and be their backup for a morning or an afternoon, so if you have doctor's office or doctor's appointments planned or let's say, they need to take their health or their shots or, you know what, honestly I've told them, even if you want to go and have your nails done for a couple of hours. I will come watch the children for them, and then that's a break hopefully just for them.

Yet the agencies offering this level of support are few and far between. In the focus group quoted above, when I asked, "How many of the rest of you, just again with a show of hands, have like a consultant or a coordinator that will come in, if you have a doctor's appointment like for two hours or four hours?" not one person raised their hand.

Day Homes Treated the Same as Day Cares

Day home agency consultants and educators state that they are often treated in the same way as day cares. This challenging theme detrimentally impacts many areas including continuing education, government support, and policy decisions, as discussed below. Participants noted how being treated the same as day cares creates unrealistic expectations – as well as a lack of informed supports and perpetuation of a system that does not meet the unique needs of day home educators. This finding links in elements of ecological systems theory and the People-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Day home educators are unique, and as such require specialized and individualized supports and licensing expectations (Doherty, 2015; Jeon et al., 2018). Currently, in Alberta they are challenged because the context of day homes is so different than day care, yet they are perceived of and treated as having the same abilities and needs. The effects of being treated in the same way as day cares permeate every level of the ecological system and can be better understood via the PPCT model, because while the processes and people are largely the same (educators and government supports or standards), the context is so different that these supports and expectations are misaligned and highly challenging.

Continuing Education. Consultants and educators in this study both found that continuing education and training opportunities routinely focus exclusively on day care environments. "A lot of the courses are day care, and not necessarily day home," mentioned one

educator. One consultant explained, "As far as going to something that would be directly pertinent to what I do, I never found that," even in a conference specifically designed for day home staff. The other consultants in her focus group all nodded in agreement.

This was described as highly problematic. Educators emphasized the fact that, "We are not the same as a day care. We are unique and different and need to be treated that way." Consultants recognized that, "What works in other situations is not gonna work in a day home." While this awareness is clearly recognized by those working directly in or with day homes, for external instructors or those new to the field, they may lack knowledge and awareness of this striking difference. A consultant recalls that when she first started working, "I was thinking, I know day care, day homes is easy!" She noted, however, that "NOTHING was the same."

Policy and Meeting Focus. The challenge of day homes being seen the same as day cares is also present at the government level, where many policies are created and discussions held that focus exclusively on day cares. Consultants are particularly aware of this, especially in town hall meetings; several vented that, "It's always all about day cares." This has led to some agencies pulling back from such government meetings, and recognizing the need for more day home specific supports:

> To be very honest with you, I attend maybe one out of every five or six of those
> director's meetings because it's always about daycares, so in that way it would be nice to
> have, I don't care if you're from Calgary or Fort McMurray, you know, just to have that
> bond like you said of [day home] directors that, you know, we all have the same needs.

Same Expectations, Less Support. Day homes are also challenged by being treated the same as day cares, while receiving much less support. One consultant said, "There's a lot expected of them when they're just one person", and further explained:

They don't get a 15-minute break in the morning, a 15-minute break in the afternoon and an hour for lunch and, unlike daycare, you know, where you go off with your team to do your program planning for the week, they have to do that on their own, usually on their own time. They don't have a cook or catering bringing in their meals every day they're doing that, so I think sometimes expectations of them very high when they're on their own.

Educators also recognize that expectations are high and may be unrealistic:

Even the agencies, when they have these expectations that we need to be documenting, we need to be putting on *Story Park*, social news, special days … it's like, 'Oh let's see all your ideas,' or some days the infant is crying all day and two year old's are fighting and you have these expectations put on you and it's only you, so I think that's probably my biggest thing on negative effects of being in this field is we can't do it all.

Having to do it all yourself means that there may be not enough time in a day. Educators disclosed, "The only barrier is time; there's just not enough hours in the day to do everything that I want to do", and that "What I would change is having more time for preparation, cleaning, continuing education, all those kinds of things." Consultants add, "The care is never the question, and the safety is never the question, it's the paperwork that is the challenge", emphasizing that "[Educators] give a lot of their own personal time outside of their day home hours to make their business run."

Misperceptions of Day Home Educators

While day homes are treated the same as day cares and are expected to meet the same standards with less supports, day home educators report often feeling seen as much lower quality, barely qualifying as early childhood educators at all. This was one of the most

concerning challenges mentioned by day home educators and their consultants. When I asked focus groups of educators what they wished they could change about running a day home, the answer I repeatedly received was, "The perception that we're just babysitters or that I'm just sitting on my couch eating chocolates and watching soap operas while kids are going chaos [sic] around me." This finding is strengthened by previous studies illustrating the same point (Faulkner et al., 2016; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). It also illustrates a proximal process within the PPCT model by which relationships characterized by lack of respect (Bromer & Pick, 2012) and in which they are seen as less-than, negatively impact self-worth and self-efficacy over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Professionals, Not Just Babysitting. Day home educators report being seen as just babysitters by parents, other early childhood educators, and society as a whole, commenting, "I think a lot of parents still don't look at educators as educators; they do look at them as a babysitter." One consultant added, "Even within the whole childcare community day homes, whether you're approved or you're private, [day home educators] seem to be something that isn't really looked upon as a professional, you know, like, 'My educators are babysitters' type of thing." Consultants noted that this misperception persists even though they have "worked really hard to try and get that perspective changed."

Day Homes Seen as Lower Quality. Another intense challenges educators working in contracted day homes face is being seen as lower quality because of the type of childcare centre they work in. Day home educators say, "I'm a professional and I would really love to be seen that way." Others described, "I find we are looked at as second rate, second class to day cares". Day home educators can be seen as less-than, but often offer more with less. They meet or exceed the same licensing standards and regulations of day cares or any other childcare setting.

Educators in the focus groups of this study explained, "My day home program is by far a higher quality just because it's easy for me to load children into my van and go and do a field trip," illustrating how the low ratios inherent in day homes often allow programming to be more flexible, responsive, and attuned to individual children's needs. Indeed, one educator expressed, "I feel we are more superheroes than the people in daycares," because they care for mixed age groups and manage to meet all licensing requirements without the benefit of breaks or support from another adult during the workday.

As consultants in this study described, "They're given 2 messages: you've got to be at the top of your game, and you've got society saying you're just a babysitter."

Elements that Strengthen or Challenge Educator Ability

There are three themes that offer potential to act as strengths or challenges for day home educators. Relationships with parents, consultants, and agencies; inclusivity for children's needs and educator needs; and continuing education opportunities were described by different individuals as supportive or detrimental, depending on their own experiences. Examining these areas and offering recommendations for best practice were topics of deep discussion by participants.

Relationships with Parents, Consultants, and Agencies

The main professional relationships experienced by day home educators are with their day home parents, consultant, and agency. Each of these relationships influences educators in supportive or challenging ways. In the focus groups of this study, educators and consultants shared experiences and best practices outlining what helps and what hinders day home educator ability to succeed. These relationships are depicted in Figure 1, and act as strong proximal impacts on day home educators. The PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) is

explanatory here, as in the context of family day homes, relational interactions between people over time contributes to their sense of self and informs how they are perceived and treated.

Relationships with Parents. Some of the closest relationships educators can develop are with parents of children attending their day home. This relationship has the potential to be supportive or challenging, as described by both consultants and educators. Educators that feel supported by day home parents shared comments like, "I've had good relationships with most of my parents", and "I love working with my parents." Consultants note that this "improves day home experience, [and] creates a cohesive environment for the child." Specific examples given of supportive parents are those that respect boundaries of working hours and time off, parents that are able to work in a positive partnership with the day home educator, and having a relationship that balances personal and professional elements.

Positive relationships with parents can grow when they respect educator's need for work-life balance and taking time off. This is important because educators already work such long hours, as one educator noted:

> I'm up at five every morning. My first little one shows up at seven or just before seven, and the last one doesn't leave until five or just after five. So, ten hours a day, five days a week - it's hard to get a work-life balance in there going.

To some, the issue of parents dropping a child off early or picking them up late may sound trivial, but those minutes of extra care add up to hours of more work over the course of a week.

Educators also find it challenging when parents push back against their need to take time off, recalling, "Sometimes you can have parents who are very negative when you have to take a day off." Others noted that parents may even ask for care on the weekend or outside of formal operating hours, challenging the boundaries that an educator is trying to maintain.

Creating a positive partnership is a critical element of the educator-parent relationship. Educators and consultants shared that this happens when both parties work together to meet the needs of the child, and when parents value and take time to appreciate the work of the educator. Working together and showing appreciation allow the relationship between a day home educator and parents to become strong and trust-based over time, which also benefits the children being cared for (Cortes & Hallen, 2014).

Parents working in partnership with their day home educator is critically important, especially if the child has unique needs. For example, educators noted that when a child needs developmental support, "If parents are not advocating, I'm getting no support." This issue is discussed further below in the theme of inclusivity.

Parents offering feedback is also an important part of creating a strong supportive relationship. Consultants recognized that "it's nice just to get that little boost of confidence … and it strengthens their relationships with families." Educators added, "I felt valued when I got feedback" from parents, and "When you got the feedback, it was good, you know, but when you didn't, you didn't know."

Unfortunately, some participants noted that parents do not seem to notice or care about what day home educators do for their children. Consultants mentioned that sometimes they "think parents are not as involved as they could be." Educators recalled some parents as having a "lack of awareness [and] lack of realization of what we actually do." This comment was expanded on by one consultant who said:

> They put all this effort in to doing their program plan and their meal plan or whatever, and parents aren't even looking at it. Or doing their daily infant schedule and parents

aren't looking at it, so I think sometimes that causes an educator to go, 'Why do I bother?'.

The last area where the relationship between educator and parent can be supportive or unsupportive is the level of professionalism in the relationship. The strongest relationships are those that maintain a supportive relationship with families, while maintaining professional distance and not crossing the line into a friendship. In contrast, when educators have little or no boundaries and establish a relationship with day home parents that is more like a friendship than a business relationship, lines of responsibility can become blurry and cause challenges. As one consultant mentioned:

> If you're getting too much friendlier, if you're getting too close to the families, it's hard to request them to make any changes … It's harder for them to communicate when they're too, like, asking favors from each other. If you're five minutes late it's just considered like, 'Oh they're just doing a favor to me', and then later, it becomes an issue.

The level of engagement that parents have with their day home educator is also an area where participants noted that relationships can develop positively or negatively, depending on the balance between personal and professional behaviours. A parent who is very distant can come across as uncaring or not appreciative of what an educator does. On the opposite end of the spectrum, parents can be too involved in the day home, and try to monitor or control minute details. For example, consultants shared stories of certain parents trying to dictate the menu plan or daily schedule, which can be very challenging for an educator to manage.

Focus group participants reported that the ideal relationship between educators and parents is characterized by support, respect, and collaboration. Ideally parents would respect educator working hours and need time for time off and, when required, advocate for

development support for their children when required to create a wraparound care environment. They noted that supportive parents also value and recognize the hard work educators do, taking time to offer feedback and appreciating the documentation and planning educators offer.

Participants further noted that educators in supportive relationships with parents take care to maintain a close professional atmosphere where families are connected, but do not create blurred boundaries by sliding into friendships or doing each other favors. They also suggested that educators also uphold boundaries of working hours and need for time off. Finally, educators mentioned that "parents maybe need some education," noting that it "would really be a good thing for them to have some education and some knowledge of behind the scenes, I guess, of what running a day home is really like." Such parent education would increase parental knowledge of the need for educator work-life balance, and the need for educators to take time off occasionally.   Consultants and educators in this study also called for agencies to foster a strong parent-educator relationship by offering education for parents outlining the importance of respecting educator boundaries of working hours and time off, working in a positive partnership with the day home educator, and in building a relationship that balances personal and professional elements. They noted that this could increase the strength and trust in educator-parent relationships, decreasing conflict and creating wraparound supports for children in care. The need for setting up specific expectations of relationship dynamics following these best practices was clearly articulated and recognized by day home consultant and educator focus group participants in this study.

Relationships with Consultants. The next sub-category in the theme of relationships as a strength or a weakness is relationships with consultants. The closest relationship an educator has with their agency is through their consultant. However, participants noted that these

relationships vary considerably in their supportiveness and what consultants are enabled to offer, resulting in a consultant-educator dynamic that can strengthen or challenge day home educator abilities.

Educators and consultants in the focus groups both brought up the importance of individualized support in the educator-consultant relationship. The most critical chance to offer support occurs during the once-monthly visits a consultant makes to the day home. This brief visit, which usually lasts for just one hour, can act as either a strength or a challenge for educators and consultants alike.

Educators who felt supported during home visits mentioned consultants that take the time to read a story to the children and offer the educator a break, or who brought individualized resources for the educator's unique needs. Their consultants were able to balance the requirements of the agency during home visits, and meet the needs of the individual educator they were spending time with. The resulting quality of the visit strengthened the consultant-educator relationship. As one educator shared, "really good coordinators and agencies, they make all the difference, I find."

However, not every consultant has the time or motivation to offer such individualized support to their educators. One educator expressed, "I just wish she can come sit down with the kids, read for them, just give me those 10 minutes, 10-minute break because I don't get any breaks at all." Another educator shared details of how she continually feels under-supported during consultant day home visits, describing how her consultants always follows the rote pattern of offering a book for the children and a generalized list of resources she had already engaged with, before taking a picture of the children and leaving. This educator said she had given up hope of individualized support being offered by her consultant, and had come to the

disappointing realization that, "I can continue to grow and develop on my own, and my agency can support me, but not necessarily in that way that I need." Another educator who has since closed her day home flatly stated, "I feel like I really didn't get a lot from my consultant … They weren't a huge resource to me, to be honest."

Consultants also agreed that individualized support is important for the relationship that they build with their educators, sharing that when they could make time to focus just on educator needs and support, they saw powerfully positive results. Consultants recommended offering remote support by phone or email throughout the day as needed, and during home visits every other month coming without a perfunctory agency agenda, instead viewing the visit as a chance to focus on educator needs during home visits every other month. One consultant observed:

Sometimes because I'm not doing checklist visits this month I'm going in and what we call our quality enhancements, where it's a little bit more relaxed. And so, I see that as a time to sort of really think about [individual support and quality enhancements].

Making time to support individual educator needs was described by consultants in these focus groups as important for the educator-consultant relationship, yet, they noted that "It takes much more effort and work to practice that." One consultant shared that what she "really wish[ed and] would like to change the most is that I had more time to visit them more often once a month," noting that "it never quite seems enough." Another expanded on this to explain:

I'm driving to work and I'm like I have this checklist of what I want to do today; I wonder if I'll get three quarters of it done because everything else comes up in the meantime. We all have these amazing intentions, but sometimes it can just be. I've got an angry parent who's fed up because their child was sent home because they've got a runny

nose and now I've got to deal with that when …what I did want was to have a chat with my educator about the ARCQE course.

The challenge of balancing roles mentioned above increases the demands on consultant's time. Many consultants found it difficult to even arrange to attend a focus group because they had various other roles in the agency such as enrolling new families or completing payroll. Consultants also struggle to balance areas of tension between educator needs, parent needs, and agency or licensing needs and requirements. They find it very challenging to manage all of their responsibilities, and as a result meeting educator needs may not be possible.

Consultants also mention that the Ministry of Children's Services is frequently announcing new changes to rules and regulations, but not the specific details of how to enact them. These rapid changes happened even before the pandemic, as new licensing was announced and accreditation axed in record time (Government of Alberta, 2021b; Johnson, 2020). As a result of these regular changes, consultants and agencies are often left scrambling, sending multiple emails and phone calls to decipher exact expectations and how to best fulfill the new obligations.

Additionally, participants described the agencies as siloed, largely isolated and disconnected from one another. This lack of inter-agency connection means that each agency or consultant must reach out to the Ministry on their own, as consultants have no quick way to check in with other agencies to see how they are handling things. As a result, the time that each individual agency or consultant must spend figuring out the new guidelines increases.

The final and largest challenge that consultants noted that they face in their role—which centers on their ability to build strong consultant-educator relationships—is lack of networking. Consultants repeatedly made comments like, "I think consultants also do really feel supported

when they can be networked and they can ask each other questions," and "Being together is helpful." They were eager to take advantage of the opportunities to connect and network even within the focus groups, noticing, "It is really nice to see that all of us are seeing the same, thing, having the same experience." Indeed, within the focus groups I witnessed consultants brainstorming, problem-solving, and networking together. Despite my pleas for confidentiality, at the end of one consultant focus group they each rapidly declared the agency they worked with, in what I interpreted as an attempt to maintain the supportive connections created within the focus group itself.

Two key features were mentioned by educators as being integral to a strong and supportive relationship with their consultant. Educators strongly valued long-term relationships with their consultants. The following conversation between three educators from different agencies highlights the power of a long-term relationship:

"I have a good consultant, and we've been working together since I started, going on twenty-one years."

"That's like unfathomable to me, I had so many, so much turnover in our agency, and it was just, it was hard to develop a relationship with somebody, right? They come three or four times and then there's somebody new, so…"

"I feel the same way, whether it was even the same people in the office, but just a different consultant. I've never had a regular one, ever."

While it is not always possible to have a relationship between educator and consultant that lasts twenty-one years, ensuring continuity with a bridging visit where the outgoing consultant introduces the new consultant to an educator can go a long way in easing the transition and maintaining that connection. Educators advised, "When they're bringing someone

new into your home, they have to bring someone in that you trust and have a relationship with." Thus, long-term relationships and taking time to ease the transition from one consultant to another, when necessary, are powerful features of a supportive educator-consultant relationship.

Consultant experience running a day home themselves was the most frequently mentioned strength of an educator-consultant relationship by participants. Educators find this background invaluable, making comments like, "The best consultants are ones that would have run a day home. They get what it's like", and "I think the best consultants were ones that had had a day home at some point." Consultants with day home experience of their own understand the daily realities of running a day home. As such, the knowledge they hold and support they can offer is substantial.

Three best practices are recommended to maintain a strong and supportive relationship between educators and their consultants. First is the intentional use of consultant time during educator home visits. Focus group discussions illustrated that agencies play a pivotal role here, because they have the capability to manage and prioritize consultant duties. Second, from the focus groups it seemed clear that consultants themselves would be more supported by networking and engaging with one another within and across agencies. Third, the focus groups also illustrated that best practices supporting strong consultant-educator relationships include agencies prioritizing long-term relationships between educators and their consultant, by decreasing consultant turnover and allowing the opportunity for trust and strength to develop over time. These best practice recommendations mentioned by consultants and educators in this study would all result in increased consultant ability to build a strong and supportive consultant-educator relationship.

Relationships with Agencies. The agency a day home educator contracts with has a lot of influence over educator experiences, which is the last category in the theme of relationships acting as a strength or a challenge. Though all agencies have to meet minimum basic requirements set out by Alberta licensing, there is a lot of variability in how individual agencies meet these standards. For example, some may offer training almost exclusively that they have created themselves, while others may focus on hiring external experts for monthly training opportunities. Some charge a fee to educators upon joining, to cover office administration costs of opening a new day home, while others offer their day home educators a start-up grant. Consultants in this study shared that each agency has a different set-up and a different approach to meeting licensing standards. As a result of these differences, educators and consultants had widely ranging views on agency support.

Some educators have very positive experiences with their agency, stating, "Any time I have questions or issues I can call [my agency] any time, and they are right there helping me with anything I need." Others mentioned that they were able to lean on their agency for support, recalling, "I don't want to have to deal with money, nagging parents. [They can] call the agency, talk to them." However, others feel less supported or even challenged by their day home agency. One educator complained, her agency has a tendency toward "pleasing the parents and families over the educators."

Some consultants also shared disappointment with their agency's policies. While every consultant in this study said they really enjoyed their work, some found their agency to be more supportive than others. One consultant lamented that because her agency has been so safety-focused lately, they have been driven to meet licensing standards while neglecting educator relationships and supports. Each agency meets the same government standards differently, and

those differences directly results in the agency or consultant acting as a strength, or as a challenge.

This can pose significant difficulties for educators who only have two choices when day home agencies do not meet educator expectations or needs: they can choose to stay or leave, either to operate unlicensed or to choose a different agency if there is one available. Changing agencies was highly beneficial for one educator, who said, "I am now currently contracting with the second agency that I'm working with because the first agency, I found, didn't support me. They didn't have that, and that made my job very, very difficult." A second educator who still feels unsupported chose to simply stay:

> I actually looked into switching to a different agency, but I was like I'm just working from the ground up again and moving all the families over and it's just such a pain. So, I'm staying where I've been for the last 17 years … I can continue to grow and develop on my own, and my agency can support me, but not necessarily in that way that I need.

Experienced educators emphasize the importance of researching an agency before signing a contract and making an intentional choice, because "a good agency is a really good support." Learning what agencies offer before a contract is signed was one tip for success brought up regularly in the focus groups.

However, some educators are not with an agency for support at all. They choose to join because there is no other option for becoming licensed. For example, one educator stated, "I want to be licensed for the license, for that status", and:

> The reason I did get licensed was because I wanted to be able to present my day home in a professional manner, so that was the main reason I got licensed, and I didn't ever get a lot from my consultant.

These educators are highly self-sufficient and were able to satisfactorily run their contracted day homes even without adequate agency support or ability to meet their needs.

Inclusivity

Similar to relationships, inclusivity is a theme described in this study as a strength or a challenge, for educator needs and for the needs of children attending day homes. Inclusivity is a topic that was not part of the semi-structured interview guide for this research, yet it arose spontaneously in several educator focus groups. Though consultants did not comment on inclusivity, educators repeatedly brought this topic up in regard to children's needs and their own needs as educators. This finding was not mentioned in any known prior research.

Inclusivity for Children's Needs. In a day home, just as in a day care, there will be a small percentage of children who need additional supports. While every educator in this study acknowledged working with children who required specialized supports over the years, some educators received much more support for children they cared for than others. Educators who lived in rural communities unanimously experienced greater ease in accessing support, and greater amounts of support from community professionals, than those living in cities. This was intriguing because it could easily be assumed that the opposite is true, as there are more supports available in cities with much less driving time. However, rural day home educators receiving a significant amount of support all had extensive networks and collaborative partnerships with the resources in their community. As one explained:

> I work actually for quite a small agency, and a little bit of a different situation out here. I'm in rural Alberta, and my agency actually falls under the purview of our counties family community and social services group, so that gives me a little bit [of support] too, because then I am quite in touch with all of the FCSS [Family and Community Support

Services] supports that we have in the area … so there's a lot of like community

programs and stuff that I'm aware of.

Another rural educator added, "I have a network out here. I've developed a network, so I know

the health nurses and I know the speech language pathologist and the occupational therapist, and

I do get them with the health nurses."

One of the biggest differences in receiving support may be not just geographical location,

but also the type of agency. Rural agencies are more likely to be not-for-profit, run by

community organizations like FCSS rather than as a sole proprietorship or corporation, and may

be in remote locations with histories of once having no agency at all. This has been highly

beneficial for a third rural educator, who described her experience:

> Because I'm in a rural community and my coordinator is 40 minutes away, I don't have
>
> the same interaction as a lot would do, but also in the most part of my career, there was
>
> no agency. I worked directly under licensing authority, so I have no issue with sending an
>
> email to my local licensing officer and just connecting that way and getting resources and
>
> whatever from them.

This ease in accessing supports for children was not shared by those working in cities.

Educators in large urban areas commented, "Day home children that [need help] sometimes get

left behind." This may because they attend a day home rather than larger, centre-based care:

> I really wish that there was better developmental supports for children ...that they get in
>
> centers, because they do get so much more support there, and I think that day homes
>
> aren't seen as needing those things, whereas those children can absolutely need those
>
> supports.

Educators shared that day care centres have more supports built in, and that accessing support for children attending a day care is a much more streamlined process. After all, "Parents in a day care, they sign a consent form and it's done for them", whereas in a day home, the parent has to be willing to advocate or "You're not gonna get any of the supports."

Even when parents do advocate, support for the child may not be appropriate or adequate. For example, day homes can receive second space funding, where they are paid to keep one space empty so they have more time and energy to devote to a child's high needs, but that's not always what the educator or child needs. Educators also mentioned that even when specialists are available they do not offer a lot of support for the day home educator, who typically cares for the child in the majority of their waking hours.

Many educators with urban agencies also reported that they did not feel support from key players within the agency. They shared high levels of frustration, because when it is clear a child is struggling and more support is needed, but nobody will step in to offer support or increase access, the child can be left behind. Educators explain, "I frequently fight for my day home kids or advocate for my day home kids when they need support. I wish that it was more readily available, that I didn't have to advocate so much."

Inclusivity for Educator Needs. Inclusivity is a theme of strengths and challenges addressing both inclusivity for children, and community inclusivity for day home educator needs. Participants noted that day home educators wanting to take the children into the community for an outing or external programming have several options. They can attend local play groups, library programs, or events hosted by organizations like Parent Link. Educators recognized just how much they thrive with community support, saying, "That human-to-human, adult-to-adult contact was something that I needed to in order to continue going, so play groups were for a

huge one for me", and, "[I was] big on going out with the kids, so I often I went to multiple playgroups. I'd always be sure I had a minivan, that was just something that I had to have so that I could take the kids."

> This is one of the most significant areas that the pandemic has detrimentally impacted: With COVID I really miss the play groups, because there was a group of us providers that would go in and, you know, get that adult interaction, while our kids played together and they got more than just our tiny little group.

Other educators added,

> Pre-COVID, similar to [anonymous], I would go to all kinds of different programs with my day home kids. We would go to parents and tot's groups, so they would meet all the other children in the community, and we would go to art days and music days and things like that, and that was a huge support because I would meet other people, other educators and other, even just parents.

Educators deeply missed these pre-pandemic experiences, because during lock-down, "Nobody could leave their home … You're not going to the parent link places. You're not meeting up with your neighbors. You don't leave the house because it's winter, you know? People were really cut off." These educators clearly described community resources as being beneficial for themselves, in terms of adult connection, networking, and problem-solving, but also beneficial for day home children, who can expand their own network of friends and enjoy nurturing experiences.

However, at some programs day home educators are warmly welcomed, whereas others may actually ask them to not come back. After one educator shared how welcoming and beneficial she found her local Parent Link centre to be, the following focus group conversation occurred:

"It's funny you mentioned the Parent Link because I did access that, and I didn't find them as welcoming to providers."

"Oh, they are here."

"I almost found I brought too many children for them."

This last educator went on to relate that it is not just Parent Link that may exclude day homes, adding, "I've been asked not to attend the story time program at the library because my group is just too big."

Continuing Education Experiences

Day home consultants and educators also had a lot to say about continuing education. Some opportunities were more helpful than others, or more accessible. As consultants often create or offer training themselves on behalf of their agency, they reflected on their experiences offering and gathering feedback from trainings, while educators shared the ways they found agency continuing education opportunities to be more or less helpful. Due to these different perspectives, this theme is divided into both consultant and educator perspectives. For the purpose of this discussion, the terms continuing education, professional development, and training opportunities or workshops will be used interchangeably. This finding echoes what has been shown in previous research (Porter & Bromer, 2015; Tovar et al., 2015), where professional development is known to have the potential to be highly supportive, yet is frequently inaccessible or misaligned with day home needs. Indeed, ecological systems theory and the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) highlight the potential that continuing education opportunities have to influence both consultants, educators, and the entire context or system they work in as a whole (see Figure 1).

Consultant Perspective. While the main focus of this study was on day home educators, consultants revealed that their own experiences with continuing education were often less than ideal. As described above, even in conferences specifically created to support day home consultants, workshops offered often did not directly pertain to the consultant role. Rather, consultants in this study found that continuing education opportunities focus predominantly on day care environments, and that the only specific training they receive is through their agency in the form of mentoring and on-the-job training.

Several consultants did recall a training that had been created by the Alberta Family Child Care Association years ago, but lack of instructors to offer the training, and lack of funds and time to update it, have resulted in this ambitious project being shelved. The training guide was referred to by consultants in this study as "that dusty purple binder" that sits on a shelf, and one consultant said, "I can't recall ever actually reading it, don't recall anyone facilitating it … it fell by the wayside very quick."

When I asked about other training that had been offered to them, consultants replied with comments like, "I personally have gotten nothing", "We've just got our own training plan", and, "As far as something that would be directly pertinent to what I do, I haven't found that yet." One consultant expanded on this to say, "I think we're underrepresented when we're offered opportunities as consultants and agency staff. I don't think sometimes … conferences that are available ... are not really geared to day homes."

However, both consultants and educators found the *Flight* (Makovichuk et al., 2014) training to be highly beneficial. *Flight*: *Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (2014) is available as a 22-week full course from MacEwan University or as a 6-week condensed course called *Possibilities for Practice* offered by Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement.

These programs are both found to be inclusive, with enough space to offer seats to day home educators and consultants, and offer more in-depth opportunities for growth than the more common "one-and-done" trainings at conferences or in-services. Comments shared from educators and consultants include, "*Flight* is an amazing program", "With *Flight* you can get so much deeper, there's so much to learn every time … wonderful opportunities are opening up", and "*Flight* so far has been really good, I've really enjoyed it." The only complaint was that it can be a weighty or heavy course for some educators, so consultants recommend a more introductory program geared toward Level 1 educators.

Beyond receiving training themselves, many consultants are also tasked with creating continuing education opportunities for educators contracted with their agency. Consultants advise that this is a time-consuming endeavor, because creating a training is a lot of work. They may also question their ability to do so, but sometimes have no other option. A consultant remembered recognizing "where educators needed more support ... and saying, 'I guess we're creating a training on program planning - am I qualified to do this? I guess so, 'cause I'm gonna do a presentation on this now!'"

Continuing education has been one of the areas most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdown forced agencies to change the way they offered trainings, moving from in-person to online opportunities. Moving professional development from in-person to online due to lockdowns has significantly increased educator access to training opportunities. Consultants reported that this has resulted in markedly improved attendance, as barriers such as childcare, lack of a vehicle, or reluctance to drive at night or in winter weather were all overcome when training was offered online. Workshops became like podcasts, where educators could listen and learn while doing the dishes or watching over their own children in the evening.

However, there are downsides to online learning as well. The biggest drawback mentioned by consultants was the lack of networking, and the lack of face-to-face connection for educators. In-person workshops see educators hanging around and making small talk afterward, while online trainings typically result in people signing off as soon as the training is over.

Consultants mentioned struggling with lack of face-to-face contact for additional reasons as well, because—in addition to offering training—they are also tasked with assessing how much educators receive from the training. With webcams off and microphones muted, consultants wondered, "How much education was being received versus just that attendance credit was being given." The feedback that consultants seek largely centers on what educators find helpful, what they appreciate, and how they plan on applying the training in their day home practice. Consultants also disclosed that they rarely, if ever, asked whether the trainings might not be helpful, what educators would change, or if there were barriers due to instructor knowledge and ability, or training focus and applicability that would prevent them from applying it in their day home practice.

In-person workshops also offered the opportunity for what consultants perceived as a break. While our society is becoming more aware of the inequities in tasks women face at work and at home, resulting in catch phrases like "the second shift" (Hoschild & Machung, 2012) or "motherload" (Dickinson, 1999; Maclean et al., 2021), and a call for recognition that activities like grocery shopping without children is not self-care or a break for women (Spalding, 2021), consultants announced:

> The one thing we do hear about our workshops again not being in person, that was a
>
> break for them, even though it was in the evening, they didn't have their children with
>
> them, they came and they connected and we often did snacks and refreshments. And we

did door prizes so we made it fun, that was a break, so these conferences and workshops

that they're not getting right now they're a break for them.

Educator Perspective. Day home educator experiences with continuing education shared

by participants were divergent. Some felt satisfied with the continuing education opportunities

they are aware of and have received, while others did not feel supported by the topics and quality

of continuing education available. Examining the different perspectives and experiences shared

by educators in this study provides rich descriptions of how continuing education may support or

challenge educator abilities.

Day home educators in this study reported that they had received continuing education

opportunities from a wide variety of sources, including on-line workshops and articles, reading

books, or attending agency workshops or annual conferences on early childhood education. One

expressed:

> I think that there's also so many trainings available that it's almost like an overflooding.
>
> Like everything's online, you can sign up for this workshop or this workshop, there's
>
> probably like five hundred workshops on how to help picky eaters.

Educators describe that they learned about professional development opportunities

online, from peers, and from their consultant. However, some were more aware of these

opportunities than others. Some educators received lists of resources and training opportunities

during monthly visits or in agency newsletters, while others commented, "I've never been sent

any webinars" or other opportunities for external continuing education, and that, "A lot of times

we get emails for training opportunities that are not entirely relevant."

Educators also reported that frequently, trainings were not helpful because they were

created with minimal effort, repetitive, or yet another introductory level course:

"The first agency I worked with, they would throw up a PowerPoint and read you a PowerPoint and that would be your training, right? And some of this stuff you're looking at going, I could have Googled that and spent ten minutes on that."

"Do you go to another nutritional thing when you've already been to five?"

"I always found that the workshops were more, intro to this and intro to that, and I've been doing this for so long that I don't need an intro anymore, I need in depth, and I want to learn deeper."

However, many educators offered more positive comments, "My agency was great about putting on workshops every month", and "The agency, once a month, they had an information session on a different topic and I always I enjoyed those. I tried my best to go to those." Educators most appreciated continuing education and training opportunities that were respectful of their time and work-life balance, though for some this meant missing out:

It was tough on me, because I didn't want to give up my weekends. My weekends were the only time I had to myself… like any other profession, most conferences are during the week, during workdays … It's challenging enough when your work is in your home to get that family time – I wasn't willing to give up a weekend. I feel I missed out on some of those valuable training opportunities because of the boundaries that I set.

A consultant mentioned that she had also noticed educators striving to keep professional development in the work week, like taking time off for the required first aid recertification. She commented on educators "Making sure you keep your Saturdays and Sundays sacred as your personal time and working that Monday to Friday, if you have to do professional development, if you have to do first aid."

Other challenges educators face beyond finding time to attend trainings are transportation, location, cost, and lack of specificity. If an educator does not have a vehicle or is not comfortable driving at night or in winter weather, they cannot attend certain trainings. Rural educators mentioned challenges of the drive time to travel to conferences in the city, a trip that could potentially take hours out of their day. Some training opportunities are costly, and up until very recently day home educators were barred from receiving the same grant funding that every other educator working in a licensed childcare program was awarded. Finally, many workshops were geared towards parents or day cares, and not targeted to or appropriate for day home educators. This led to some educators agreeing with consultants that, "A lot of the courses are day care, and not necessarily day home," and sharing that what they really valued "for the most part was collaboration with other providers rather than the actual workshop." Educators also realized that the experiences and qualifications of those leading the training mattered, because "Unless they are running a day home themselves, they are not really getting it."

While the above findings focus on agency workshops and other short training opportunities, many day home educators are striving to obtain more formal continuing education in the form of working toward a diploma or a degree. Very recent changes to grant funding have increased access to formal education, as after years of being asked, the Ministry of Children's Services finally granted those working in day homes the same continuing education funding as other early childhood educators working in a licensed childcare centre. As outlined in the *Alberta Child Care Grant Funding Guide* (2021), this funding covers up to $500 per year for workshops and conferences, and up to $1,500 per year for post-secondary courses and textbooks. The new guide also includes a release time grant, where educators are reimbursed $800 for every course

they take, and $17.50 per hour for attending workshops and conferences (Government of Alberta, 2021a).

Yet even with the funding, educators are facing significant barriers with continuing education. A lot of post-secondary institutions are full, leading educators to state, "I have this funding but can't get into any courses … what's the point of this funding?" Another educator clearly described this dilemma along with an idea for a potential solution:

Level 3 is completely full for the January semester, you can't even get in until probably another two semesters away, so to further my education I'd have to wait a year to try to get into some of my diploma courses. There's some messed up situation going on about they want us to get educated then don't help us at all get educated. I think they need to set some kind of schooling, that the providers that are already in the field that are working should have their own schooling, so we can go in and get our education, because trying to do it when there's all these eighteen-year-old's taking up a program, it's hard.

Another large barrier educators reported facing in continuing their formal education is completing their practicum. While some universities and colleges recognize the high-quality care offered in contracted day homes, other do not allow day home educators to complete their practicum despite the licensed childcare they provide. As day home educators run businesses which they cannot close without losing all of their clientele and income—and many are mothers themselves who have created a life where they can provide childcare for their own children without having to pay for it—the implications of not being able to do a practicum in your own day home are daunting. Educators shared, "I've completed all the courses, I've just run into the problem of getting the practicums done." When educators persist to overcome these barriers, they may find that time presents a large challenge. An educator describes her career as her first

thought every morning and night, as, "Having a day home and trying to get your education is all-consuming."

Best Practices. Best practices were outlined by both consultant and day home educator participants, who offered guidance and feedback on ways continuing education can be more supportive. First, focus group discussions illustrated that continuing education should be targeted to the experiences and unique needs of day home educators and consultants. As noted, their work is not the same as that of day care staff, and as such their training needs to be approached differently. Participants noted that the best way to do this is to ensure that those offering training generally have day home experience themselves. When that is not possible, care should be taken that training offered is informed by the daily realities of educator and consultant experiences and abilities. Participants stressed that offering informed, targeted training for both day home educators and consultants would greatly improve the strength and support of such opportunities.

Second, participants noted that continuing education needs to be available. If post-secondary programs are full, day home educators cannot work toward their degree or diploma. If courses are only offered during the daytime, they are largely not accessible to day home educators. If courses are only available in-person, those lacking transportation or the ability to drive at night cannot attend. Finally, continuing education that does not allow an educator to complete their practicum in their contracted day home means that many educators have reached a stand-still in their coursework, and may not ever be able to complete their diploma or degree program.

Finally, in order for day home continuing education to be most effective, those offering training are urged to seek feedback from those receiving it. Only asking what works, and not inquiring as to how a training may not be meeting consultant or educator needs, is resulting in a

disparity where what is offered does not match what is required or needed. As a result, day home consultant and educator participants reported that they are finding themselves unsupported by courses that are either geared to day cares, not pertinent to their specific role or abilities, or repetitive and surface-level. Gathering both positive feedback and constructive criticism opens lines of communication and will allow trainings to grow to be more supportive for the unique needs of day home educators and their consultants.

Conclusion

Day home educators and consultants that participated in focus groups for this study identified nine main themes, broken down into categories of strengths, challenges, and areas that can act as strengths or challenges. Themes that act as strengths are educators enjoying their work, networking and problem-solving, and advocating for themselves and the children in their care. Areas that are challenging for day home educators include guilt and worry negatively impacting self-care and work-life balance, issues rising from day homes being treated the same as day cares, and misperceptions caused by lack of understanding of those working in day homes. Finally, themes that can act as strengths or challenges to educator ability to offer high-quality care include relationships with agencies, consultants, and parents, inclusivity for children's needs and educator needs, and continuing education experiences. Examining these themes and best practices, which arose iteratively from data analysis, provides a large amount of helpful data and information that can be used to create practice and policy change which more fully supports day home educator ability to offer quality and longevity in early learning and care.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to examine the strengths and challenges day home educators face in their work, and to increase understanding of supports that enable them to offer quality and longevity in early learning and childcare. This qualitative research project incorporates a community-based participatory approach to inform the creation of the study, and a directed approach to content analysis was used to combine my personal experiences as an educator with the current body of empirical knowledge on this topic. A framework (Figure 2 in Appendix D) was created in the initial stages of this research, based on my own personal experiences and what has been shown in previous studies. Throughout the key stakeholder sessions, focus groups, and subsequent data analysis, this emerging theory has been checked and modified. Many themes of this study aligned with what is known, and new findings uncovered here help to fill in the gap in the current research base and offer direction for both practice and policy change and for future research. As only some elements of this framework rose iteratively during data analysis from focus groups, more research and community engagement is needed to further develop and strengthen the emerging framework found in Figure 2 (see Appendix D). Future work will begin to explore the features of this framework in greater detail.

This study began by drawing from the theoretical frameworks of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and relational theory (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Porter et al., 2016). Relational theory aligned well with these findings, as relationships between an educator and their agency, consultant, and day home parents was mentioned frequently by participants in focus groups. Relationship longevity was strongly tied to satisfaction, strength, and trust in the consultant-educator relationship, and relationship collaboration and positive partnership was shown to be a critical component of the relationship between educators and parents.

Drawing on the ecological systems framework was also strongly suited to this study. Every aspect of this framework, from microsystem educator qualities to macrosystem government or agency policies, was brought up in the focus groups as being influential to the abilities of educators. While some elements strengthen and other elements hinder educator ability to offer quality and longevity in childcare, considering the proximal and distal impacts of ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) heavily informs the theory created here. The nuances of relational theory and ecological systems theory, and how those emerged in the findings of this research, will be discussed further below.

Educators Enjoying their Work

One theme that emerged from the focus groups was how much day home educators enjoy their work. Educator enjoyment of their work is a finding that aligns with what has been found in previous studies, deepening the existent knowledge base. Forry et al. (2013) discovered that love of the job is a large intrinsic factor which contributes to educator satisfaction and motivation to provide high-quality care. Love of the job was also included in findings from Faulkner et al. (2016), who found that high levels of satisfaction was provided by educators deeply caring for the children attending their day home, and loving their work. As educators in day homes are isolated with a minimum of external influence, their individual characteristics, including job enjoyment and satisfaction, are the most proximal influencers of quality (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Although it has been noted in this study as well as in previous research that day home educators are intrinsically motivated to do their work well because of love of the job, it is critical that other benefits and external motivational factors not be reduced or excluded because of this. While day home educators do love their work, they also need fair wages and adequate supports in order to thrive (Swartz et. al., 2016). They may get into this field because of their

love of children and their big hearts, but in order to continue in the field offering high-quality care over time, they need supports (Doherty, 2015; Lanigan, 2011). Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and the findings of this study align to show that such supports have a strong ability to impact the quality of care educators are enabled to provide. As such, an important avenue for future research is examining how educators can increase their enjoyment.

Networking and Problem-Solving

Both educator and consultant focus group participants noted the importance to networking to their success as professionals. It has been well-established that networking with peers is a highly influential factor strengthening day home educator ability to do their job well. Support networks are known to increase quality of care educators can offer (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011), and opportunities for increasing educator support networking have been recommended by many in the field (Bromer & Pick, 2012; Swartz, 2013). This study has aligned with such findings, as peer support and networking were frequently mentioned by both educators and consultants as an important mesosystem strength (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Forry et al., 2013).

The skill of problem-solving itself has not been explicitly mentioned in previous studies, but it has been noted that connection to other mentors and peers can increase educator problem-solving abilities (Lanigan, 2011, Swartz, 2013). This heightens the importance of networking, as educators and consultants in this study repeatedly stating turning to their support networks in response to challenges they faced in their day homes. In addition, problem-solving is a microsystem educator ability known to have potent proximal influence on quality of care (Forry et al., 2013).

Networking was also mentioned by participants in this study as highly supportive of consultant's ability to work well. This finding helps fill in the gap in existent literature, because

while educator need for networking is evidenced in previous studies, no known studies have explicitly uncovered the need for consultants or professional day home support staff to network with others engaged in the same roles. Despite this, two day home support networks based in New Haven and Philadelphia do include support staff as an integral part of their frameworks (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Porter et al., 2016).

While this research highlights networking as a strength, the pathways to networking opportunities are often obscure, and those not included or aware of *Facebook* groups or other sources of online support are left out of this value opportunity for making connections with peers. Some educators in this study felt highly informed and connected, and others less so. Consultants mentioned that not every educator enjoyed the same rich networks, even within one day home agency. Creating a network for connections and peer support between educators, consultants, and day home agencies across the province is one of the strongest recommendations resulting from this study. The ecological systems framework outlines how networks, including connections with peers, continuing education opportunities, and more, strengthens the abilities of day home educators (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Cortes & Hallen, 2014). An educator who is less connected is left out of the valuable opportunity to receive supports through channels to peer connection. Ecological systems theory and the framework developed here (see Appendix D) align to demonstrate that prioritizing networks, by increasing visibility and emphasizing importance, are a vital influencer of educator ability to offer quality and longevity in childcare.

Networks increase educator support and problem-solving ability, enabling them to offer higher quality care (Swartz, 2013). Illustrating exosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), consultants would also benefit from a province-wide network, which would likely decrease the

time agencies need to spend on researching solutions, implementing effective policies and procedures, and creating or curating continuing education opportunities.

A province-wide network would have the ability to connect people working in day homes from different agencies across the province. When someone received an answer from licensing or discovered a better way of doing things in their day home, those solutions could be shared in this network. The network could partner with other support agencies as well, creating wraparound systems that increase quality and stability of day homes and the children they care for throughout the province.

Finally, networking between agencies would enable positive partnerships in many areas of the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Educators living close to one another but not contracted with the same agency could meet. Consultants could benefit from sharing different skillsets. A centralized list of supports, including online workshops and training opportunities, could be created. This network would streamline connections and increase access to knowledge, peers, and supports province wide. Drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) to create such a network, and analyzing its effectiveness, is one of the strongest recommendations for future research recommended here.

Advocacy for Day Home Children and Educators

The need for educators to advocate for themselves and the children they work for was repeatedly mentioned by day home educators and consultants in this study. This finding is significant, because the strength of educator advocacy was not brought up in any of the studies previously published. While it is known that viewing oneself as a professional is beneficial (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2016), the importance of taking that extra step from positive self-perception into advocacy for oneself is a new finding from this study.

Self-efficacy plays a role here, as educators are acting on strong beliefs that their needs matter, and that they can also stand up for the needs of children in their care (Bandura, 1982). Self-efficacy increases performance, and as an individual professional quality is one of the microsystem influencers known to have a strong proximal impact on quality of care (Forry et al., 2013). Educators with the ability to advocate for themselves have a certain level of self-confidence, belief in their own competence, and understanding that what they need matters, and is attainable. This is a proximal determinant impacting behaviour, and requires personal educator characteristics of bravery, determination, perseverance, and confidence (Bandura, 1982).

Additionally, educators in this study discussed needing to advocate for the children in their care. The existent literature mentions the need for accessible support and resources (Bromer & Pick, 2012), and the need for professional engagement by educators (Abell et al., 2014), but not the need for advocacy. This is an intriguing finding because advocacy was mentioned in this study as a need and a strength for day home educators and consultants alike. As this finding does not appear in previous studies, more research is needed to decipher the factors increasing educator ability to advocate, and whether policies could be created to strengthen this ability. In Alberta, the supports and resources are theoretically in place due to contracting with an agency. Yet, in order to receive those supports, educators have to strongly advocate for themselves and the children in their care. Drawing on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) it is clear that support systems need not only to exist, but also to be known and accessible.

Educators work alone and have many demands on their time. If they are contracted with an agency, it is presumed that certain resources and supports are readily available to them. This finding, that a strength and need of day home educators is to advocate for themselves and the

children in their care, demonstrates that systemic changes must be made in order to enable day home educators to provide quality and longevity in childcare. The new finding of day home educator's need to advocate for their own needs and the needs of the children they care for is concerning. If the current system in Alberta was working well, supports and resources would be easily accessible and available. While many such resources and supports are written into policy and legislation (Government of Alberta, 2021d; Government of Alberta, 2021f), they may not be refined to the nuance of day home educator environments. There would be little to no need for educators to advocate – after all, that is one of the main reasons day homes choose to be contracted, because of the increased supports and resources that agencies are tasked with providing (Government of Alberta, 2022d). Yet even consultants working with licensed agencies clearly state that educators need to advocate in order to get their day home needs met.

The Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model can be used here to further understand this dilemma (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This model describes how the process of people interacting with their environment and contexts around them, over time, impacts their life course. Drawing from the PCCT, it is shown that the current system day home educators operate within does not adequately meet their needs, or the needs of the children they care for. In a supportive system which is performing adequately, day home educator advocacy would not be a prominent strength and need.

Systematic changes are needed to ameliorate this. For example, microsystem educator ability to advocate can be increased through policy creation and further research to understand how this ability can be strengthened. Mesosystem support, including interactions between an educator and their peers, consultant, and agency, can be prioritized, strengthened, and made more visible, so that the need to advocate can be reduced as pathways to support and solutions become

more prominent. This study also found that many agencies in Alberta do not seek feedback from their educators. That may be the cause of the disconnect, either because the agency is offering support and resources and barriers prevent the educator from receiving them, or because the agency is not offering the quality and type of support needed. This results in increased demands on day home educators, who currently must advocate for themselves and the children attending the day home. As mentioned, this need to advocate is intense and tiring, and is cited in this study as one reason causing educators to leave the field.

This finding leads to recommendations for change by policy makers at the government, organization, and agency level. The ecological systems framework informs how these all interact bidirectionally, and as such every level of the environmental context can be considered as an avenue for change (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Supports for both day home educators and children in care need to be easier to identify and access, so educators can focus more of their energy on providing high-quality care, rather than expending it to seek out what is needed. Agencies must ask for feedback from their educators, both positive and negative, and act on that feedback to increase resource and support availability and accessibility. Policy needs to be clearer, and feedback required to ensure that the supports stated equal the support needed and received. Implementing these recommendations will increase day home educator ability to offer quality and longevity in early learning and care.

Guilt and Worry Impacting Self-Care and Work-Life Balance

One of the biggest challenges educators in this study face is guilt and worry causing them to neglect self-care and work-life balance. This leads them to avoid taking time off for any reason, including paid or unpaid sick days, vacation days, or even to see their doctor or attend necessary medical appointments. This finding correlates with what has been found in previous

studies, that educators face significant challenges maintaining self-care and work-life balance, mainly due to long hours and lack of support (Bromer & Bibbs, 2011; Jeon et al., 2018). However, this finding is new in specifically identifying guilt and worry as factors negatively impacting self-care and work-life balance. The findings of this study clearly show that day home educators and consultants both recognize the need for educators to take regular time off, in the form of attending medical appointments, closing for sick or mental health days, and taking vacation time at least once a year. Some educators take this time paid, and some are not paid, though even those who have time off written into their educator contract frequently experience guilt and worry which negatively impacts their wellbeing. As balancing personal and professional life is a highly valuable action step enhancing educator well-being and ability to offer quality care (Cortes & Hallen, 2014), this ability needs to be strengthened.

Ecological systems theory and the PPCT model can be utilized here to further describe this concern (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Educator characteristics and qualities are central to their ability to offer high-quality care (Forry et al., 2013). Considering the PPCT model, it is clear that when a day home educator's context, or the environment they operate within, does not enable them to take care of themselves, over time those processes will build and eventually impact the educator and the care they are enabled to offer. Maintaining educator capabilities, and bolstering their ability to maintain self-care through time off to accommodate health needs and vacation time, need to be prioritized on every ecological systems level.

Educators, consultants, and parents alike will benefit from increased education and awareness of the importance of regular time off. Specific training that addresses the guilt and worry around this time off, along with support in creating and maintaining strong contracts and policies outlining this educator need, are called for. Finally, it must be noted that this is not just

an educator's responsibility. While some agencies take initiative in supporting their educators to maintain wellbeing through self-care and work-life balance, others view this as outside of the agency role, as day home educators are self-employed. Yet, agencies are tasked with supporting educators and enabling quality childcare to occur (Government of Alberta, 2022d). This is not just an educator issue and should not be left to educators to sort out alone.

In order for educators to successfully maintain self-care and work-life balance, they need regular time off. Ideally, this time would be paid, because financial worry is one of the factors impacting this. Increasing education and awareness of the importance of educators taking time off, for consultants, educators, and day home parents, is a highly recommended direction for change. Educators need to be supported by parent understanding, increased agency training and mandated policies to enable time off written into educator contracts, and a systemic shift in how this essential time off is viewed. Researching the most effective ways to decrease educator guilt and worry, and increase their ability to take time off to maintain well-being, is an important avenue for further exploration.

Issues Caused by Day Homes Being Treated the Same as Day Cares

This study showed that contracted Alberta day homes are routinely treated the same as day cares in continuing education opportunities and government rules and regulations, as macro-level influencers on exosystem policies (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Yet, day homes are unique, and as such disadvantaged by the current system which is targeted for the significantly different dynamic in day care settings. This was not a finding established in previously published studies, which were conducted largely in the United States whose systems do not include known contracted day homes or licensed agencies.

This study found that when day homes are treated the same as day cares, educator needs are not met. According to the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007) this is because the context of day home educators is entirely different. Educators in day homes lack the resources and supports available to those working in day cares. They have more to do with only one person to do it, and work with mixed age groups in home environments. This is a markedly different working environment which makes meeting day care standards extremely difficult or even impossible. Mandating that educators working in day homes continually meet the same expectations for paperwork and documentation as those in day care settings was mentioned as a very high expectation bordering on unreasonable.

Additionally, offering continuing education opportunities to day home educators and consultants that was created in the context of day care settings is not appropriate or helpful. Day home environments are being overlooked in current workshop and conference offerings, and the people offering training frequently do not have experience or understanding of what is possible in a day home setting. Post-secondary education frequently lacks space to accept day home educators, or do not allow them to complete their practicum in their day home, though it is a supervised setting meeting all licensing requirements. These are significant barriers, and this lack of informed, appropriate, accessible training and continuing education is resulting in an under-supported sector of childcare in Alberta.

Treating day homes the same as day cares impacts both consultants and educators detrimentally. Agency consultants are not offered specific support in government town halls or director's meetings. Educators struggle to meet the same requirements as day cares, with significantly less support from breaks, someone else being responsible for cooking and cleaning, and having time and extra staff to allow for program planning and documentation. Continuing

education opportunities for both educators and consultants lack a day home focus, awareness, or applicability. This is one of the largest challenges that day home educators face. Previously published studies have show that often those offering training or creating polices lack awareness and understanding of what running a day home is like, and what is possible in such a unique setting (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). As such, it is pertinent to recommend specific training to policymakers and those offering continuing education, so that they can increase their knowledge of what is possible and adjust their expectations, policies, and continuing education offerings accordingly.

The results of this study show that day home consultants are challenged by government licensing requirements changing swiftly and frequently. This is exacerbated by town hall meetings and other communications between directors and Ministry officials being dominated by the day care perspective. Best practices recommended for the Ministry of Children's Services to adopt are minimizing the number and frequency of licensing and regulation changes and offering targeted supports such as town hall meetings specifically created for day home agencies. Minimizing licensing changes will help consultants manage their time and responsibilities, and offering town hall meetings that are exclusive to day homes will increase guidance, support, communication, and also allow an avenue for inter-agency networking. In this way, macrosystem government processes will positively impact mesosystem opportunities for collaboration (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Last, increasing the presence of decision-makers who have experience running day homes themselves is strongly recommended. This can create a system which is informed by and targeted to the unique settings of day homes, resulting in licensing regulations and continuing education opportunities that are specific to and more supportive of day home educators.

Purposefully drawing on the lived experience of successful, satisfied, competent day home educators would allow them to affect their environment bidirectionally (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Offering specific education to those creating policies and continuing education opportunities, and increasing the hiring of those with experience running or supporting day homes, will strengthen Alberta's childcare system considerably. Optimally, this will lead to changes in policy to create licensing standards unique to day home needs. These changes will also result in increased ability for educators working in day homes to receive the quality and availability of continuing education known to enhance their abilities to offer quality care (Doherty, 2015).

Misperceptions Caused by Lack of Understanding

This study found that day homes are challenged by misperceptions held by parents, other early childhood educators, and members of the public in general. Being seen as lower quality educators or referred as babysitters because of their work environment is hurtful and damaging, negatively impacting educator's self-perceptions and the amount of respect they are treated with by parents, peers, and society as a whole (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). It can result in educators being treated with less respect, being offered less support for them and the children in care, and even day homes receiving up to 55% less funding than day cares (Government of Alberta, 2022a).

This is a complex issue implicating every level described by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). In the microsystem, day home educators may perceive themselves as less-than, which could impact mesosystem interactions with parents or consultants. Or, bidirectionally, mesosystem interactions with parents or consultants who themselves do not value or understand the important work that day homes offer could taint the relationship and lower an

educator's sense of worth (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Of course, macrosystem policies drive this societal belief as well, in this case most clearly demonstrated recently by offering a mere 55% grant funding for childcare space subsidy in day homes (Affordability rates, 2021).

Increased awareness of day home educator abilities and quality of care is needed to change this misperception. Participants in this study repeatedly mention a need for people to recognize the valuable work that they do, and recognize that they offer quality care meeting the exact same licensing requirements as those in day care settings. Private, unlicensed day homes may vary wildly in quality and safety, but day homes contracted with a licensed agency must meet certain standards and are continually supervised and supported to ensure that those standards are met. While educators and consultants alike described their actions in strongly advocating for this field, these misperceptions contracted day homes are lower quality stubbornly persist. As such, an important recommendation rising from this study is the need for educational and awareness campaigns to begin, aimed at changing the perceptions of parents, other early childhood educators, and society as a whole. This finding illustrates influence from nearly every level of the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Future research could explore how these environmental influences can be modified to increase understanding of day home educator value and worth.

Relationships with Parents, Consultants, and Agencies

The relationships educators have with their day home agency, consultant, and parents are highly influential on workplace motivation and job satisfaction (Bromer & Pick, 2012). As such, care needs to be taken by all parties to ensure that these pivotal relationships can grow strong and trust-based over time (Lanigan, 2011). These mesosystem interactions are quite proximal to educators, and have the power to heavily inform their abilities and sense of self (Bronfenbrenner,

1986). This finding strengthens what has already been shown in previous research, and extends the current knowledge base by identifying specific behaviours strengthening or challenging educator abilities. To grow a strong relationship with their day home educator, parents are urged to be respectful of educator boundaries including working hours, and their need to take time off occasionally for health reasons or vacation. Parents are recommended to work in partnership with their educator, creating wraparound supports for children by collaborating and advocating for a child's needs when necessary. Offering feedback to educators is also highly recommended by educators and consultants in this study as a positive source of strength and motivation.

Day home educators and agencies also play a role in building strong relationships with parents. Educators must create a balance of personal and professional relationship dynamics, being neither too friendly nor too distant. Educators must also uphold the boundaries they have created, enabling them to take time off as required to maintain self-care and wellbeing. Last, it was recommended by this study's participants that parents need education on educator abilities and the quality of care they offer. While it is not yet known which avenue for offering this education would be most appropriate, early childhood organizations, agencies themselves, or even day home educators are recommended to begin offering education for day home parents.

Participants in this study identified that the most important aspects enabling a strong relationship to grow between a day home educator and their consultant are individualized support offered during home visits, decreased consultant challenges of time, role balancing, and lack of networking, and agencies decreasing consultant turnover and focusing on hiring consultants with experience running a day home whenever possible. Agencies themselves are largely responsible for enabling these recommendations to take place. Agencies that prioritize the strength of relationship between educator and consultant, and act with awareness of the

known benefits such a relationship can provide, will follow the recommendations for best practice set forth in this study. Those recommendations include prioritizing meeting educator's individual and unique needs through careful time and task management during home visits, meeting consultant needs by offering more training and networking opportunities, and prioritizing both long-term relationships between educator and consultant, and the hiring of consultants with experience running a day home themselves.

Both consultants and educators in this study shared recommendations to strengthen the relationship between an educator and their agency. In addition to the agency recommendations listed above, one of the strongest recommendations is supporting educators in taking time off. This can be in the form of the agency providing in-home back-up care, or agency training and support to create and uphold contractual policies for regular time off in the form of health days and vacation, ideally paid. Both are important avenues allowing educators to maintain their health, self-care, and work-life balance.

Finally, it is important to note that some educators are not with an agency to receive support, but only to receive status as a professional and the benefits conveyed by providing licensed care in the form of subsidies or grants. These perks are currently only available within the current system when a day home contracts with a licensed agency. This does not necessarily mean that the agency is providing meaningful or quality support, as educators have no other choice to access benefits of being licensed than going through an agency. Even if an educator is not receiving adequate support, some participants in this study shared that they remain contracted with an agency mainly to continue to receive licensing benefits.

This situation is compounded by the finding in this study that no known agencies are collecting feedback on the support or services offered. This means that agencies may be

operating without knowledge about whether they are offering the support required. While there are licensing requirements for day home educators to complete annual performance assessments ensuring their continued growth as early learning and childcare professionals which include feedback on parent satisfaction (Government of Alberta, 2021c), there are no such requirements for agencies.

One critical recommendation for best practice is exploring ways that agencies can become more aware of and responsive to the needs of their educators. Agencies can choose to gather feedback on the quality and appropriateness of support offered, and strengthen agency practice and policy based on what their educators share. Another option is changing licensing regulations to require agencies to complete development plans similar to those required of educators. This would include a mandated performance assessment involving collection of feedback from educators on the support being offered, and also include unwavering expectations that agencies build their practice and policies to meet day home educator needs. This is an opportunity to utilize the PPCT model and ecological systems framework, to ensure that educator needs are heard, understood, and actually being met (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Researching the impact that requiring agencies to gather and implement educator would have on quality and longevity in childcare is an important consideration from this study.

Inclusivity for Children's Needs and Educator Needs

This study showed large variance in community inclusivity for meeting day home educator and children's needs. This finding is significant because it has not been mentioned in any existent studies. Though it is known that quality care matters for children's cognitive and language development (Porter et al., 2016), and it has been well-established that day home educators need strong support systems (Abell et al., 2014; Bromer & Pick, 2012), the theme of

inclusion for educator's needs or children's needs is a new finding which helps to fill in the current gap in the knowledge base. Importantly, it seems that only educators in Alberta are currently aware of the importance of inclusivity, as not one consultant who participated in this study mentioned this topic. Educators report the value held in community resources and events such as library programs, Parent Link drop-in centres, or local play groups. These exosystem opportunities serve as both supports for educators and learning opportunities for children, and are critical components required to enable quality child care in day homes (Doherty, 2015). Yet some found services in their community to be more welcoming than others. Best practice recommendations for educator inclusivity include increasing awareness of the need for community resources to be offered to day home educators, and an increase in community groups who warmly welcome day home educators and the children they care for to their programs.

Finally, it is possible that not all educators are aware of the supports available within their community. If community resources and events could be listed in a centralized place that all educators have free access to, educators will likely experience greater inclusivity and greater support in their work. When the pandemic passes, highlighting paths to these community opportunities is important as an avenue for networking and problem-solving as well.

Inclusivity for children's needs is one of the most striking findings of this study. Participants shared experiences that are completely different than what one would reasonably expect, as those in remote or rural communities have experienced much greater ease in identifying and accessing supports for children in their care. It is clear from this finding that urban support systems need to be researched further to understand the disconnect. Educators shared that day cares seem to have streamlined pathways to support, including a broad permission slip for parents to sign, and professionals like occupational therapists, speech-

language pathologists, and behavioural experts regularly coming in to offer supports. Supporting the needs of children who have developmental challenges is critically important. Equalizing ease in identifying and accessing supports for children, whether a day home is rural or urban, is paramount.

Continuing Education Experiences

Experiencing continuing education as a strength or a challenge is a finding that deepens what is known, as current studies share both issues with training opportunities and strengths that occur when adequate training is provided (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Cortes & Hallen, 2014). Additionally, is has been established that consultant themselves need specialized training, as day homes are unique (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). Yet in the current Alberta system, educators and consultants mentioned that while sometimes professional development opportunities such as the *Flight* course (Makovichuk et al., 2014) were highly supportive, other needed continuing education was not available, or did not match day home abilities and needs. Many changes can be made to strengthen educational supports for day home educators and consultants. First, instructors themselves need training on what running a day home is like, and whenever possible instructors should have experience running or supporting a day home themselves. Second, there needs to be a centralized and freely accessible list of currently available trainings that are relevant to day homes. This is important because some educators in this study have lists of opportunities given to them by their agencies, while others were unaware and unconnected. Leaving the creation and distribution of resource lists up to the agency is neither fair nor wise, as agencies are currently overtaxed and have great disparity in the support they choose to or are enabled to offer. Utilizing other opportunities in the ecological systems framework provide more

opportunities for pathways to support, and more bidirectional opportunities for learning and growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Educators highly benefit from the networking opportunities before and after workshops, so as soon as the pandemic permits, increasing face-to-face continuing education is recommended where possible. As many trainings are put on by the agency, but there is a lack of feedback being gathered from educators on its effectiveness, agencies are strongly encouraged to explore both what works, and what is lacking from their current professional development offerings. Gathering and implementing feedback, positive and negative, on training opportunities is highly recommended.

Knowing that day home educators are professionals who already struggle with long work hours (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2018), it is important to both offer them professional development opportunities during working hours, and provide back-care or funding enabling them to receive training during the workday. Even something as small as having one educator day off per year, or a half-day every six months, would support their need for work-life balance and continuing education. Currently, some educators skip evening or weekend opportunities because it adds too much to their workload. Allowing access to daytime professional development during work hours, and providing them supports enabling educators to attend, will meet their needs for work-life balance and continuing education.

Also, consultants need specialized, informed continuing education opportunities. They mentioned that nothing is the same between day cares and day homes, and also that they have received no ongoing professional development specific to their role. Resurrecting and updating the old Alberta Family Child Care Association training program, and finding time and funding to offer this training in a meaningful way, is highly recommended.

Finally, the issues with accessing and completing formal continuing education need to be addressed. Spaces for day home educators need to be held or created that allows them to continue their education. This would most likely be via online educational opportunities, though some educators would be able to access evening classes from local post-secondary institutes. In addition, it is likely that there is a significant number of day home educators who only need to complete a practicum in order to obtain their certificate, diploma, or degree. The creation of a province-wide program that partners with post-secondary institutes to allow practicums to continue in day homes working with licensed agencies is critical.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study include sample size, participant characteristics, and the process of conducting and analyzing data from focus groups. Though every effort was made to contact experienced educators and consultants, and my goal was to have response from up to six qualifying participants per agency, I did not receive the rate of response originally hoped for. There was a lack of experienced consultants due to high turnover, which is known to be problematic in this field (Bromer & Pick, 2012). As such, selection criteria were enlarged to include four consultants with three, rather than five, years of experience. Gatekeeping is also known to have occurred, where certain agencies disclosed that they chose not to pass the research invitation along. Finally, this research occurred during a tumultuous time in Alberta' early childhood education field. Accreditation was cancelled (Johnson, 2020), licensing changes were made (Government of Alberta, 2021a), and the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly increasing stress levels and work loads across the province (Crawford et al., 2021). As a result, the capacity of educators and consultants was reduced, likely impacting their ability to participate.

This study purposefully targeted educators and consultants with experience. As a result, participants had established routines and networks developed over years. It is likely that the results of this study would be significantly different if participants with less experience were recruited. The sample size in this study is relatively small, consisting of thirteen educators and thirteen consultants. However, this aligns with research previously done on day home educators. In 2016, Faulkner et al conducted seven focus groups with twenty-six educators, Gerstenblatt et al.'s 2014 study consisted of just three focus groups and eleven participants, and Rosenthal et al.'s 2013 qualitative study centered on interviews with seventeen participants. As such, this research study aligns with sample sizes in previous research.

Due to the small sample size, theoretical saturation was not reached. However, by including participants with two different points of view, greater perspectives were gleaned. Additionally, this research is strengthened by incorporating community-based participatory research approaches, adding to the credibility and direction of the research (D'Alonzo, 2010). As participant backgrounds were varied, with diverse experiences, there is indication that any were atypical. Thus, the results of this qualitative study contribute meaningful findings, though more research is needed to add weight and substance.

Directions for Future Research

Future research is recommended with larger sample sizes and quantitative approaches like a survey, which can add diversity in experiences and perspectives. Also, selection criteria for future research are recommended to include those with less than one years' experience in the field. This will allow for diversification of findings and allow further evaluation of educator strengths and challenges. The information gained may help guide practice and policy to further enable day home educators to offer quality and longevity in childcare.

Additionally, there are several actionable recommendations for best practice which provide highly informative directions for future research. Research questions might include:

- How does offering targeted training to day home consultants impact their abilities?

- In what ways can a province-wide day home support network increase abilities of day home educators and consultants, and does this increase quality of care?

- Does increasing day home educator access to formal continuing education, and implementing a province-wide system where they can complete required practicums in their day home, allow for more educators to obtain higher levels of credentials?

- What are the experiences and preferred supports of Alberta's unlicensed day home educators? How can they be encouraged to become licensed?

In a field with such few studies done, many opportunities exist for future research which will greatly contribute to the understanding of the unique population of family day home educators.

Conclusion

This study is one of the only research projects done in Canada that focuses exclusively on day home educator experiences. Using a community-based participatory research approach and qualitative description methodology, the purpose of this study was to increase knowledge of the strengths and challenges facing Alberta's family day home educators, and build awareness of what is needed to support day home educators in offering quality and longevity in early learning and childcare.

The findings of this study uncovered nine elements impacting day home educator quality and longevity. Strengths commonly mentioned in this study are enjoyment of their work, networking and problem-solving, and advocacy. Challenges day home educators face are guilt and worry minimizing time off, misperceptions caused by lack of understanding, and day homes

being treated the same as day care. Areas that can act as a strength or a challenge include relationships, inclusivity, and continuing education.

In conclusion, there are many avenues to further support day home educators in their ability to offer quality and longevity in early learning and care. Ecological systems theory illuminates many proximal and distal opportunities for bidirectional strength and increased support (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Relational theory highlights the importance of continuity, and the strength and trust which can be built between educators and day home parents or consultants over time (Porter et al., 2016). Building on known strengths, and implementing practice and policy change to decrease challenges, are enabled by acting upon the results of this research.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Engagement with Alberta Early Childhood Organizations and Institutions (May – July 2021)

Organizations:

Name	Acronym	Notes
Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta	AECEA	• Two members attended
Alberta Family Child Care Association	AFCCA	• Two members attended
Alberta Health Services, Early Childhood Education	AHS	• They expressed interest, then had to decline due to lack of time and workforce capacity
Alberta Resource Center for Quality Enhancement	ARCQE	• One member attended
Calgary & Area Alberta Family Child Care Association		• One member attended
Community-University Partnership	CUP	• Two members attended
Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care	ECELC	• Two members attended
Getting Ready for Inclusion Today	GRIT	• One member attended
Ministry of Children's Services		• No response, or emails automatically blocked • Two licensing officers, contacted by a participant of a previous stakeholder meeting, aided in informing and guiding the research
Muttart Foundation		• One member attended

Post-Secondary Institutions:

Name	Notes
Blue Quills First Nations College	No response
Bow Valley	• I obtained my Early Learning and Childcare diploma, or Level 3 qualification, here • After inquiring about research ethics approval (not necessary for community engagement without data collection) the early learning chair invited every one of their instructors; 6 attended meetings
CDI	No response

Grand Prairie Regional College	No response
Grant MacEwan	No response
Keyano College	No response
Lakeland College	No response
Lethbridge College	No response
Medicine Hat College	No response
Mount Royal University	- I obtained my Early Learning and Childcare certificate, or Level 2 qualification, here - They were curious about the study but unsure of whether they could help. After I mentioned that training was offered, they firmly corrected me (they offer formal education, not training) and stated that they would be unable to aid in the research
Norquest	No response
Northern Lakes College	No response
Portage College	No response
Red Deer College	No response

Day Home Agencies

Name	Notes
Calgary and Region Family Day Home Organization	1 member attended
Child Development Day Homes – Edmonton	1 member attended
Drayton Valley Day Home Agency	1 member attended
It's A Child's World Family Day Home Agency	1 member attended
Kids at Churchill Park	1 member attended
Monkey Business Family Day Homes	2 members attended
NorthAlta Family Day Homes Ltd.	1 member attended
North Edmonton Family Day Homes	1 member attended
Odyssey	1 member attended
Primrose Children's Centre	1 member attended
Westlock Family Day Home Agency	1 member attended

TOTAL Groups Engaged: 22 (9 Organizations, 1 Institution, 11 Agencies)
TOTAL Individual Key Stakeholders Engaged: 29

Table 2

Focus Group Categories and Themes: Strengths

Theme	Educator Quote	Consultant Quote	Number of Mentions
Enjoying their Work	"My favorite part of day home is the kids; I just love working with children"	"What I love the most is the mentorship part and either supporting a parent or an educator through an issue … I love that part"	Consultants: 13 Educators: 30
Networking and Problem-Solving	"Sometimes you just need to talk to someone who's been through whatever problem you're trying to deal with"	"This year, especially because of COVID and doing a lot of things online they're starting to network with other professionals in that business sense"	Consultants: 85 Educators: 95
Advocacy	"I frequently fight for my day home kids or advocate for my day home kids when they need supports"	"They have to advocate for their own day home"	Consultants: 45 Educators: 47

Table 3

Focus Group Categories and Themes: Challenges

Theme	Educator Quote	Consultant Quote	Number of Mentions
Guilt and Worry Minimizing Time Off	"I want to help people right, so I every time I take time off it's with guilt" "I've always felt so guilty any time I take any time off" "I have to say my boundaries are so terrible. I still feel guilty taking time off, but I do have it written in my contract now"	"They can take vacation, they do take vacation, but it's not a thing you know - when you're losing a week or two weeks of your income, I think that's challenging"	Consultants: 51 Educators: 71
Day Homes Treated	"Even the agencies, when	"They don't get a 15-	Consultants:

the Same as Day Cares	they have these expectations that we need to be documenting, we need to be doing, putting on story park, social news, special days … it's like, oh let's see all your ideas, or some days that infant is crying all day and two year old's are fighting and you have these expectations put on you and it's only you, so I think that's probably my biggest thing on negative effects of being in this field is we can't do it all"	minute break in the morning, a 15-minute break in the afternoon and an hour for lunch and, unlike daycare you know where you go off with your team to do your program planning for the week, they have to do that on their own. They don't have a cook or catering bringing in their meals every day, they're doing that, so I think sometimes expectations of them are very high when they're on their own"	14
			Educators: 15
Misperceptions Caused by Lack of Understanding	"The thing that I would like to see changed is more respect for day homes as profession and that we're not the same as a daycare that we are unique and different and need to be treated that way" "I find that were looked at as secondary, like second class to the daycares, and when I look at what I did in a daycare and what I look when I look and see what I do in my day home, my day home program is, by far, a higher quality"	"Even within the whole childcare community day homes, whether you're approved or you're private, seems to be something that isn't really looked upon as a professional, you know, like my educators are babysitters type of thing so we've worked really hard to try and get that perspective changed"	Consultants: 17
			Educators: 29

Table 4

Focus Group Categories and Themes: Strength or Challenge

Theme	Educator Quote	Consultant Quote	Number of Mentions
Relationships $\updownarrow$	"I have a great relationship with her (my consultant)"	"I feel I'm really, really looking at my whole role in relationship with them and only building a stronger one, I think"	Consultants: 161* Consultant: 65 Parent: 60 Agency: 36
	"I feel like I really didn't get a lot from my consultant"	"They put all this effort in to do their program plan and their meal plan or whatever and parents aren't even looking at it. or doing their daily infant schedule and parents aren't looking at it, so I think sometimes that causes an educator to go, "Why do I bother?"	Educators: 124* Consultant: 36 Parent: 51 Agency: 37
Inclusivity $\updownarrow$	"I really wish that there was better developmental supports for children"	n/a	Consultants: 0
	"I have a network out here, I've developed a network, so I know the health nurses and I know the speech language pathologist and the occupational therapist, and I do get them"	n/a	Educators: 32
Continuing Education $\updownarrow$	"The agency once a once a month, they had an information session on a different topic and I always I enjoyed those; I tried my best to go to those"	"With *Flight* you can get so much deeper, there's so much to learn every time … wonderful opportunities are opening up"	Consultants: 71 Educators: 76

	"I always found that the workshops were more intro to this and intro to that, and I've been doing this for so long that I don't need an intro anymore; I need in depth, and I want to learn deeper"	"I think we're underrepresented when we're offered opportunities as consultants and agency staff … conferences that are available …are not really geared to day homes"	

Note: In the relationship theme, coding was easily broken down into specific sub-categories.

Appendix B: Focus Group Guiding Questions

Educator Version:

Introductions and Icebreaker

Thank you for being here.

We'll start by introducing ourselves. I'm Laura, I ran an approved day home in Edmonton for ten years, and I'll be moderating our session today. Please introduce yourself by your first name only. Then say one thing you love about running your day home, and one thing that you wish you could change.

Questions

Let's talk about what supports your ability to offer high-quality care.

1. **What are your strongest supports?**
   1.1 Do you have other day home educators that you connect with?
   1.2 How supportive are your family and friends?
   1.3 Are you able to take breaks, days off, or vacation time?

Each day home experience is unique. Let's look at some other factors that may be affecting you.

2. **When you are facing a problem in your day home, where do you turn to for help?**

3. **What is your experience with training or educational opportunities?**
   3.1 How accessible is training in your area (time, location, price)?
   3.2 Do training topics meet your needs?
   3.3 If there was anything you could change about the training or education that is currently available, what would it be?

4. **How does working with parents impact your abilities?**
   4.1 Do you feel valued by the parents at your day home?
   4.2 How is the communication between yourself and parents?

5. **How would you characterize your relationship with your consultant?**
   5.1 What does your consultant do that most supports your abilities in the day home?
   5.2 Is there anything you wish your consultant would do differently or better?
   5.3 Does your consultant seem to know what it's really like running a day home?

6. **If English is your second language, how does that support or challenge you in running your day home?**

7. **In what ways do you maintain a positive work-life balance?**
   6.1 How do you balance work time and family or personal time?
   6.2 How do you manage running a business out of your family home?
   6.3 What boundaries do you have in place to keep your day home running smoothly?

We'll explore some of your challenges now.

8. **What are your biggest barriers in providing quality care?**
   8.1 Are wages and funding opportunities adequate?
   8.2 How do you manage all of the roles involved in running a day home: program planner, cook, chauffer, financial manager, communications, child development expert?
   8.3 How do you cope with isolation in your day home?

9. **What do you do for self-care?**

Is there anything else that you think important for us to know?

Thank you very much for your responses. I hope to use them to increase our understanding of what supports educators to offer high-quality care in a day home setting.

Consultant Version:

Introductions and Icebreaker

Thank you for being here.

We'll start by introducing ourselves. I'm Laura, I ran an approved day home in Edmonton for ten years, I was also a consultant for a brief time, and I'll be moderating our session today. Please introduce yourself by your first name only. Then say one thing you love about being a consultant, and one thing you wish you could change.

Questions

Let's talk about what supports educator ability to offer high-quality care.

1. **What are your educator's strongest supports?**
   1.1 In general, do they have other educators they feel close to that they can connect with?
   1.2 Do they mention support from their family or friends?
   1.3 Are your educators able to take breaks, days off, or vacation time?

Each day home experience is unique. Let's look at some other factors that may affect educator ability to offer quality care.

2. **When your educators are facing a problem with their day home, where do they turn to for help?**
   2.1 Have your educators shared with you any solutions they really valued? Where did those ideas come from?

3. **What is your perspective on educator training or educational opportunities?**

3.1 How accessible is training in your area (time, location, price)?

3.2 Do training topics meet educator needs?

3.3 If there was anything you could change about the training or education that is currently available, what would it be?

4. **How does working with parents impact educator abilities?**
    4.1 Do educators feel valued by the parents at their day homes?
    4.2 How is the communication between educators and parents?

5. **How would you characterize your relationship with educators?**
    5.1 What would you most recommend for consultants to enable educators?
    5.2 What are your biggest challenges in supporting their ability to offer high-quality care?
    5.3 Have you received any specific training about owning and operating a day home?

6. **In what ways do educators maintain a positive work-life balance?**
    6.1 How do they balance work time and family or personal time?
    6.2 How do they manage running a business out of their family home?
    6.3 What boundaries do you recommend for educators to keep their day home running smoothly?

We'll explore some common educator challenges now.

7. **What are the biggest barriers to educators providing quality care?**
    7.1 Are wages and funding opportunities adequate?
    7.2 How do they manage all of the roles involved in running a day home: program planner, cook, chauffer, financial manager, communications, child development expert?
    7.3 How do they cope with the isolation of running a day home?

8. **What do your educators do for self-care?**

Is there anything else that you think important for us to know?

Thank you very much for your responses. I hope to use them to increase our understanding of what supports educators to offer high-quality care in a day home setting.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Script for Focus Groups

Hello everyone, thank you so much for taking the time to join us tonight. As you know, the purpose of this focus group is to explore the strengths and challenges of family day home educators. Before we begin, I'd like to outline details of this session, and reassure you that we will be sticking to our 60-90 minute time frame. I value your time and want to honor that commitment.

Each of you was provided with an Information Letter for this study. Before I answer any questions you may have about the study, I want to briefly review consent and confidentiality.

- Your participation today is entirely voluntary. You can choose, at any time, to stop participating in the group, or to skip any question that you find difficult or uncomfortable.
- I do want to assure you that your identity and responses will be kept strictly confidential by the research team. To ensure this, please do not disclose your last name or the area you live in. If you happen to recognize someone here, I ask that you agree to keep their identity and responses completely confidential.
- The session today will be recorded, and your answers transcribed. Once that has happened, all transcripts will be anonymized and any personal identifiers removed. Due to the group nature of the focus group, I will not be able to remove your information from the recording if you do choose not to continue with the focus group. However, if you choose to withdraw from the study, if desired, I can remove your responses during the transcription process. You would simply need to contact me and request that your responses not be included in the transcription. Please note that after the transcription is complete and names are removed, I will not be able to identify and delete your responses.

Do you have any questions about the confidentiality agreement? [*Pause for dialogue*]. Please say "yes" to indicate that you agree to these terms.

Documentation of Verbal Consent from Participants:

1. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
   Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

2. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
   Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

3. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
   Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

4. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
   Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

5. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
   Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

6. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
    Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

7. _____   Laura Woodman   _____
    Participant Name   Person Obtaining Consent   Date & Time

At this point, we will begin the focus group. Your presence and participation in the focus group means your consent. With that said, let's begin!

Appendix D: Elements Impacting Quality and Longevity in Family Day Homes

Figure 2

Elements Impacting Quality and Longevity in Family Day Homes