

Overcoming the Challenges of Family Childcare Educators in Canada: A Family Ecological Theory Approach

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Abstract

This paper explores a framework of family ecological theory for overcoming the challenges facing family childcare educators (FCC educators), who care for small groups of children in their own home. Pathways to overcoming these barriers through an ecological approach will be outlined by critically examining current research on these challenges. In this way, I justify using ecological theory as an effective tool for conceptualizing the challenges of FCC educators. Ecological theory describes how people's growth and change is influenced by the contexts around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For isolated FCC educators working alone with young children, the limited interactions, supports, and environments they encounter offer incredible meaning and possibility. Examining how the challenges they face can be overcome with a family ecological theory approach illuminates many avenues for success in this unique population. In this paper, the four main challenges of lack of respect, low wages and funding, isolation, and lack of training currently facing FCC educators are examined with an ecological lens to highlight opportunities for positive change. Final thoughts of how this benefits others using an ecological theory framework conclude this paper.

Keywords: family day home, family childcare, early childhood education, ecological theory



Overcoming the Challenges of Family Childcare Educators in Canada

This paper explores a family ecological theory framework for overcoming the unique challenges facing family childcare educators (FCC educators) who care for small groups of children in their own home. I will outline pathways to overcoming the barriers of family childcare in Canada through an ecological approach by critically examining current research on these challenges, using the province of Alberta for specific examples of policy and regulations. In this way, ecological theory is justified as an effective tool for conceptualizing the challenges of FCC educators.

Early childhood educators in Canada work in a variety of settings, including preschool, out of school care, centre-based care, and family childcare. In a family childcare setting, also called family day care or a family day home, the educator works primarily alone, with small groups of children in mixed age groups. These settings are unique, and involve distinctive challenges that are unique to FCC settings (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Cortes & Hallam, 2014). In this paper, four main FCC challenges—lack of respect, low wages and funding, isolation, and lack of continuing education—are examined with an ecological lens to highlight opportunities for positive change. Final thoughts of how this benefits others using an ecological theory framework conclude this article.

Positionality Statement

My awareness of the challenges faced by FCC educators arose out of personal experience, as I ran an accredited, award-winning day home in Edmonton, Alberta for 10 years. To support my goal of offering professional, high-quality care, I chose to open my family childcare centre with a licensed agency because in Alberta this is the only way for family day home spaces to become licensed (Province of Alberta, 2021). Benefits of joining a licensed agency include a more professional status and more support. Educators who are contracted with a licensed agency must maintain certain professional standards, including current Childcare First Aid and CPR, a clean criminal record check, and paperwork such as incident reports, medication forms, and monthly fire drills (Government of Alberta, 2022b). Private day homes, in contrast, are only mandated to meet ratios of a maximum of six children under the age of six, in addition to the educator's own children (Province of Alberta, 2021). Licensed day home agencies also provide more support for educators than those who choose to run privately. Agencies are required to offer in-home support visits from a day home consultant every month or two, and regular continuing education opportunities such as workshops or conferences (Government of Alberta, 2022b).

However, I soon came to realize that what I expected to receive from being contracted with a licensed day home agency—more professionalism and support—was sorely lacking. I was seen and treated by many peers and leaders in the early childhood field as less professional or capable, simply because I worked in a day home rather than in centre-based care. I found that continuing education was often inaccessible to me, offered at a time or place that did not allow me to attend, and frequently given by people who clearly did not know what running a family childcare program entails. This was frustrating and disheartening because it takes a lot of work and dedication to offer high-quality care in a day home setting, and even more work when one voluntarily chooses to become licensed. This article details how existing research provides empirical support for my own anecdotal experiences, and shows how ecological systems theory is an ideal approach for exploring this complex topic.

Framework of Family Ecological Theory

Family ecological theory examines families according to the many systems they interact with and that act upon them (Allen & Henderson, 2016). Those systems can be referred to as levels, which outline the relationship each level has with the family or individual. Each level exerts influence on the family through interactions which occur throughout the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Originally, this theory included the individual and individual characteristics such as gender, age, and health; *microsystems* such as family, peers, or school; *mesosystems* where connections between microsystems take place, including interactions between FCC educators and parents, peers, or professional supports; *exosystems* such as mass media, politics, industry, the economy, and social services; and the *macrosystem*, which consists of the attitudes and beliefs of the culture as a whole (Allen & Henderson, 2016). This theory has evolved over time to include the *chronosystem*, or the influence of time and historical changes impacting each layer, evidenced by the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

The challenges of FCC educators arise at each ecological level, as do opportunities for support. Conceptualizing these challenges and possible solutions at different levels provides a solid framework for understanding their significance and complexity. Ecological theory describes levels or environments which are both proximal and distal (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). While proximal environments are closest to day home educators, such as family and peers in the microsystem, more distal levels such as exosystem policies and macrosystem beliefs also impact FCC educators and affect their abilities. These impacts are bidirectional, where an educator can influence the contexts surrounding them just as the external contexts can influence the educator (Tudge et al., 2009). For example, mesosystem interactions can be improved and increased, and exosystem policy changes can provide the necessary individualized supports and continuing education needed. Ideally, shifts in the proximal environments of FCC educators described by family ecological theory will create positive change and growth in macrosystem societal beliefs, and over time involve a chronosystem shift to increased values and respect for FCC educators.

Our understanding of the effect of various levels of FCC educators' contexts can be further refined by considering the PPCT model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), that Bronfenbrenner incorporated into later versions of his theory. In the PPCT model, processes are key to understanding how environmental factors, from daily interactions with others to policies and political influences on family childcare, may influence educators and families. Processes describe the interactions between a person and their environment, influenced by the individual characteristics of that person. Those interactions occur within environmental contexts which can be proximal or more distal (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The element of time is included because people and relationships develop over time, and present experiences are influenced by historical events. Thus, ecological systems theory provides a longitudinal approach to development.

The interplay of environment and processes impacting a person over time is a central element of family ecological theory, and an approach frequently used in research to examine challenges of FCC educators (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Forry et al., 2013). This model outlines how respectful, supportive macrolevel policies and microlevel interactions with day home parents and consultants may offer opportunities for growth and strength to FCC educators, depending on the context in which they occur. In contrast, disrespectful, negative, and underinformed or misaligned interactions or supports may have detrimental effects, depending on the context in which they occur, which may also accumulate over time.

These PPCT processes outline the reason that the term “family childcare educator” is intentionally used here, rather than the more commonly cited “family child care provider” (Bromer

& Weaver, 2016; Tovar et al., 2017). This shift in language aligns with recent recommendations from the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (2020), and clearly describes the group of early childhood educators working in the home providing childcare. The term identifies FCC educators as qualified teachers of children, rather than mere babysitters. This critical distinction is important because it positions those working in family childcare settings, or family day homes, at the same level of professionalism as those working in larger childcare centres. Calling one group of people offering early learning and childcare “educators,” and calling a different group of people offering those same childcare services “providers,” perpetuates systemic disrespect, lowers the value of family childcare, and places people working in a day home at a lower tier than those working in centre-based settings. Yet, people offering early learning and childcare in family childcare settings do not merely “provide” care; they educate young children and meaningfully impact their growth and development (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). It is imperative that the terms chosen to describe family childcare educators reflect this, and offer a clear perspective on the valuable services provided.

Family Ecological Theory and Family Childcare Educators

Family ecological theory outlines the role that multiple societal factors may play in moderating the ability of FCC educators to overcome challenges and thrive, as outcomes are impacted by the intersection of various contexts, including individual characteristics, social class, language and language barriers, and culture (Act, 2020; Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Tudge et al., 2009). Indeed, many recent studies explicitly mention this model as being central to their research on FCC educators (Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Forry et al., 2013; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Examining how the intersecting layers of the ecological system influence FCC educators provides a strong framework for understanding how FCC educators can overcome the multiple challenges they face.

Understanding the Role, Benefits, and Challenges of Family Child Care Educators

Lack of childcare is a pressing issue for contemporary families; for example, in Alberta, licensed spaces are only available to 34% of children under the age of six (Buschmann, 2022). The Government of Canada (2022) aims to remedy this by offering increased funding through the recent early learning and childcare agreements, which seek to increase access to affordable, high-quality care throughout the nation. In Alberta, the federal-provincial agreement aims to increase the number of licensed spaces by 42,000 over the next 5 years, with the majority aimed at family day homes (Government of Alberta, 2022c). Licensed day homes are beneficial because they involve just one educator and a small group of children, a program type which provides the opportunity for licensed childcare in communities that are remote or rural, with populations too small to support larger childcare centres (Malik et al., 2018). Additionally, family day homes offer greater flexibility in hours, increased personalization of care, the ability for siblings to be cared for together, and longevity in educator-child relationships (Lanigan, 2011). These unique characteristics offer valuable alternatives to parents, and a strong solution to the current issue of insufficient childcare spaces.

In Alberta, both private day home educators and those contracted with a licensed agency run small businesses, and are personally responsible for maintaining the environment, recruiting families, managing finances, and more. As such, FCC educators have many roles, including business owner, early learning and childcare educator, and often fulltime parent, and those intersecting dimensions are frequently unacknowledged and undersupported (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). Due to long working hours and unique working

conditions, existent continuing education opportunities are often inaccessible or irrelevant (Lanigan, 2011; Tovar et al., 2017). Day home educators also receive low wages and funding (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Tovar et al., 2017). They have low status and often are not regarded as highly as early childhood educators working in other settings (Forry et al., 2013; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, the specialized support systems necessary for FCC educators have not yet emerged. Licensed family childcare support systems have existed in Alberta since 1989 (Alberta Family Child Care Association, n.d.), yet educators continue to face daunting challenges in their work (Blasberg et al., 2019; Dev et al., 2020). These stressors are exacerbated by the isolation faced by sole educators working with groups of young children for long hours in home environments (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011).

Although day home agencies provide support for contracted educators, agencies must work within their capacity and in accordance with provincial childcare regulations and policies, which are largely the same for large childcare centres and family childcare programs (Province of Alberta, 2021). However, the experiences and abilities of family childcare are markedly different. Doherty (2015) brought awareness to this issue by stating:

Success in developing and implementing government regulations, policies and initiatives that effectively support and enhance family child care quality requires accepting that it is not simply a watered down version of center child care. It is a distinctly different service model. (p. 164)

In addition, family childcare support professionals, referred to in Alberta as day home consultants, often lack awareness and continuing education in the specific and unique field of family childcare, resulting in a lack of knowledge on how to best support FCC educators (Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Faulkner et al., 2016). Few specialists working with FCC educators have any experience in FCC themselves (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). As such, supports provided may be misinformed and not targeted to the abilities and challenges of FCC educators (Bromer & Pick, 2012). Importantly, the challenges of family childcare do not affect FCC educators alone. They also affect the children in care, families of both educators and the children being cared for, and the broader community as a whole (Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Forry et al., 2013; Sarlo, 2016).

Though specialized support systems have emerged in the United States and are shown to increase quality of care along with educator satisfaction and abilities (Porter et al., 2016; Porter & Bromer, 2019), in Canada most early learning and childcare support organizations broadly focus on the field of childcare in its entirety, without offering targeted support for family childcare. Canada has no known national support systems specifically created for the needs of FCC educators, and family childcare quality has not been associated with services currently being provided by agencies, including monthly home visits or the supervision and support provided by agency consultants (Doherty, 2015). While advocating for and supporting the broad workforce of early childhood educators is an important goal, this diffuse approach results in family childcare perspectives and needs being left out (Doherty, 2015).

From an ecological systems perspective, interactions between systems are pivotal to life experiences and influences (Allen & Henderson, 2016; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Given that the microsystem of the FCC educator is very small, the characteristics of interactions between FCC educators, parents, or professional supports are more important and influential than they may be in other settings such as larger childcare centres, where more opportunities to interact with

others are present. The small microsystem of a family day home concentrates the experiences within, and amplifies the impact of relational interactions because there are so few (Jeon et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2016). Thus, the amount of respect that FCC educators are treated with has implications for each of the other three main challenges facing FCC educators: isolation, low wages and funding, and lack of continuing education. These challenges are addressed below according to an ecological systems framework, and this section concludes with an in-depth exploration of how the PPCT model informs critical understanding of the overarching challenge of lack of respect.

Isolation

One of the biggest challenges of FCC educators is isolation (Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Loewenberg, 2016). There are very few opportunities for FCC educators to make connections or collaborate with their peers (Lanigan, 2011). This can be stressful because the unique dimensions of their work, including working alone and holding multiple roles as business owners, early childhood educators, and family members or parents, pose distinct challenges unlikely to be understood or appreciated by those not working in the childcare field, and even by educators working in other contexts such as larger childcare centres (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Forry et al., 2013). FCC educator interactions with others, which may take place through formal continuing education opportunities such as conferences or more informal meetings such as play groups, provide valuable opportunities for connection, networking, and collaborative support such as brainstorming solutions to unique FCC educator problems (Lanigan, 2011). Thus, the challenge of FCC educator isolation could be minimized by increasing opportunity for interaction with peers and specially trained FCC support professionals on a mesosystem level (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011).

While day home agencies in Alberta are required to offer regular continuing education sessions that often include opportunities for networking (Government of Alberta, 2022b), timing or travel requirements may prevent some educators from regularly attending (Cella, 2020). In addition, these sessions typically take place once a month, for about 2 hours, which is likely not frequent enough to significantly impact FCC educator experiences or abilities (Abell et al., 2014). Finally, continuing education is routinely offered in a one-size-fits-all approach, which does not meet the need of FCC educators to receive individualized continuing education and support, or the ability to self-customize their continuing education (Porter & Bromer, 2019; Tonyan et al., 2017). While existent policies in Alberta require licensed day home agencies to provide support in the form of continuing education (Government of Alberta, 2022b), in practice the support being provided often fails to meet the unique needs of educators working family childcare settings.

Working with an ecological systems lens, it is clear that increasing the frequency and accessibility of educator interactions with other adults is an essential part of reducing FCC barriers (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011). Increasing interactions with peers and specialized FCC support professionals would decrease problematic isolation and address the challenge of lack of continuing education further described below. Such a change would impact licensed FCC agencies the most, as they are primarily responsible for providing such interactions (Government of Alberta, 2022b). This mesosystem shift would require more reflexivity, specialized continuing education for staff, and potentially more federal and regional funding specifically directed to family childcare (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Schaack et al., 2017). However, the benefits produced by this shift would positively impact not only day home educators, but also the high numbers of children and family accessing childcare in these settings, improving outcomes at a

societal level (Porter et al., 2016; Sarlo, 2016). Ecological systems theory illustrates this by describing how changes in proximal and distal systems, such as mesosystem increases in interactions and exosystem changes in policy and practice to support increased connection, permeate through the entire system to impact many individuals including educators, children, and families (Tudge et al., 2009).

Lack of Continuing Education

Another daunting challenge currently facing FCC educators is the lack of accessible, relevant continuing education available to them (Swartz et. al., 2016; Tovar et al., 2015; Tovar et. al., 2017). It is too often taken for granted that mainstream approaches to supporting early childhood educators are applicable in every setting. FCC educators work within unique systems of operation markedly different than any other childcare setting, because they work alone and out of their own homes. As such, they require targeted and informed supports (Bromer & Weaver, 2016). In addition, FCC educators care for groups of children with mixed ages, a distinct challenge often ignored in literature and formal continuing education opportunities (Lanigan, 2011; Loewenberg, 2016). FCC educators need individualized, specialized continuing education, which is not currently being provided in Canada by exosystem organizations that mainly provide generalized educator continuing education. Offering specialized, individualized support benefits both children as recipients of care, and the day home educator themselves on the micro and mesosystem levels (Figueroa & Wiley, 2016; Swartz et. al., 2016, Tovar et. al., 2017).

The PPCT model aptly describes how increasing continuing education opportunities and quality can decrease isolation and provide widespread benefits for FCC educators and the people they care for. Increasing the number and quality of interactions or processes between educators, their peers, and specialized support professionals during continuing education is an environmental context shown to be an important avenue for change (Swartz et. al., 2016, Tovar et al., 2015). Over time, these increased interactional processes in the context of more targeted continuing education and opportunities for FCC educator connection has a powerfully positive impact on educator sense of self and ability to offer high-quality care (Swartz et al., 2016). Unfortunately, funding is often needed to provide more opportunities for meaningful interactions and continuing education, and lack of adequate funding is a key concern addressed below.

Low Wages and Funding

Though the field of child care is well-known for its low wages and funding (Uppal & Savage, 2021), systemic inequalities of ecosystem practice and procedures perpetuate a distinct disadvantage for FCC educators. Family day home fees are significantly lower than larger childcare centre fees in many provinces including Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Ontario, where childcare centres charge between \$100 and \$700 more per space than day homes (Arrive, 2020), even though family childcare programs are typically expected to meet the same licensing standards and requirements (Province of Alberta, 2021). Not only do family childcare programs offer the same level of quality care at significantly lower fees, affordability grants for Alberta's FCC spaces are approximately half the amount of what is offered to licensed spots in centre-based care settings (Government of Alberta, 2021). These ongoing exosystem policy inequities decrease FCC educator continuing education opportunities, financial well-being, and ability to enhance the environment and materials provided (Carter, 2018; Lanigan, 2011; Zbarskaya, 2012). The current funding policies and system also perpetuate the lack of value conveyed to family childcare, which negatively impacts FCC educator sense of self, how they are

seen and treated by others, and public perception of the profession (Faulkner et al., 2016). This affects quality of care for children, and job satisfaction for educators (Mimura et al., 2019).

On a positive note, some exosystem policies are changing to be more equitable toward valuable FCC educators. Until very recently, certain funding sources such as grants for professional education were offered only to employees of child care centres in Alberta, excluding FCC educators from receiving the same continuing education opportunities. The recent changes to family childcare funding, which began in April of 2020 (Government of Alberta, 2022a) support all of Alberta's early childhood educators equally, and hopefully represent a positive shift in policy that will gain in volume and momentum moving forward, to more fully include and support FCC educators.

A Process-Person-Context-Time Model Approach to the Challenge of Lack of Respect

Ecological systems theory and the PPCT model provide a strong framework for examining how respect, or lack of, impacts FCC educators. Both proximal and distal contexts, as outlined by examining the many interactional layers of the ecological system, offer experiences that can be supportive or detrimental (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The PPCT model further demonstrates this, by outlining four concepts and the interactions between them. Taking the time to unpack the intersecting outcomes arising from the amount of respect shown to FCC educators increases understanding of the complexity and importance of this topic.

Ecological systems theory has evolved over time to include more focus on the individual and their personal characteristics, as previous iterations were found to overemphasize context (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This increased attention to the role of the individual and their development was further refined with the addition of proximal processes and the PPCT model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). While PPCT concepts of process, context, and time can be explored through the levels of the exosystem as outlined below, the role of the individual and their personal characteristics needs to be delineated especially in the field of family childcare, where just one educator cares for a group of children on their own.

The personal characteristics of FCC educators have been described as perhaps the most important factor impacting quality of care (Faulkner et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2016). Sense of self as a professional, maintaining self-care and work-life balance, and engaging in professional development are all critical components which contribute to the abilities of FCC educators and the quality of care they offer (Cortes & Hallam, 2016; Tonyan et al., 2017). As the PPCT model so clearly emphasizes the importance of personal characteristics, using this theory as a framework to understand and explore family childcare is particularly apt.

Personal characteristics of FCC educators, including their self-perspective, self-care, ability to balance work-life commitments, and internal motivation to engage in continuing education all heavily impact their abilities and performance (Cortes & Hallam, 2016). If an educator views themselves as a professional, they will be more likely to offer high-quality care, maintain professional boundaries, and collaborate effectively with parents (Doherty, 2015; Faulkner et al., 2016). Educators working in family childcare who can effectively balance work-life commitments and engage in self-care experience lower levels of stress, which increases responsiveness to children and ability to offer high-quality care (Gerstenblatt et. al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2018). For FCC educators, the personal characteristic of engaging in continuing education is well-known to increase quality of care and self-efficacy, which is linked with motivation, social supports, and intention to remain in the field (Porter et al., 2016). Unfortunately, some educators

may choose not to engage even when professional development is available (Tonyan et al., 2017). Lack of engagement may occur when continuing education is uninformed and not targeted to FCC educators, yet it also occurs when an educator does not view themselves as a professional (Cella, 2020; Hallam et al., 2017).

The personal characteristics of FCC educators are informed and influenced by interactions with others over time, as described by the PPCT model (Tudge et al., 2009). The way people are viewed and treated, by other people as well as by licensing regulations and policies, impacts their sense of self and their abilities (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). As people, processes, contexts, and time are interrelated and intersectional, examining the three components of the PPCT which impact the role and development of the individual is essential in describing family childcare dynamics.

Processes in the PPCT describe regular interactions between a person and other people or objects in the immediate environment (Tudge et al., 2009). For FCC educators, this may include interactions with parents or support professionals, such as day home agency consultants in Alberta who visit educators regularly to both monitor for quality, and offer support (Government of Alberta, 2022b). Interactions that occur over time, such as educator relationships with day home parents or agency consultants, contribute to form educator self-perceptions, and can grow to become sources of strength or challenge. The processes and contexts surrounding the challenge of lack of respect toward FCC educators, and how those form over time, are further outlined below.

Though societal perceptions of childcare professionals have evolved far from mere caretakers who keep children alive, there is still a distinct lack of respect for early childhood educators as a whole, and in particular the subgroup of FCC educators (Faulkner et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2018). This is an issue raised repeatedly in existent research (Bromer & Weaver, 2016; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014; Lanigan, 2011; Loewenberg, 2016), and it is highly problematic because it permeates every level of the ecological system. From a microsystem perspective, lack of respect negatively impacts self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of self-worth (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Swartz et al., 2016). Exosystem policies reflect and perpetuate the lack of value and respect conveyed to FCC educators through the low funding and inadequate supports currently being provided, as previously described (Lanigan, 2011; Loewenberg, 2016). In a broader context, neoliberal economic and social policies continue to devalue work traditionally done by women, such as childcare, despite clear evidence of the value and well-being that such work confers to children, women, families, and economics (Breitkreuz et al., 2019).

Societal perceptions impact how value is prescribed. Seeing FCC educators as the essential professionals that they are offers a profound shift in how they are treated, funded, and supported (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, 2020). Increasing respect of FCC educators as professionals, rather than merely babysitters or childcare providers, affects policies regarding the quality and accessibility of continuing education, amount of funding and wages they receive, and more (Forry et al., 2013; Gerstenblatt et al., 2014). The potential for macrosystem change, which happens over time, is a critical implication of ecological theory and supports a potential chronosystem shift of perspectives which can eventually create a different culture that is more supportive of FCC educators (Allen & Henderson, 2016).

Changing the perception of FCC educators, from child care providers to early childhood educators, has profound impacts according to the PPCT model (Tudge et al., 2009). For example, increased respect for FCC educators and increased understanding that these unique settings require specialized supports could result in funding being provided directly to the FCC field, rather than

the broad field of early childhood education in its entirety, which is what is happening with the current Early Learning and Childcare Agreements (Government of Canada, 2022). Increasing respect held for FCC educators by themselves and in the people and policies surrounding them impacts how they are treated, how they are supported, and most importantly their ability to provide long-term quality care (Lanigan, 2011). Below, the challenge of respect toward FCC educators is further outlined and explored according to the various contexts of ecological systems theory.

Microsystem interactions directly impact FCC educators. Because educators working alone in their own home are isolated, the interactions they have with others can become concentrated, and have more of an impact than they would if educators experienced more interactions with adults during the workday. In the microsystem, if interactions between educators and parents at the day home are routinely characterized by a lack of respect, it can contribute to FCC educator low self-esteem, negative affect, and decreased self-worth (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Lanigan, 2011; Loewenberg, 2016). This may cause low mood or even depression, which is detrimental not only to the FCC educator and their immediate family members, but also to children being cared for (Bridgett et al., 2013).

Depressive symptoms in early childhood educators cause withdrawn and negative caregiving, more so in family day home settings than in centre-based care where this impact can be buffered by other, happier caregivers (Forry et al., 2013). When caregivers are impacted by low mood, their responses to children change in one of two ways. Caregivers with low mood, high stress, or depression have been shown to underreact to children's needs, minimizing or even ignoring them in a neglectful or permissive parenting style, or overreact with a harsh and punitive approach common to authoritarian parenting styles (Bridgett et al., 2013). Both overreacting and underreacting to children's needs are linked with decreased socioemotional development at best, and neglect or physical abuse in the extreme (Barros et al., 2015; Kim & Kochanska, 2012). Treating people with respect is important because it informs their sense of self and bolsters their ability to perform well on the job (Forry et al., 2013).

Mesosystem interactions are also of critical importance to isolated FCC educators. For some, daily interactions with parents and monthly visits with their day home agency consultant are potentially the only times of day when educators speak to or even see another adult. Visualizing an echo chamber may clarify the concentrated impact of relationship characteristics within the small circle of individuals, including day home parents and agency consultants that FCC educators see on a regular basis. Mesosystem interactions with those regular FCC contacts hold opportunities for support, but can be detrimental if the relationship is characterized by disrespect, mistrust, or conflict (Lanigan, 2011; Tudge et al., 2009).

Exosystems of early learning and childcare regulations and organizational policies strongly impact how FCC educators are treated. In ecological systems theory, the exosystem is a context which has indirect influence on an individual; however, exosystem influences, including policy frameworks, continuing education, and support organizations, all impact how FCC educators are perceived and supported (Tudge et al., 2009). If licensing and regulation policies and perceptions of FCC educators are strengths-based and positive, it is likely that educator-consultant visits will be marked with trust and respect (Lanigan, 2011). If policies and perceptions are misinformed or place FCC educator ability in a diminished light, such as minimizing educator abilities, treating and viewing them the same as educators working in larger childcare centres, or focusing on a punitive approach to support and guidance, there is increased likelihood that visits will be unsupportive or characterized by condescension and disrespect (Loewenberg, 2016). The

interactions take place in the mesosystem are thus heavily influenced by exosystem procedures and policies.

Increasing respect held for FCC educators impacts how they see themselves as individuals, how other people see and interact with them in the mesosystem, and how they are supported in exosystem policies and practice. Respect can be signalled by how FCC educators are treated by others, how policies view educator abilities, and by FCC educators receiving adequate pay (Faulkner et al., 2016). Increasing their respect also increases how valued they feel and are perceived as by others, which would be reflected throughout the PPCT model (Tudge et al., 2009). Changing societal perceptions of FCC educators to reflect their worth and value is a powerful pathway to addressing each of the challenges listed above, and will likely result in a positive shift in macrosystem societal beliefs.

Benefits of a More Integrated Approach

Ecological systems theory not only describes how FCC educators can thrive by overcoming present challenges, but also outlines benefits for other people and systems described by ecological systems theory and the PPCT model. Macrosystem beliefs about the value of early childhood educators can provoke changes in the funding and supports offered to them. Those changes would strongly benefit families, who often scramble to find safe, reliable childcare (Breitkreuz et al., 2019). Increasing the perceived value of FCC educators will lead to increased supports, enhancing the quality of care provided and boosting educator ability to guide optimal development in children (Bromer & Korfmacher, 2017; Forry et al., 2013; Lanigan, 2011; Schaack et al., 2017). Improving respect levels and wages, decreasing educator isolation, and increasing continuing education quality and accessibility not only boost supports for FCC educators, but contribute to factors known to increase longevity and stability of early childhood educators (Grant et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2017; McKinlay et al., 2018).

The continuity of care established by increasing strengths and reducing challenges of FCC educators have overwhelming benefits for children, families, and communities. This is part of quality care, and promotes supportive, secure caregiver-child relationships, resulting in more interaction with caregivers and less behavioral problems (Ruprecht et al., 2016). Continuity of care promotes secure attachment and emotional well-being, increases children's self-control, and decreases problematic behavior (Horn et al., 2018). Lower childcare turnover also benefits parents, who can rely on the security and stability of their childcare arrangements. This enhances parental well-being, and provides widespread benefits for the community as well. People can arrive at work regularly, and disruptions to routine and comfort levels are minimized when such continuity is provided. In addition, family childcare's unique dynamic results in benefits to families including more flexible and individualized programming for children, the ability to provide care for siblings together, closer proximity to home and work, shared culture between educators and families, and a home environment (Blasberg et al., 2019; Lanigan, 2011). In this way, the interconnected systems of ecological theory can overlap to provide wraparound supports for FCC educators, and also offering benefits for children, families, and communities.

Conclusion

For FCC educators to be successful, they need support. Addressing current issues of lack of respect, low wages and funding, isolation, and lack of continuing education throughout each layer of the ecological system are important avenues for providing this support. Overcoming the challenges facing FCC educators provides widespread benefits for the individual, the families they

work with, and society as a broader whole. The ecological systems theory approach clearly demonstrates the nuances of this issue, illustrating both challenges and solutions at every level, and taking into consideration the multifaceted, interconnected processes occurring between people and their environmental contexts over time.

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