

Research Brief

Family Child Care Professionals: Understanding a Critical Workforce

BY ROBYN KELTON, MA, & IRINA TENIS, PhD

INTRODUCTION

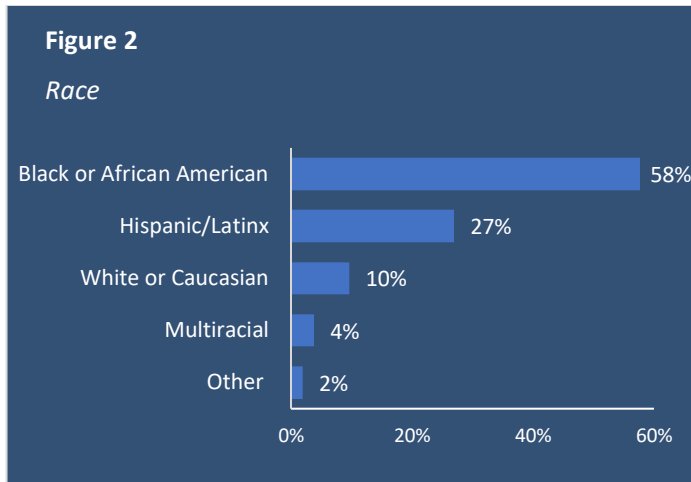
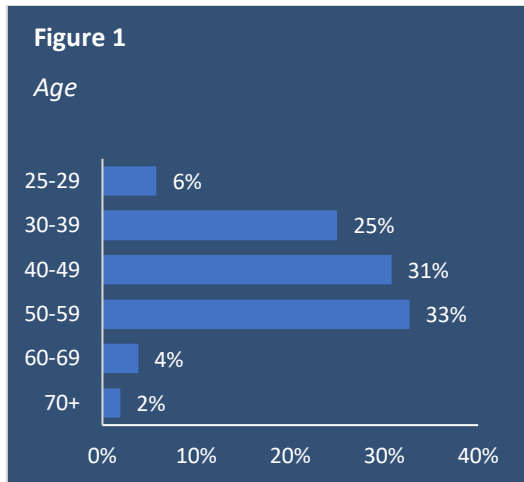
The early childhood education care (ECEC) practitioner landscape is complex and encompasses many roles including center-based and school-based administrative, teaching, and support staff as well as home-based unregulated child care family child care (FCC) providers and home-based regulated (e.g., registered or licensed) FCC providers who simultaneously operate as small business owners and early childhood educators. FCC providers are sometimes referred to as home-based educators, small business owners, or entrepreneurs. For this research study, the term FCC professional is used to refer to a home-based educator who owns and operates a licensed FCC business.

FCC professionals represent an “essential component of the child care landscape,” yet the number of FCC programs has seen an alarming decline for the past two decades (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2021, p. 6). Moreover, while other professions often have well-defined steps or universal requirements for entry-level positions and identified milestones and clear pathways for advancement, those who open FCC programs tend to represent a more varied and flexible professional pathway. This makes it difficult to gain a systemic understanding of the experiences and characteristics that make up the workforce. Research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of this distinct yet crucial sector of the ECEC workforce including motivations, role perceptions, and job satisfaction. This Research Brief aims to bridge this gap in the literature by offering a detailed professional report of FCC professionals.

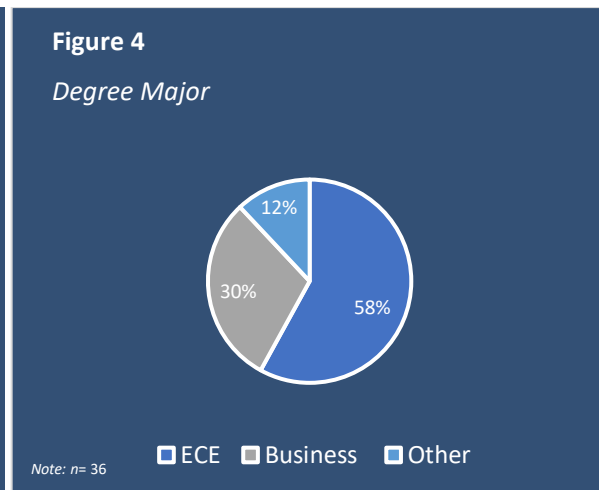
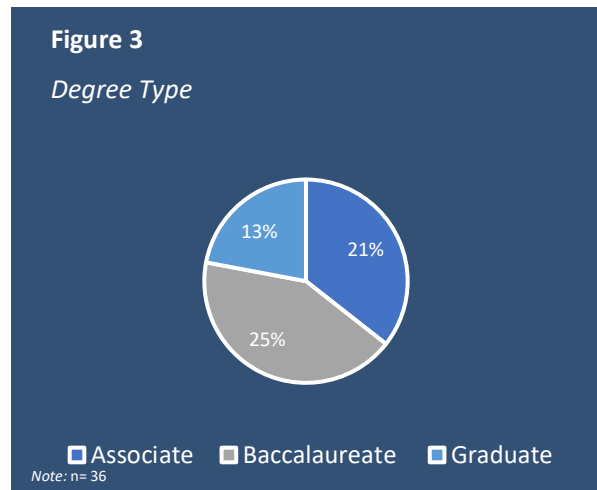
METHOD

Sample

The sample included 52 FCC professionals who owned and operated a licensed FCC program in Illinois between 2020 and 2024. Data were collected as a part of a registration process for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership’s Taking the Lead Family Child Care Leadership Academy prior to the start of the academy. The sample predominantly identified as female (94%), 2% male, 2% non-binary, and 2% of the sample chose not to answer this question. The sample also represented a range of ages and races (see Figures 1 and 2 below).

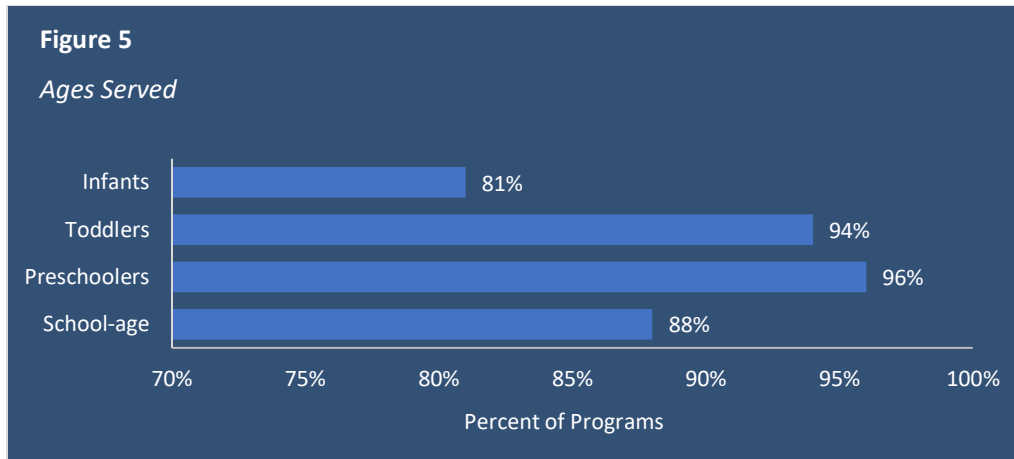


The majority (70%) of the sample reported having a college degree. Figure 3 breaks down the degree by type while Figure 4 breaks down the degree by relevant major. Of those without a degree, 81% had previously completed some college coursework. Over half of the sample (60%) reported they had taken business or professional practices training in the past 12 months. Twenty-three percent had a state-issued family child care credential and 20% had a CDA. Fifty-four percent of the sample were members of a formal FCC network or association and 17% were members of a staffed FCC network. Experience in the field of ECEC ranged from 0 to 35 years with an average of 13 ($SD = 9.56$) years of experience. Experience as a FCC professional ranged from 0 to 27 years with an average of 11 years ($SD = 6.90$) years of experience.



Together the 52 FCC programs served a total of 595 children. Individual program enrollment ranged from 1 to 36 children with higher numbers of enrollment reflecting programs that offered a combination of care options and/or served children who attended the program less than five days a week. Average enrollment was 11.44 children with a mode (most common enrollment number) of seven. As described in Figure 5, the majority of the programs served children across all age groups. All of the programs had children enrolled full-day, 58% had children who were enrolled part-day, 33% of programs had children enrolled in extended, evening, or overnight care, and 37% had children enrolled part-time (attending

less than five days a week). These program demographics are aligned with other research findings and highlight the critical span of services offered through FCC, especially those that meet the needs of families with infants and toddlers and those working non-traditional hours (Bromer et al., 2021; Kelton & Tenis, 2024; National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2020).



Forty-eight percent of the FCC programs were located in suburban settings, 42% were located in urban settings, and 10% were located in rural areas. While only 6% of the programs were accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care, 17% reported being in the self-study phase of becoming accredited. Twelve percent of the programs received Head Start or Early Head Start funding and 2% received state pre-K funding. More than half (62%) of the family child care professionals in the sample were also employers. Sixty percent employed at least one assistant and 21% employed at least one substitute (note that many programs employed both substitutes and assistants).

Measures

The Administrator Role Perception Survey—Home Based (ARPS-HB) was used to collect data. The ARPS-HB is a 70-question online survey exploring FCC professionals' perceptions of their work (Bella & Kelton, 2021). The ARPS-HB examines the alignment between current and ideal work experience as well as past perspectives, current role perceptions, levels of self-efficacy, and perceptions of mastery of key family child care educator and entrepreneurial competencies. The ARPS-HB also collects practitioner and program demographic data. The ARPS-HB was modeled after the Bella et al., (2017), Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS), but refined to reflect the unique needs and characteristics of FCC programs (2017).

FINDINGS

Career Beginnings

Respondents were asked about their motivations for becoming FCC professionals, work experience, and thoughts and feelings when they first opened their businesses. As noted in Figure 6, the leading motivation for becoming a FCC professional was the opportunity to run their own business (23%) and to stay home with their children (23%). Both of these motivations represent a level of career autonomy

that is often seen as a unique advantage of being a FCC professional and may represent an attractive feature of the role. Because of the highly variable career pathway associated with FCC professionals, prior work experience in the field was also of interest. While 52% of the sample had no previous ECEC work experience, 46% of the professionals had held at least one previous teaching position. Only 15% had any prior administrative experience (see Table 1 for all previous experience).

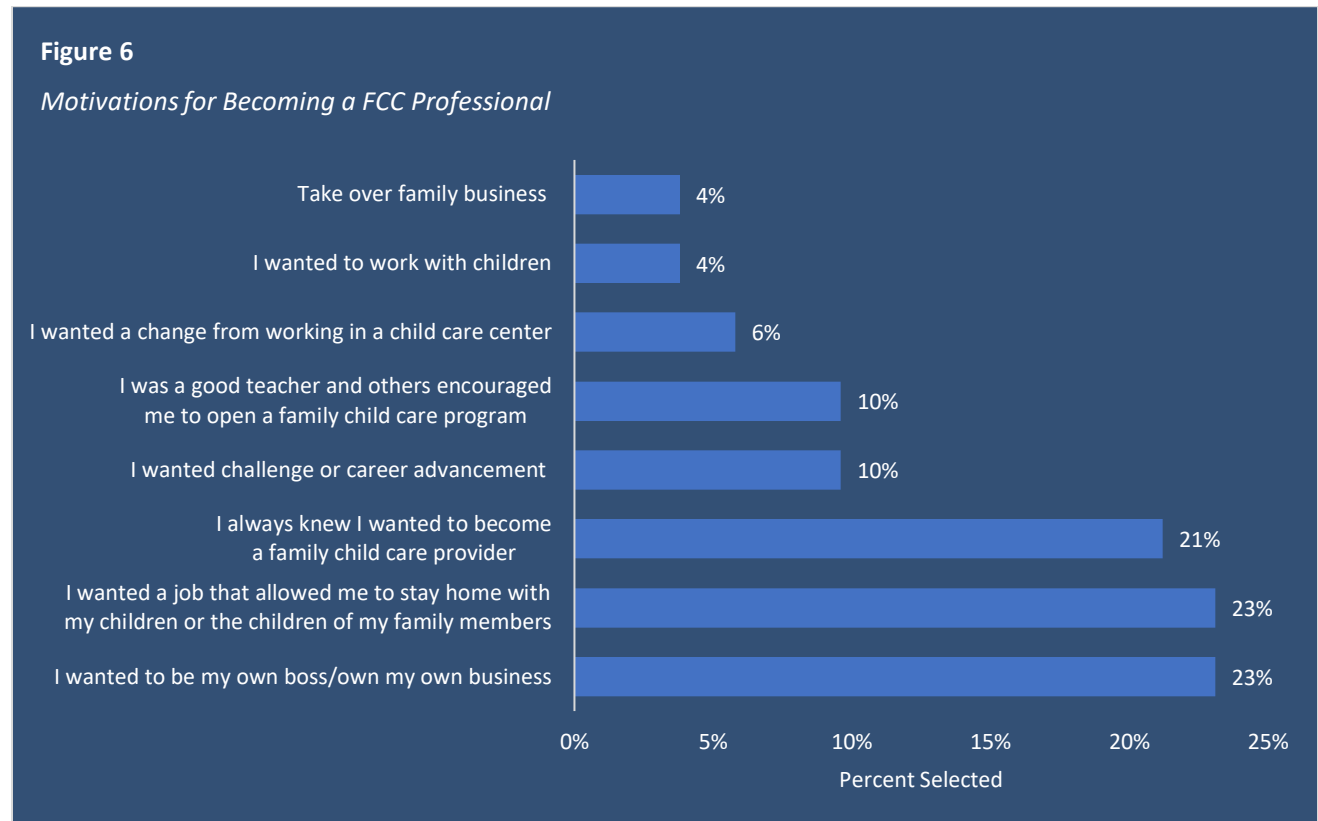


Table 1

Previous ECEC Experience

Previous Role Experience	Number	Percent
Assistant in a FCC program	15	29%
Substitute in a FCC program	8	15%
Teacher in a child care center	17	33%
Teacher in a pre-K-12 school setting	8	15%
Child care center director or assistant director	7	13%
Coordinator position	1	2%
No previous ECEC work experience	27	52%

Note: Respondents were asked to select all experiences that applied; many selected more than one previous position

As Table 2 shows, when the FCC professionals first opened their FCC business, the majority of the sample felt confident in themselves, secure that the families they served would like them, and that their own expectations for themselves had been realistic. However, the majority of the sample also indicated that they were not well prepared for their role, with 64% reporting they were not prepared specifically

for the challenges they encountered in their work with children and families. Moreover, the majority (67%) were not prepared for the business-related issues they faced.

Table 2

Feelings and Beliefs at Career Beginning

▪ 64% felt confident and self-assured	VS	▪ 37% hoped no one would find out how scared they were
▪ 67% felt their expectations of themselves were realistic	VS	▪ 33% felt their expectations for themselves were unrealistic
▪ 75% felt confident families would like them	VS	▪ 25% worried families would not like them
▪ 37% felt well-prepared for the kinds of challenges they encountered working with children and families	VS	▪ 64% felt unprepared for the challenges they encountered working with children and families
▪ 33% felt well-prepared for the kinds of issues they encountered in running their business	VS	▪ 67% felt unprepared for the kinds of issues they encountered in running their business

Current Role Perception, Job Satisfaction, and Confidence

A large body of research supports the theory that role perception, job satisfaction, and self-efficacy are important predictors of role commitment, job performance, and burnout (e.g., Khani & Mirzaee, 2015; Kotaro et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021; Sandstrom et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Spreitzer et al., 2005). The overarching findings from these studies suggest that when practitioners have favorable views of their professional role and a strong sense of competence in completing work-related tasks, they tend to be committed to their work and are better able to handle job-related challenges and stress.

Role Perception

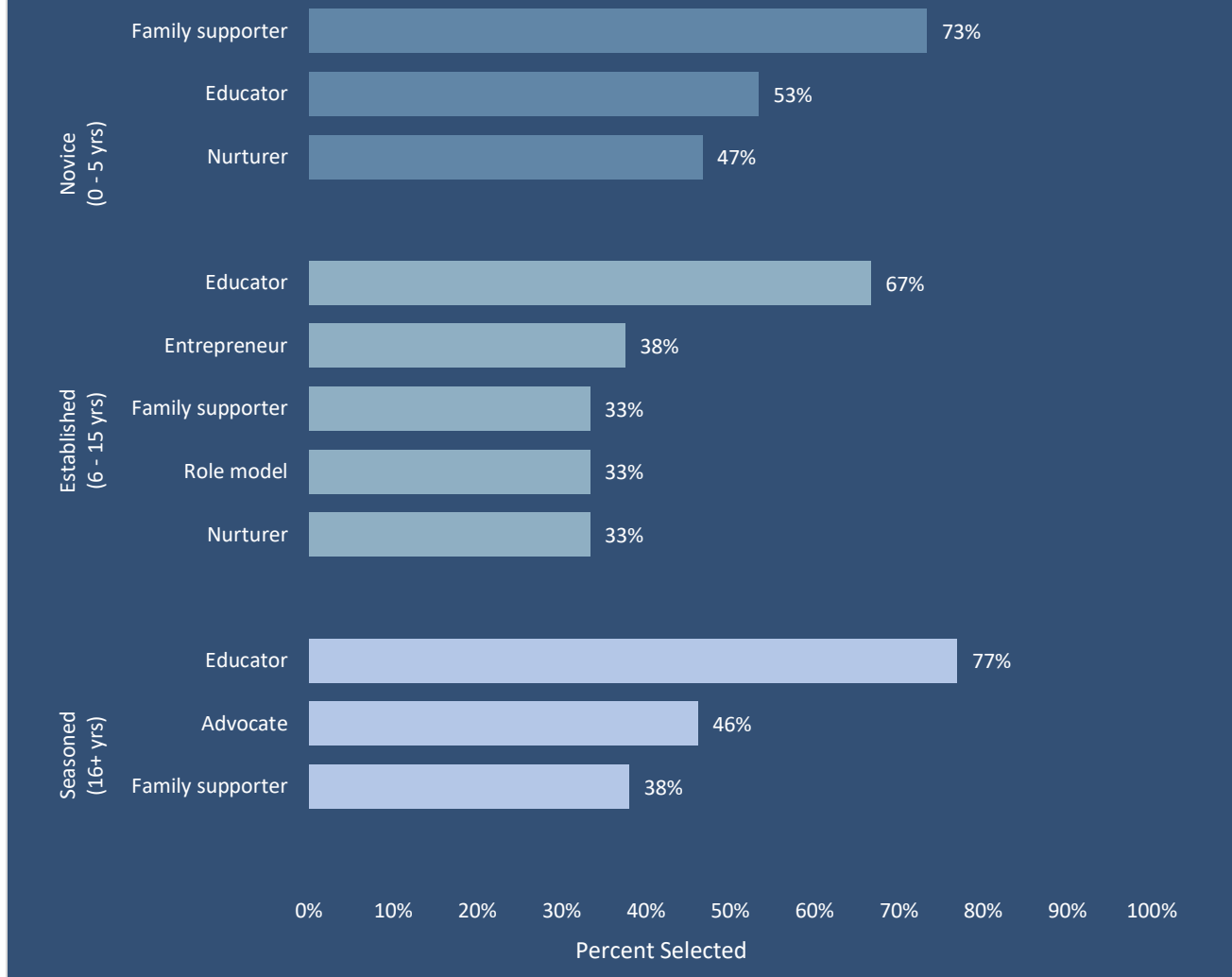
Respondents were asked to select the three words or phrases that best described their role. Based on frequency, the top three choices for the full sample were *educator* (65%), *family supporter* (46%), and *nurturer* (37%). Role descriptors were further examined by years of FCC experience. Professionals with 0-5 years FCC experience were classified as novice professionals ($n = 24$), those with 6 – 15 years were classified as established professionals ($n = 15$), and 16 or more years were classified as seasoned professionals ($n = 13$). As demonstrated in Figure 7, over the course of their careers FCC professionals consistently referred to their work as *educators* and *family supporters*; however, across their years of experience, there appears to be an interesting evolution of the third descriptor representing increased identification as *entrepreneurs* and *role models* for established professional, and identification as *advocates* for seasoned professionals.

Figure 7

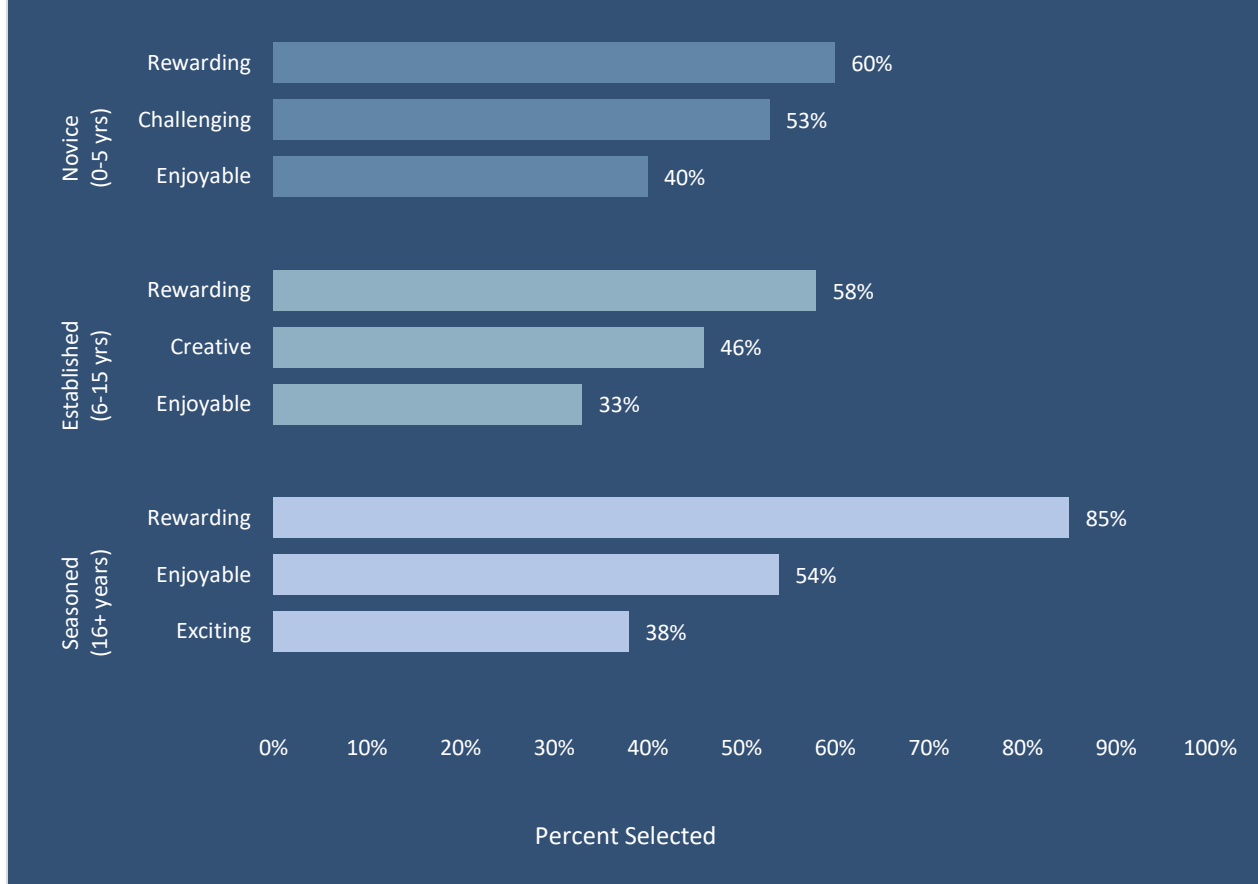
Role Descriptors by Years of Experience

Figure 7

Role Descriptor By Experience

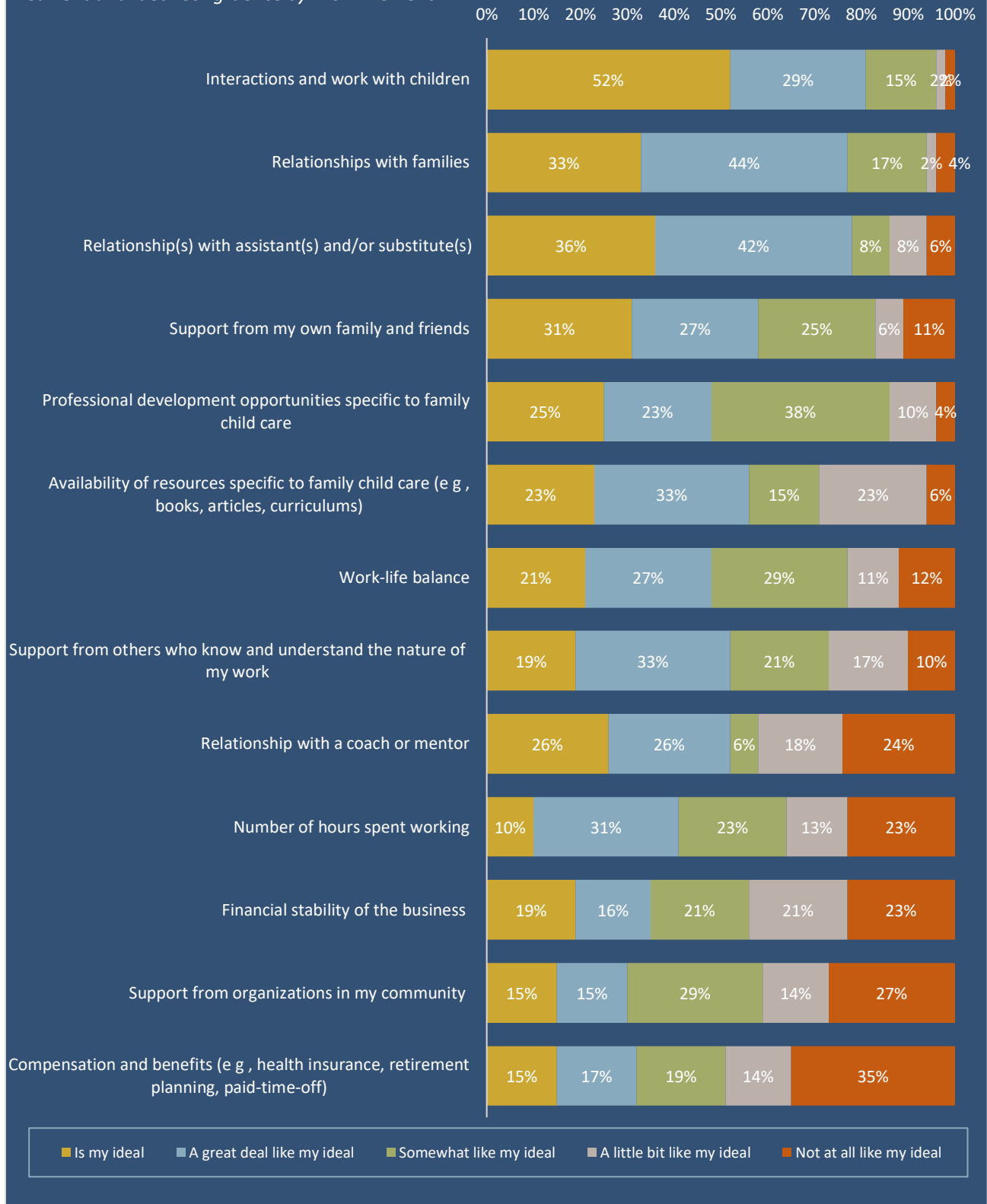


Respondents were also asked to select the three words that best described their current job. For the full sample, the most frequent descriptor was rewarding (65%), followed by enjoyable (40%), and challenging (37%). Further analysis by experience found overlap with rewarding and enjoyable remaining stable across time, but that novice professionals most often selected challenging as their third descriptor, experienced professionals most often selected creative, and seasoned professionals most often selected exciting as their third descriptor (see Figure 8).

Figure 8*Role Descriptor By Experience***Role Congruence**

Respondents were asked to rate on a Likert-scale how well elements of their work aligned with their ideals (0 = *not at all like my ideal*, to 5 = *is my ideal*). Figure 9 below shows the means for each comparison by element. Average congruence of how closely current conditions resembled their ideal was 3.37 ($SD = 1.27$) suggesting that overall, the role of the FCC professional is *somewhat like the ideal*. Figure 9 breaks down levels of congruence by specific elements of the role.

Figure 9
Current and Ideal Congruence by Work Element



Critical Issues, Satisfaction, and Frustrations

Next, respondents were asked to select the three most critical issues they face running a FCC business. The most commonly selected issues were the demands of the job (47%), lack of benefits (44%), and difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff (33%).

Respondents were also asked to describe the aspects of their work that brought them the greatest satisfaction and greatest frustration. Open-ended responses were then categorized into themes. As noted in Table 3, the top satisfaction themes revolved around relationships with children and families, positive impact on children's lives, and personal and professional growth (e.g., overcoming challenges, worries, or fears).

Table 3

Satisfaction and Frustration Themes

Sources of Satisfaction Themes	Quotes
Impact on children's growth and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Watching the children blossom and become independent little people." ▪ "Seeing the smiles on the children's faces and knowing that they feel loved while in my care."
Relationships with families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "The bonds I have established with my families and the relationships my families have formed with each other." ▪ "Love and respect from the families."
Personal growth and professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Working with my families and showing them my professionalism." ▪ "I have overcome a lot of my "used-to-be fears."
Professional fulfilment and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "To be able to impact each child that enters my business." ▪ "Seeing the children I cared for years later, successful, I and letting me know I had a part in that."
Sources of Frustration Themes	Quotes
Challenges with families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Billing parents and getting them to understand that I am not just a babysitter." ▪ "The parents not respecting my day care as a business and my time as an educator."
Pay and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "We get burnt out at times and it's hard to take vacation because we don't want to lose out on the pay." ▪ "The pay we receive for all the work we do for these children."
Time management and workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Not enough time in a day." ▪ "The pay and long days."
Financial concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Not having funding to improve or grow my program." ▪ "Finance management."
Isolation and lack of support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Not having a network of peers that I can communicate with." ▪ "Doing it all alone. Good help is hard to find."

Confidence in Competencies

Respondents ranked their current level of confidence across 38 competencies related to owning and operating a FCC business. Each question was scored on a four-point Likert scale (1 = I am not confident in

my ability, 2 = I am somewhat confident in my ability, 3 = I am confident in my ability, 4 = I am very confident in my ability). The average score across all 38 competencies was 2.87 ($SD = 0.66$) and ranged from 1.24 to 4.00. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the five competencies in which FCC professionals expressed the highest level of confidence and the five competencies with the lowest level of confidence.

Table 4

Highest and Lowest Areas of Confidence

Competence	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Most Confident			
Working with children of different ages at the same time	3.31	0.76	1.00 - 4.00
Promoting the professional development of staff	3.19	0.82	1.00 - 4.00
Supervising staff to ensure a developmentally appropriate learning experience for children	3.19	0.74	1.00 - 4.00
Promoting a positive image of the program in the community	3.13	0.82	1.00 - 4.00
Building partnerships with families of diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds	3.08	0.81	1.00 - 4.00
Least Confident			
Implementing sound financial management practices (e.g., budgeting, cash flow)	2.42	1.00	1.00 - 4.00
Protecting time for myself to complete business practices (e.g., recordkeeping, updating policies)	2.44	0.96	1.00 - 4.00
Recruiting, selecting, and orienting staff	2.50	0.92	1.00 - 4.00
Creating and implementing a salary scale	2.50	0.92	1.00 - 4.00
Using program assessment data to support continuous quality improvement efforts	2.52	1.00	1.00 - 4.00

Role Commitment

The sample appeared to be strongly committed to their work. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported feeling *very committed* to their business, 88% reported *taking pride in their business* and 77% reported that *they put a lot of extra effort into their work*. Moreover, knowing what they know today about the satisfaction of their job, 96% would still become a FCC professional. However, the intention to stay in the role appears more nuanced with only 65% reporting they intend to run their program for at least two more years. Additionally, 14% reported that they often think about closing, and 8% reported that they sometimes feel trapped in their job. This may reflect FCC professionals desire for a career pathway that allows them to grow and advance in the field. This highlights a need for additional research on next steps for the FCC professionals after they close their programs.

DISCUSSION

Research and reports focused on roles in ECEC serve as valuable resources for individuals considering a career in this field, as well as for educators, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders interested in workforce development, talent management, and industry trends. They can inform decision-making

processes related to education, training, recruitment, and workforce planning. This Research Brief provides a report of the regulated (licensed) segment of the FCC workforce. Data from a small, but relatively diverse sample of 52 FCC professionals suggest that they tend to enter the field feeling confident and self-assured. Despite their confidence; however, many felt unprepared for the challenges they face, especially in business-related areas. While 52% of the sample had no previous experience in ECEC, 46% did have prior teaching experience, yet only 15% had administrative experience. This diversity in backgrounds underscores the multidisciplinary nature of the FCC profession, with individuals entering from a range of educational and professional backgrounds.

The findings regarding the motivations for individuals to become FCC professionals provide valuable insights into the unique appeal and potential career pathways within the ECEC field. As illustrated in Figure 6, two primary motivations emerged as leading factors: the desire to be one's own boss or run a business (23%) and the aspiration to be able to stay home with their own children (23%). These motivations reflect a distinct aspect of the FCC profession, highlighting the appeal of flexibility and autonomy that comes with operating a FCC program. The fact that only 10% of the sample were motivated by the encouragement of others presents an interesting contrast to data on center-based administrators, who often cite encouragement from others as a primary reason for entering their role (McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, 2018). More research is needed to further understand career motivations, but this discrepancy may suggest that FCC professionals are more often self-driven and motivated by intrinsic factors such as independence and the desire to balance work with family responsibilities.

A prominent discovery across the ECEC literature concerning leadership underscores the significance of individuals' professional identity and their perception of themselves as leaders. Work in this area has highlighted the crucial role of self-efficacy, reflective practices, empowerment, and leadership purpose. This underscores the importance of measuring and supporting role-related factors when considering workforce well-being and sustainability.

Our findings reveal a consistent role-perception of FCC professionals as *educators* and *family supporters* across the span of their careers. However, an intriguing evolution is observed in experienced and seasoned FCC professionals that seems to extend beyond direct interactions with children and families. Mid-career professionals (with 6 – 15 years of FCC experience) appear to broaden their role identity to emphasize their work as small business owners and role models and seasoned professionals (16 or more years of experience) extend to include their role as advocates.

Interestingly, we found a similar evolution in how FCC professionals described their work. While *rewarding* and *enjoyable* remained consistent descriptors across time, new professionals most often selected *challenging* as a third descriptor, experienced professionals most often selected *creative*, and seasoned professionals most often selected *exciting* as their third descriptor. Additional research is needed but the shift may reflect a sense of resiliency and empowerment as professionals advance in their career.

This preliminary data begin to demonstrate how FCC professionals' perceptions evolve across time. When new to the role, FCC professionals seem to emphasize their direct work with children and families,

finding the work to be rewarding yet challenging. Mid-career FCC professionals' role perceptions may expand to highlight their powerful role as small business owners embracing autonomy and creativity—the combination of being an entrepreneur and an educator is enticing for the mid-career FCC professional. Later in their career, the perception seems to extend past their influence within their individual programs to encompass the exciting role they play in advocating for and supporting the larger FCC and ECEC field.

The thematic analysis of the FCC professionals' frustrations revealed several common themes including challenges in parent-provider relationships, time management and workload, financial concerns, and the need for staffing and support. Unsurprisingly, these areas overlap with the areas in which FCC professionals reported having the least confidence—the business and professional practices that foster a successful and sustainable business.

These findings also mirror previous research measuring FCC business and professional practices using the *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS)* which found income and benefits, fiscal management, and provider as employer to be among the lowest rated items in a national sample of 210 FCC programs as well as a clear parallel to other research highlighting factors hypothesized to lead to professional burnout and program closure (e.g., Bromer et al., 2021; Kelton & Tennis, 2024; National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2020; Vieria & Hill, 2019). Given the context of the sample's educational background and work experience, these findings further elucidate the need for specialized training and coursework related to the business aspects of FCC. Addressing competencies in business and professional practice is crucial in improving the well-being and effectiveness of FCC professionals in delivering quality care to children and families.

This study provided nuanced results regarding the FCC professional's commitment to the role. While the vast majority (85%) of the sample identified as *very committed* to their business, only 65% indicated that they plan to run their business for at least two more years. These data taken in conjunction with the role perception data raise interesting questions regarding the possibility that as their career advances, FCC professionals may look to close their programs but not necessarily leave the field. While there is a great deal of critical conversation around the alarming rates of FCC program closure, there is limited information about what FCC professionals do after closing their FCC businesses. Future research on FCC professionals should investigate if they move to other roles within the ECEC field, particularly if they obtain positions that allow them to support and advocate for FCC at the community or state level (e.g., with resource and referral agencies, unions, or FCC networks or associations).

While limited in sample size, the findings from this Research Brief underscore the multifaceted nature of the FCC profession, highlighting both its rewards and challenges. Areas of strength, such as dedication to children and families, are contrasted by areas needing greater support, particularly in business management and sustainability. These data also offer insight into the potential of individualizing professional development and support based on the FCC professional's career stage. Specifically, highlighting the need to extend beyond education and caregiving practices to also encompass business and professional practices mid-career and to foster community and professional advocacy and leadership in more seasoned professionals. Addressing these needs and challenges, as well as delivering

targeted professional development is crucial for the well-being, effectiveness, and retention of FCC professionals.

REFERENCES

- Bella, J., Abel, M., Bloom, P.J., & Talan, T. (2017). *Administrator Role Perception Survey*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University.
- Bella, J., & Kelton, R. (2018). *Administrator Role Perception Survey—Home-Based*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University.
- Bipartisan Policy Center. (2021). *Family child care policy framework*. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/family-child-care-policy-framework/>
- Bloom, P. J. (2010). *Measuring work attitudes in the early childhood setting: Technical manual for the Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey and the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University.
- Bromer, J., Porter, T., Jones, C., Ragonese-Barnes, M., & Orland, J. (2021). *Quality in home-based child care: A review of selected literature*. OPRE Report # 2021-136, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/quality-home-based-child-care-review-selected-literature>
- Liu, D., Zhang, S., Wang, Y., & Yan, Y. (2021). The antecedents of thriving at work: A meta-analytic review. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 1-20.
- Khani R. & Mirzaee A. (2015). How do self-efficacy, contextual variables and stressors affect teacher burnout in an EFL context? *Journal of Educational Psychology, 35*(1), 93–109.
- Kelton, R. & Tennis, I. (2024). Small business, big implications: A look at business practices in family child care programs. *Research Notes*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University. <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/research-note-240131/>
- Kotaro, S., Cieslak, R., Smoktunowicz, E., Rogala, A., Benight, C., & Luszczynska, A. (2015): Associations between job burnout and self-efficacy: A meta-analysis. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping, 1-20*.
- McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership (2018). Director’s professional development needs differ by developmental stage. *Research Notes*. National Louis University. <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/directors-professional-development-needs-differ-by-developmental-stage/>
- National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. (2020). *Addressing the decline in family child care*. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care. https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/addressing_decreasing_fcc_providers_revised_march2020_final.pdf
- Sandstorm, H., Casas, M., Hernandez-Lepe, F., & Greenberg, E. (2022). Early educators’ work experiences and job satisfaction: Findings from the District of Columbia child care policy research partnership. *Urban Institute*. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Early%20Educators%E2%80%99%20Work%20Experiences%20and%20Job%20Satisfaction.pdf>

Skaalvik, E. M., Skaalvik, S. (2010). Teacher self-efficacy and teacher burnout: A study of relations. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(4), 1059–1069.

Spreitzer, G., Sutcliffe, K., Dutton, J., Sonenshein, S., & Grant, A. M. (2005). A socially embedded model of thriving at work. *Organization Science, 16*(5), 537-549.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0153>

Vieira, N. & Hill. S. (2017). *Creating the conditions for family child care to thrive*. All Our Kin.
https://allourkin.org/files/galleries/Family_Child_Care_to_Thrive.pdf