



Continuing Education for an Essential Workforce

Perspectives from Early Care and Education Professionals in Wisconsin

Continuing education is a powerful avenue for building robust knowledge and skills that directly impact early care and education professionals' morale, teaching quality, learning environments, and, ultimately, children's development.



Human Development & Relationships Institute
DIVISION OF EXTENSION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



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A note on language in this report

Throughout this report, we use the terms **professionals** and **providers** to refer to the teachers and directors in the early care and education workforce. We use the term **participants** when referring to those professionals who participated in our research study. We appreciate the diversity of families in Wisconsin. We broadly define **parent** and **parenting** to include parents and any guardian or caregiver providing consistent care in children's home environment.

“Throughout this report, we include anonymous quotes from participants to exemplify themes and illuminate their lived experiences and unique perspectives.”



Executive Summary

Situation

Wisconsin early care and education professionals work tirelessly to provide a strong foundation necessary for young children to succeed in school and beyond. *Quality* early care and education during the critical birth to five period supports children's short- and long-term learning and development and parents' ability to participate in the workforce. Quality early care and education requires investment, including the ongoing training of providers in best practices grounded in science. For these professionals, continuing education is a powerful avenue for building robust knowledge and skills that directly impact their morale, teaching quality, learning environments, and, ultimately, children's development.

Response

To capture early care and education professionals' perspectives about the state of continuing education in Wisconsin, we conducted six focus groups between October and November 2023. In total, we included 32 providers with an average of 20 years in the profession. We designed our focus groups to understand the following:



The continuing education needs of Wisconsin professionals, including preferences for content, delivery model, and dose, and



The challenges these professionals face when accessing high-quality continuing education.

Findings

Our research suggests that the teachers and directors working today want to be valued as the professionals they are — hardworking, educated, and deeply committed to young children's care and education. After the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual continuing education expanded providing improved access, but also to the detriment of cohesion and connection among providers. There are persistent barriers to accessing continuing education, such as lack of substitute care and cost.

Across all focus groups, three interconnected themes emerged. Providers need the following:



Education to understand and appropriately respond to individual differences in child development and the diversity of experiences in which children are raised.



Strategies for improving family engagement, including how to build rapport with parents, have difficult conversations, and refer families to community resources as needed.



Better support for new professionals, including education in the foundational content that underpins supportive guidance and nurturing and effective learning strategies and environments.



In this report, we offer recommendations for the early care and education workforce — particularly training and technical assistance professionals — that address these themes and leverage existing resources in Wisconsin.



Situation

Across Wisconsin, early care and education professionals work tirelessly to provide young children with the knowledge and skills necessary for them to succeed in school and later in life. Quality early care and education, which represents services that provide safe, nurturing, and effective learning environments, supports children's short- and long-term development in many important ways. Quality early care and education promotes children's critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Anderson, 2008; Campbell et al., 2012; Schoch et al., 2023; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.). Notably, these benefits are most pronounced among children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Schoch et al., 2023; Van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). For example, when children living in households with poverty or low-income receive quality early care and education, they tend to display more effective socioemotional skills over time, compared

to their counterparts who did not receive high-quality care (Votruba-Drzal et al., 2004). Benefits extend beyond childhood, too. Children who receive quality early care and education are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college, supporting their academic achievement (Campbell et al., 2012; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

In addition to the direct benefits experienced by children, early care and education can positively impact families and communities across Wisconsin. Access to quality early care and education promotes workforce and economic growth (Bishop, 2023; Raising Wisconsin, 2022; Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2021). It provides parents and caregivers with a support system, allowing them to work and/or continue their education, and, ultimately, increase their earning potential (Bishop, 2023; Raising Wisconsin, 2022).

Decades of research support what is abundantly clear: that quality early care and education improves the lives of children, families, and communities. But what contributes to quality? To ensure all Wisconsin children and families receive the best early care and education possible, providers need high-quality continuing education paired with well-coordinated support from local and statewide organizations (Schoch et al., 2023). In this report, we describe the findings from a statewide focus group study in which we documented the continuing education needs of early care and education professionals in Wisconsin.

The intended audience of this report is the:

Early care and education workforce

Training and technical assistance agencies

Other sectors who support and sustain early childhood professionals

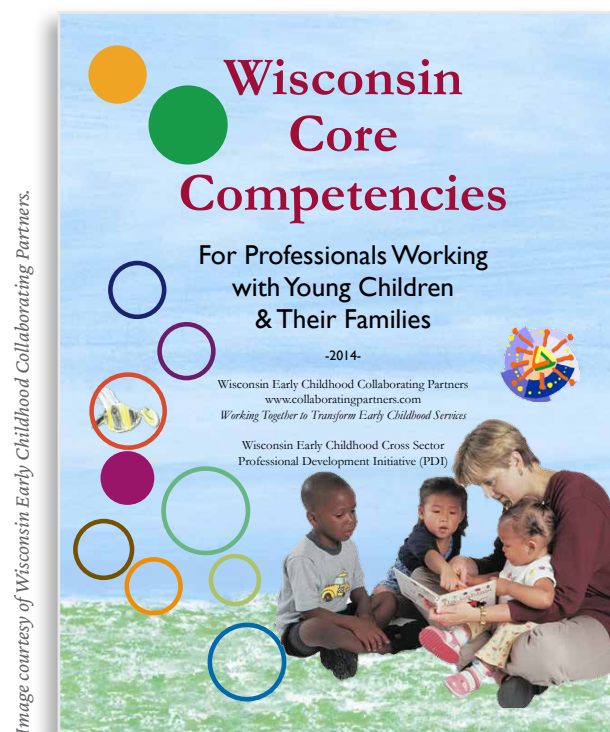
Continuing Education Is a Driver of Professional Success

Our research suggests that the teachers and directors working today want to be valued as the professionals they are — hardworking, educated, and deeply committed to young children’s care and education. They receive specialized training, either through formal post-secondary education or required pre-licensing courses, adhere to policies and procedures that govern child learning and safety, and work together with families to contribute to the well-being of the next generation. And like many other teaching and helping professions, they are required to engage in continuing education that contributes to a strong understanding of foundational competencies (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

In early childhood education, professionals enter the field with diverse education and experiences. In Wisconsin, a recent survey of center-based providers revealed that about half had completed either an associate, bachelor’s, or graduate degree, predominantly in early childhood education or a related field (Pilarz et al., 2021). Similarly, about 40 percent of family providers reported holding a post-secondary degree, although substantially fewer had degrees related to early childhood education (Awkward-Rich et al., 2021). For all professionals, and especially for those without related education or experience, continuing education is a powerful avenue for building robust knowledge and skills that directly impact teacher morale, teaching quality, learning environments, and, ultimately, children’s development (Brunsek et al., 2020; Egert et al., 2018; Gore et al., 2017). As such, investing in our early care and education professionals via high-quality continuing education opportunities is crucial to ensure provider success.

In Wisconsin, continuing education is guided by competencies found in the Department of Public Instruction's Wisconsin Core Competencies for Professionals Working with Young Children and Their Families (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014) (Figure 1). These competencies include *Child Development; Family Systems and Dynamics; Diversity; Special Needs, Disabilities, and Inclusive Practices; Learning Experiences, Strategies, and Curriculum; Health, Safety, and Nutrition; Guidance and Nurturing; Observation, Screening, and Assessment; Family and Community Relationships; Professionalism; Planning, Reflection, and Evaluation; and Administration and Management*. These competencies reflect the content expertise, skills, and attitudes professionals working with young children should demonstrate in their roles.

All professionals providing care and education for Wisconsin's young children are required by the Department of Children and Families to receive a certain number of continuing education hours each year. This number of hours varies from five required hours for professionals in certified family childcare to upward of 15 hours for those in group childcare centers, although required hours can vary by workplace and role. Based on findings from our research, as well as observing trends in Wisconsin, we know that professionals value continuing education and desire high-quality opportunities that are easily accessible and provide practical solutions for challenges in the classroom. Unfortunately, there are barriers to access, including cost and availability. It is essential that we work to promote best practices for continuing education while ensuring that educational opportunities are accessible to a wide range of providers across the state.



Wisconsin core competencies:

- Child Development
- Family Systems and Dynamics
- Diversity
- Special Needs, Disabilities, and Inclusive Practices
- Learning Experiences, Strategies, and Curriculum
- Health, Safety, and Nutrition
- Guidance and Nurturing
- Observation, Screening, and Assessment
- Family and Community Relationships
- Professionalism
- Planning, Reflection, and Evaluation
- Administration and Management

Figure 1. In Wisconsin, continuing education is guided by competencies found in the Wisconsin Core Competencies for Professionals Working with Young Children and Their Families (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014).

Response

Staff at the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension recognized an opportunity to strategically engage with early care and education professionals and leverage our university resources to serve the growing needs of this workforce, especially their requirements for continuing education. Driven by the Wisconsin Idea, the Division of Extension is tasked with providing nonformal, community-based education on topics including caring for Wisconsin’s children. We employ county-based educators and state specialists within Extension’s Human Development & Relationships Institute who have expertise in content areas relevant to early childhood education, such as child development and positive caregiving practices. For many years, our educators have provided continuing education for the early care and education workforce. As part of Extension’s program development cycle (Kushner, 2022) and our commitment to research-based outreach and education, we designed a study to capture the voices of the early care and education workforce and to learn about the opportunities and challenges of accessing continuing education in Wisconsin. We wanted to know what is working well and what barriers remain.

With funding from an Extension Innovation Award, we designed a focus group study to document:

- 1 The **continuing education needs** of Wisconsin early care and education professionals, including preferences for content, delivery model, and dose.
- 2 The **challenges these professionals face** when accessing high-quality continuing education.

Our intention was to harness insights from the focus groups to leverage university resources and research that could inform the future design and implementation of continuing education within Extension. Additionally, we planned to share findings with county and state partners to benefit their ongoing support for this workforce.



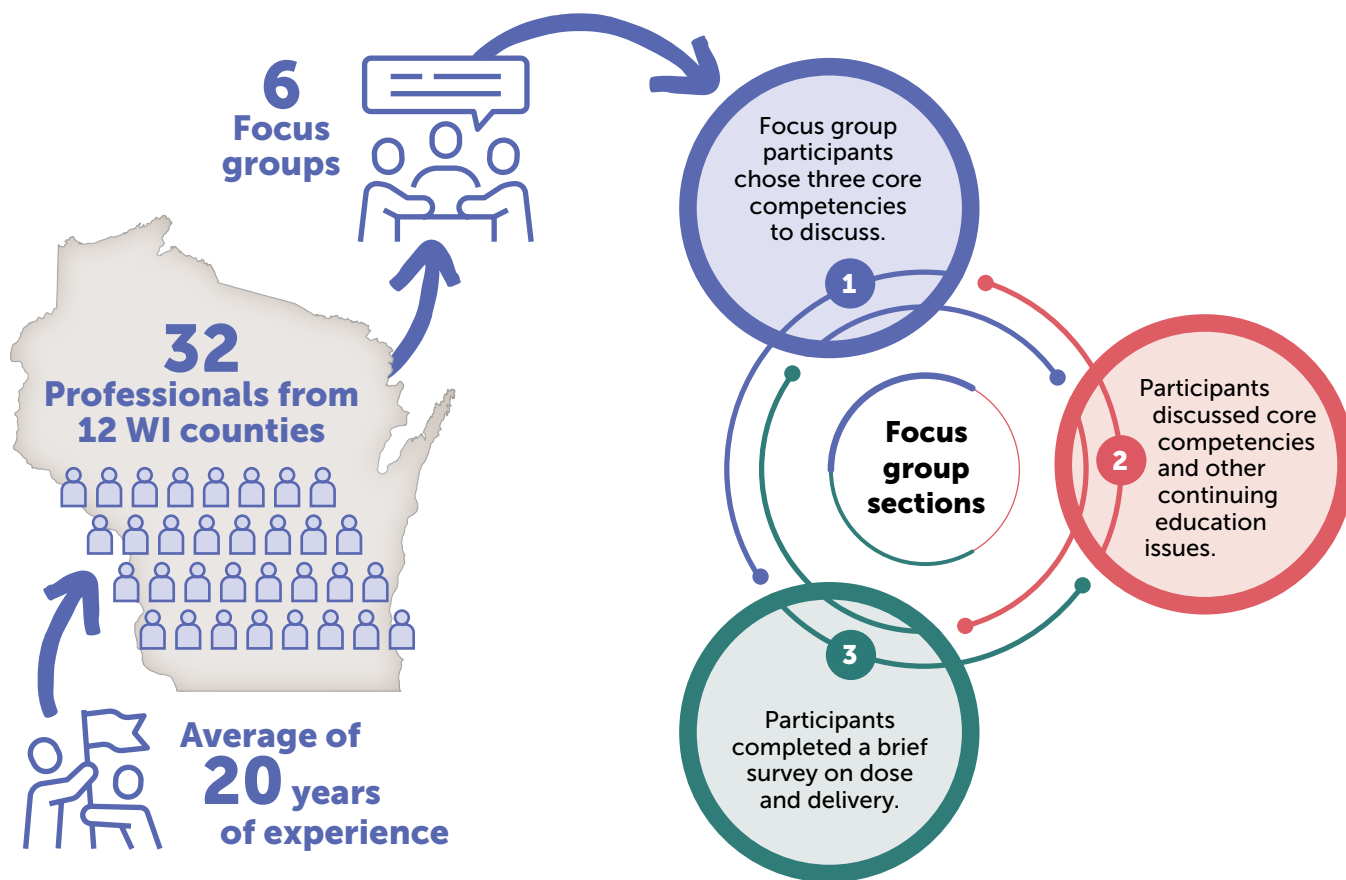


Figure 2. Focus group snapshot.

To capture professionals' perspectives about the state of continuing education in Wisconsin, we conducted six focus groups between October and November 2023. Each focus group consisted of three parts (Figure 2). First, we welcomed participants and asked them to read an information form that contained important details about the nature of the study. All participants provided verbal consent to participate. Participants read through nine of the Wisconsin Core Competencies for Professionals Working with Young Children and Their Families (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014) and chose the top three they would like to discuss during that day's discussion. Second, participants engaged in a discussion about the competencies they chose and other issues related to the quality of and access to continuing education in Wisconsin. Third, participants completed a brief survey about their preferences for the dose and delivery.

We recruited participants in six regions of Wisconsin representing eight rural and eight urban counties (Wisconsin Department of Health Services [WISH], 2024). Our final focus groups consisted of 32 professionals from 12 counties, four rural and eight urban. Each focus group included four to seven providers who represented a diverse range of roles including teachers and directors. Most worked in group centers, although nearly a quarter provided care at family centers. On average, providers had worked in the industry for 20 years (the range was one year to over 50 years). About 81 percent had some form of higher education and nearly half had a degree in early childhood education or a related field. Most participants self-identified as female and non-Hispanic white. Read a full description of the recruitment and participants in the **Methods section** on page 22.

Findings

The results from our focus groups are organized into three sections:

1 We describe how the participants viewed their profession and what continuing education looked like for them recently, with special attention to the impact of the pandemic on learning opportunities and amenable barriers to change.

2 We document the foundational competencies participants deemed most important for supporting their professional growth and their direct work with children and families. These were the competencies for which participants most wanted more continuing education.

3 We end with recommendations for improving the quality and accessibility of continuing education for this workforce.

Recognition and Respect for the Early Care and Education Workforce

Overwhelmingly, the participants in our focus groups expressed the desire to be seen as professionals by the families and communities they serve. They wanted recognition for the incredible amount of growth that takes place in their early learning environments and for parents to understand the importance of these environments for child development and well-being. As one participant said, *“We need to value this and be able to build good childcare in the homes, in the centers, in different places with quality people.”*

Participants viewed themselves as part of a support system upon which families can rely. To do that, they expressed the desire for mutual trust and respect between providers and families. Being seen as a professional, trusted resource in the community allows professionals to benefit families beyond the classroom. Participants mentioned the need to appropriately refer children and families to support services, including parent education. One participant said, *“If there’s a problem, let’s come together and try to figure that problem out and see how we’re going to make this work. I pull my resources, you’ll pull your resources, and let’s make this thing work.”* Another remarked, *“And parents should know that ... their daycare providers or their teachers could also be that support system ... we’re here not only to support your children, but to also support you as a family ... and I don’t think parents understand that.”*

Participants reflected on their dedication to fostering children’s learning and development. They sought recognition for work often done outside the classroom and formal hours of care for children, including planning and lesson preparation. Remaining informed about best practices for early learning and care requires time, access to high-quality learning opportunities, and oftentimes financial resources. This preparation benefits children and families by leading to optimal environments that prioritize care, safety, and learning. One participant shared her hopes that parents recognize, *“... when [parents] walk in the door, their child is safe where they’re at. And that when they come to pick up, they did have a fun day. They did learn something out of playing in the sand and building blocks.”*



Throughout this report, we include anonymous quotes from participants to exemplify themes and illuminate their lived experiences and unique perspectives.

“...I would really like to focus on bringing that in-person training back to my staff at least once or twice a year. It’s just a great opportunity to be able to collaborate together as a group on one specific topic.”

Expanded Virtual Options with Loss of Community and Cohesion

We wanted to know what continuing education looked like for participants in the previous year. Just over half of participants reported receiving 16 to over 25 hours of continuing education outside their center in a year’s time. They described an array of choices and participation varied across the type of opportunity. As a result of the pandemic, participants frequently utilized virtual learning options, including self-paced modules and conferences provided by training organizations dedicated to the profession. Self-paced training included watching recorded webinars, coursework including book readings, and discussion boards. However, participants noted that while there were more opportunities virtually, some continuing education seemed less relevant. *“I feel like there’s some that are outdated and some that don’t really speak to what’s actually going on currently since [the] pandemic.”* For example, some described a dual dilemma after the pandemic that included increases in child behavior challenges and teacher burnout. Some

suggested that burnout needed to be acknowledged and addressed through wellness promotion as part of post-pandemic continuing education.

For some participants, the reliance and proliferation of online learning during the pandemic led to a loss of community and continuing education that was more fragmented and less intentional. As one professional said, *“I am conflicted about it because I definitely see the benefits of virtual. But I think those once in a while, inspire times to get together with your colleagues ... have value too.”* Despite the convenience and accessibility of virtual methods, professionals described a desire for in-person local educational opportunities. This included local or regional conferences, one-to-one coaching, and classroom visits. Participants wanted in-depth learning opportunities that could reach an entire center staff. One participant noted, *“I would really like to focus on bringing that in-person training back to my staff at least once or twice a year. It’s just a great opportunity to be able to collaborate together as a group on one specific topic.”* Increased social and professional connections made through in-person





training opportunities may also decrease isolation and offer benefits such as professional cohesion and collaboration. One participant explained that in-person opportunities are, “... a great way to make connections and to collaborate with each other and at least feel like our voice and our opinions up here in Northern Wisconsin are being heard at some level. I’ve always felt like there just isn’t the opportunity for us up here this far north.”

Foundational Content Is Essential, Especially for New Professionals

Participants also recognized the need for ongoing education in the foundational content of early care and education, especially for those that are new to the field without a background in early childhood education or a related discipline. Within a center, providers often have a wide range of skills, experiences, and formal and nonformal education. High turnover and the loss of seasoned providers also contribute to a drain of expertise. Participants noted that going back to the basics would be helpful for all staff to get on the same page to provide consistent care and family engagement within a center. “I just think our early childhood workforce needs to have a better grounding than what we have ... I think we have a lot of people that could use more education because they’re already working. Let’s give them the continuing ed to grow and be able to have classrooms that are rich.” Another

participant shared similar sentiments, “Looking at my staff right now, I have an amazing group of providers. They all have a strong passion for being in the early childhood field. But I don’t have anybody right now with the education background other than myself.” Ongoing training in the foundational content areas of early care and education can ensure that providers are engaging with children and communicating with families in similar ways that are grounded in best practices.

Amenable Barriers to Accessing Continuing Education

Participants identified barriers that limit access to continuing education, including time of day and substitute availability, access to training in rural geographies, lack of awareness of opportunities, and financial constraints. Participants noted difficulty attending education that was scheduled during working hours because it conflicted with direct childcare. One noted, “The issue with some of the Zoom meetings are they have them at 1 o’clock in the afternoon. So sometimes you can’t attend that, or you try, and it’s always being interrupted because you have kids.” As a solution, professionals appreciated asynchronous options that allowed them to participate outside of work hours, especially at night or on the weekends. In fact, 81 percent of professionals expressed a clear preference for evening education

“...I think we have a lot of people that could use more education because they’re already working. Let’s give them the continuing ed to grow and be able to have classrooms that are rich.”

“What I’ve started doing is just offering [continuing education] as part of our monthly meetings, extending the time and picking a topic of interest to us in our group of educators. So that’s what I’ve started to resort to, is doing it myself with my staff so we can ensure we get something.”

followed by 28 percent who selected weekends. This was especially important for those caring for children in their home where they may be the only provider. Current workforce shortages, including a lack of substitutes, only magnify this issue. *“There aren’t really subs anymore. There’s not too many people in this field anymore. So that is very much a challenge for me ... the time of day that they’re offered.”*

Residing in rural geographies also limited access and required traveling longer distances. Participants expressed a willingness to commute to nearby training on weekends outside of the paid workday if the content is high-quality and the cost is reasonable. Rural geographies also impact the accessibility of virtual options. Insufficient broadband services may reduce access in certain remote areas. Some met this challenge by offering in-center opportunities. Directors felt called upon to provide education for their staff, in part because finding quality training is challenging. In-center opportunities conferred benefits and challenges. Organizing and implementing high-quality continuing education requires a significant investment in time and resources, although benefits include all staff hearing the same message and implementing similar practices across children and classrooms. *“What I’ve started doing is just offering [continuing education] as part of our monthly meetings, extending the time and picking a topic of interest to us in our group of educators. So that’s what I’ve started to resort to, is doing it myself with my staff so we can ensure we get something.”*

In some circumstances, participants weren’t aware of current learning opportunities. Some noted inconsistent communication from center directors about available

continuing education. Others expressed uncertainty about navigating the Wisconsin Registry, the centralized database of continuing education opportunities. Some participants met this challenge by accessing learning opportunities via email listservs from specific training organizations. Barriers to access led some participants to feel a lack of motivation to sign up and participate when opportunities occurred outside of standard working hours. Prioritizing support for professionals to access education and collaborate with colleagues enhances opportunities for connection and can reduce isolation.

Participants also noted financial barriers when accessing continuing education. The cost of training may limit options for providers, particularly for high-quality education delivered by trainers with lived experience or specific areas of expertise. Center directors need to make careful financial decisions about who can attend certain events. As one participant noted, *“The ones that you want to spend your time doing, sometimes they’re very costly. And for me as a director, if I want to send my whole staff so that we’re all on the same page, that becomes an issue if they’re all very costly. So, then it’s like, let’s draw straws. Or you went to the last one.”* It was clear that although directors wanted to provide paid opportunities for their staff to attend, the cost was often prohibitive. *“If you really want to do a quality one, I want to send all my teachers to [a statewide conference], but it would’ve cost like almost two grand and that’s not in the budget.”* Some participants noted a decline in the number of low-cost options in their local communities. *“They used to provide so many at the library and so many things in the evening that were free or \$5.”* Another participant agreed, *“Money is a big [barrier].”*



Foundational Competencies for Professional Growth

Essential to the success of the early care and education workforce are competencies that provide structure and support to build the knowledge, skills, and capacity of professionals in Wisconsin. Beyond formal, post-secondary education and informal, day-to-day experiences that shape professionals' practice, continuing education provides a powerful lever to improve the quality of care and education children receive during the most formative years of their lives (Schoch et al., 2023). And while it is essential that professionals seek to employ the very best practices to promote children's learning, growth, and development, it is also critical that educational and cross-sector organizations provide the necessary support, including continuing education, that allows professionals to attain excellence. As a professional, approaching this work means integrating a variety of foundational content areas. Making sense of these competencies requires education grounded in the best research available and the lived experiences of the workforce. We asked professionals to prioritize the topics they needed to strengthen their skill set and boost their professional growth.

Across all focus groups, our analysis revealed three interconnected themes (Figure 3): understanding and responding to individual differences in child development, strategies for improving family engagement, and better support for new professionals. Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing and responding to variations in children's growth, development, and life experiences. This includes

managing children's big emotions and challenging behaviors. Family engagement emerged as crucial for fostering collaboration between professionals and parents, with a focus on building trust, understanding unique family needs, and enhancing communication. Lastly, participants highlighted the importance of supporting new professionals' continuing education to ensure high-quality care and a competent, stable workforce.



Education to understand and appropriately respond to individual differences in child development and the diversity of experiences in which children are raised.



Strategies for improving family engagement, including how to build rapport with parents, have difficult conversations, and refer families to community resources as needed.



Better support for new professionals, including education in the foundational content that underpins supportive guidance and nurturing and effective learning strategies and environments.

Figure 3. We discovered three interconnected themes across the focus groups.

“Kids learn guidance through **being guided**. They learn how to help their friends by their teachers helping them.”

Positive Caregiving Strategies Are the Foundation of Quality Care and Education

Participants emphasized the importance of guidance and nurturing more often than other competencies. The Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners (2014) describe guidance and nurturing as practices that support children’s social and emotional development and prosocial behavior. This includes providers’ positive interactions with children, such as understanding and appropriately responding to children’s behavior.

Participants highlighted the critical importance of positive caregiving. In particular, participants described role modeling as a dual-purpose strategy that teaches prosocial behavior while encouraging learning through observation. Participants agreed that leading by example is a powerful strategy that shapes children’s growth and development. One participant mentioned, “Kids learn guidance through being guided. They learn how to help their friends by their teachers helping them. If I go help a child put their shoe on, another child is watching me. And then when a kid loses their shoe, that child might pick that shoe up and go help the other kid.” However, some participants commented that this does not always come naturally to

all providers and that some would benefit from in-depth training. One participant said the workforce needed, “More opportunities for the teachers to really learn a precise ... nurturing path. This is how you’re nurturing. You nurture by doing this or that.”

Participants recognized self-regulation as an essential skill that supports positive caregiving. Participants discussed how providers’ own behavior either supports or detracts from child learning and well-being. One participant shared the need for education that is, “More in-depth about how your own emotional regulation affects your ability to do the guidance and nurturing and the emotional regulation of the kids.” One participant shared her frustration with colleagues who struggled with regulating their emotions, “We’d rather struggle alone than have a teacher in the classroom who is not being nurturing ... who’s not just guiding or redirecting in a calm way.” Participants affirmed that regulating one’s own behavior and emotions are teachable skills that are necessary for positive provider-child interactions.

Positive caregiving strategies are especially important when children are experiencing big emotions or challenging behavior. Participants shared that at times they failed to understand the causes of children’s behavior and approaches that can meet children’s





Positive caregiving strategies are especially important when children are experiencing **big emotions** or **challenging behavior**. Participants shared that at times they failed to understand the causes of children's behavior and approaches that can meet children's **individual needs**. What works for one child may not work for another, and participants identified the need to use **different strategies** for different children.

individual needs. What works for one child may not work for another, and participants identified the need to use different strategies for different children. For example, one participant commented, *"I marked that one for understanding where all the challenging behaviors come from ... why the guidance that you're giving them doesn't work with all kids. I don't know where those behaviors are coming from or why I can't get them to listen."* Many participants recognized the importance of meeting individual needs when providing care and education for children. One participant shared, *"They have the right to be mad, angry, don't know what to do. But what skills are they missing that we can help [with]? And I think training [can help providers] figure out what those missing skills are."*

Participants shared that developing trusting relationships with families is essential to providing guidance and nurturance in line with family values. One participant asked, *"Why is [children's] behavior the way it is? I feel that also connects to the positive relationships around them or what's maybe going on at home. That's when we need to have those strong communication skills with families."* Participants expressed that learning about family expectations is important for ensuring consistency in

guidance and nurturing strategies across home and childcare environments. Participants discussed how to support the connection between providers and families so that everyone is on the same page. One shared, *"I would like to see trainings offered on guidance where it involves both families and the centers or whatever it might be — there is potential for both parent and teacher training on how and when to implement positive guidance strategies."*

By providing continuing education about guidance and nurturing strategies, providers can develop the skills needed to create supportive and responsive environments. This includes enhancing their ability to model positive behavior, manage challenging behaviors, and build strong relationships with families. Continuing education will not only improve providers' self-regulation and caregiving practices but also ensure that every child receives the individualized support they need to thrive.

Child Development Knowledge is Essential for Positive Caregiving Strategies

Participants prioritized child development as a foundational competency essential for providing the best possible care and education. A comprehensive understanding of this competency includes key principles of child development, including milestones, developmentally appropriate expectations, and the many factors that influence children's growth. This competency also includes a focus on relationships and how adversity, including neglect and maltreatment, impacts children's well-being (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014).

Participants discussed the value of learning about the stages of child development for all early care and education professionals. When professionals understand what is expected at each stage of development, they can appropriately tailor learning experiences to meet the needs of each child. For example, one participant shared how her understanding of child development guides her practice. *"If I'm with a child who I'm feeling some resistance ... we're going to move on to something else. What else can I teach you? ... I don't have to teach counting to three right now ... But I can introduce, look at all the wheels on the cars."* Participants recognized that all professionals can benefit from ongoing education about child development, including new information as it emerges.

“We are having a hard time finding people. And when we do find people, they don’t have a **background in knowing the basics** and our workforce needs at least the basis of what is appropriate for **good child development**.”

An adequate understanding of child development drives developmentally appropriate expectations that are essential for positive caregiving practices. One participant stated the need for “an understanding of *developmentally appropriate [practices] at each age group*.” Participants emphasized that new professionals require comprehensive education about child development to realize these practices. One participant shared, “*New teachers and parents often don’t understand what would be developmentally appropriate*.” Another participant stated, “*We are having a hard time finding people. And when we do find people, they don’t have a background in knowing the basics and our workforce needs at least the basis of what is appropriate for good child development*.”

In addition to the stages of child development and appropriate expectations, participants shared a desire for education about individual differences across development. When providers have a strong understanding of the variations in children’s development, they can adapt and modify learning environments to meet the unique needs of each child. One participant said, “*You want to be sure that you’re meeting [the needs of] the individual child because they have individual goals*.” In particular, participants discussed the importance of understanding the emotional and behavioral needs of children with atypical development and recognized continuing education as an avenue to learn supportive classroom strategies.

Broadly, there was a desire for continuing education about social and emotional development for both early care and education professionals and parents. Positive early life relationships and experiences promote social and emotional skills in children and can buffer the impact of adversity. Many participants shared that education about this specific developmental domain is even more important after the pandemic. Some participants observed an increase in children’s behavioral challenges after the pandemic that impacted their classrooms. One participant shared, “*We would go through our assessments and evaluate and have meetings with teachers. We had 10 kids that were going into [four-year-old kindergarten]. Of those 10 this year, we only*

determined three were developmentally ready to go when in the past it would be that they were all ready to go.” Another commented, “*I think it’s important, especially post-COVID now, that we are looking at a lot of trauma, and a lot of insecurity, and a lot of behaviors [in children]*.”

Recognizing and Responding to Childhood Trauma

Participants acknowledged that in addition to typical child development, there is a need for continuing education about recognizing and responding to childhood trauma. They discussed challenges with identifying the signs of trauma. One participant shared, “*Sometimes it’s so hard because everybody’s so different ... it’s hard to recognize [the signs of trauma] or what to be looking for exactly. Or certain things are skipped over or brushed off. And I think education in that is very important*.” Participants reflected on the broad array of responses children might display after experiencing trauma. “*So, one child might be withdrawing. And another child might be being charismatic or be the center of attention, wanting to make his friends laugh. And they could both be experiencing the same thing. We just wouldn’t know because they’re displaying it in two different ways*.” Other participants noted that it can be difficult to detect trauma in children when they are new to a center and providers are only beginning to get to know the children in their care.

Participants recognized the significant impact that early care and education providers and environments can have on the lives of children who are facing adversity. Providers interact daily with children and families who are vulnerable. One participant’s comment succinctly summarized what is the devastating reality for some children, “*This daycare may be the only safe place the child has*.” Overall, participants recognized how important their role is in providing safe and loving environments for children experiencing significant stress.

Learning Strategies Should Be Inclusive, Adaptable, and Engage Families

The learning experiences, strategies, and curriculum competency also emerged as an important area for continuing education. This competency includes mastering research-based practices that support early learning environments (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014).

Participants were interested in best practices for lesson and curriculum planning and updates about effective classroom strategies. This sentiment was particularly true for professionals newer to the field without formal education in early childhood and those who were working with new age groups. One participant expressed, *“It’s difficult, especially if you’ve never worked in the field. You’re new to this. It can be hard to come up with a lesson plan. What is that? How do you create one, especially off of the core competencies?”* Another participant shared, *“It’s my first year working with this age group. I just felt like having a well-rounded toolbox would be helpful.”* Participants that were experienced in the field of early childhood education also referenced the need for continuing education about learning experiences. One participant said, *“I think that this is a general thing, from year to year, it’s good to have updated information on strategies and curriculum and stuff that’s going to be helpful in the classroom.”*

Participants highlighted the need to adapt learning strategies to meet the individual needs of children. One participant shared, *“You understand your own children, but understanding someone else’s children, coming in new can be challenging until you get to know each individual child and how they communicate and then also [how] they respond.”* Participants recognized the importance of inclusive



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practices that are especially relevant for children with disabilities and special needs. They wanted practical strategies that lead to engagement and belonging for these children. One participant asked, *“What are some things that you can start with? Where are good places? Or if you’re trying to do a specific concept, what are some other ways to go about teaching that to a child who has special needs?”* Participants wanted to ensure all children receive the right level of support, although some felt they didn’t have an adequate level of training. One participant said, *“We’re not equipped to do it, and we don’t have the supports we need. And it’s all of the connections to the community places where you refer families, that’s a whole thing to navigate and a whole system that you need to understand and it’s complicated and I get stuck.”*

A strong throughline in our focus groups was the importance of engaging children’s parents and caregivers, including around learning experiences. Participants recognized the critical role parents play in their children’s learning and wanted avenues to better engage parents in the learning process. One participant said, *“There’s so much going on with families these days that to ... get that communication from the family, like, ‘Hey, we’re having a hard time at home. My child may need a little extra love’ or just to know what’s going on to help support those kids, because if they’re not regulated, you’re not going to get anything done.”*

It’s clear that the learning experiences, strategies, and curriculum competency is an area where early care and education professionals see a need for continuing education. Education in this competency area will provide professionals with tools to establish learning environments and adaptive strategies that support families and meet each child’s needs, capabilities, and interests.

“ [As professionals] our goal is to really **help the children to grow** and to meet all these milestones. But if you’re working by yourself, and the family’s not supporting that, it becomes **much more difficult.**”

Partnerships with Families Are Critical for Classroom Success

Participants highlighted family systems and dynamics as an essential competency for the profession. This competency includes understanding and valuing family relationships and their impact on children’s development. It also includes best practices for family engagement (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014). Participants recognized and valued the importance of family engagement, including parent education, for best meeting the diverse needs of children in their care. One participant stated, “[As professionals] our goal is to really help the children to grow and to meet all these milestones. But if you’re working by yourself, and the family’s not supporting that, it becomes much more difficult.”

Participants wanted to develop stronger relationships with parents by improving communication outside of typical channels, such as regular email and daily encounters at the center. In particular, participants noted challenges when having difficult conversations with parents. One participant noted several skills that are essential when having these challenging conversations. “I do think that having difficult conversations with the parents is what all of the teachers need to be able to do, and not really accusing [parents], but explaining things and not being judgmental. I think this is a really strong thing we need to work on.” Participants shared that frequent parent-provider conversations can lead to a better understanding of family values and parents’ expectations of providers. One participant noted, “Understanding that sometimes the things that we ourselves value as teachers, we need to let some of that go so that our kids and families feel acknowledged and seen and their parenting choices are seen as valued and accepted.”

Participants pointed to several barriers when attempting to connect with families. They noticed a decrease in parent involvement, especially after the pandemic. As one participant mentioned, “Parental involvement in the program, getting families to come in and do things with the

kiddos during our special parent events, that’s dwindled.”

Aside from the standard interactions, such as pickup, drop-off, or parent-teacher conferences, the lack of parent involvement impacts providers’ ability to develop a rapport with parents. Building trust is essential so that professionals can help families feel respected and providers are seen as experts who can support families. One participant said, “I wish parents would see us as professionals and take what we have to say as having value.”

Participants expressed that providing opportunities for parent education could improve partnerships with parents. For example, parent education might include providers discussing and identifying resources to help parents understand child development milestones. When providers notice delays in children’s development, they can work together with parents to determine referral sources and next steps. Participants noted that when education and community referrals come to parents from providers, parents may be more accepting. One said, “Sometimes I think families just don’t know ... where to get those resources. And I think if it’s ... communicated through the school or the daycare, I think they’re more apt to do it.”

A thorough understanding of family systems and dynamics can significantly contribute to building trusting relationships between providers and families. Early care and education professionals are eager to learn and develop skills that support family involvement in children’s growth and development and address the challenges of today’s families.

“ Sometimes I think families just don’t know ... where to get those resources. And I think if it’s ... communicated through the school or the daycare, I think they’re **more apt to do it.**”



Improving Family Engagement Through Culturally Responsive Practices

To better engage families, participants discussed the desire to learn and understand the family and its unique impact on child development through a cultural lens. Parents' expectations, at home and at the center, can differ significantly from family to family and may be rooted in cultural beliefs. Participants found it important that professionals learn about each family's cultural background to build rapport and create a sense of belonging and safety for children, offering consistency with respect to a family's expectations about caregiving. Participants discussed ideas about how professionals could learn more about each family's culture and parents' expectations prior to enrollment. For example, one participant said, *"What questions should we have on the intake form that we're not just having them fill out?"* As a result, professionals can be better equipped to support children in ways that are aligned with the diverse goals and interests of families.

Aside from learning more about the family, participants shared several topics they felt needed to be addressed to create environments that appreciate diversity and foster belongingness, including anti-bias and historical trauma. Participants thought that providers could benefit from anti-bias training to respond and appropriately support the needs of children and families in a safe and inclusive manner. One participant stated, *"The only way we can help young children is if we learn and grow ourselves through education."* Another expressed, *"Having teachers*

educated on acceptance and maybe some of the anti-bias, biases, subconscious biases they may have is really important. I think that really is playing into so much of what we're seeing in early childcare education."

Participants also discussed historical trauma across generations and its impact on child well-being, family functioning, and professionals' approach to family engagement. One participant shared that historical trauma *"is something that nobody ever talks about."*

Participants also recognized the importance of teaching a variety of content that highlights the diverse experiences and cultures of families across Wisconsin. One participant noted, *"Children learn better and just connect better when they have that inherent sense of belonging and understanding."* Some participants noted a lack of support and exposure to resources has led to reduced confidence among providers in the classroom. Participants wanted specific strategies beyond book reading that could expose children to a variety of cultures. Other participants exchanged ideas about how they support diversity in their classrooms. One participant mentioned, *"In my environment, [I'm] trying to add a lot of different tools, toys, things, books, style of singing Itsy Bitsy Spider. Even in music ... I make it a point to play different genres of music to my babies. And even when the parents are entering in, I have different genres of music ... I think the field is missing a lot of that. And it's hard."* Overall participants shared interest and excitement about improving their culturally responsive practices and they acknowledged several barriers that could be addressed by high-quality continuing education.

Effective Communication and Adequate Staffing Drive Professionalism

Aside from the four foundational competencies described above, participants shared their thoughts and suggestions about other topics that could improve their care and education practices. Two themes emerged, including communication practices across existing staff and hiring and retaining high-quality professionals.

Communication with Coworkers

Participants wanted continuing education about how to have team-based conversations among other childcare professionals, specifically coworkers. They wanted to better discuss children and families with other providers in their center and respectfully share best practices when appropriate. They also felt sharing pertinent information about children's development, parents, or home life could help others on the staff understand and empathize with children's behavior. They noted difficulty sharing key pieces of information with staff across the workday. One participant said, *"For example, we have a child whose parents are getting divorced. I might know that, and I know she's having a rough day because of that. But everybody's got to be on board, [including] the afternoon crew that comes in."*

Participants also wanted continuing education that shared best practices of communication in the workplace, especially for providers who are just out of school or new to the field. One participant said, *"You have to be open to everyone's suggestions and be willing to*

give things a try. They may or may not work. We don't know until you try it. We teach the children that all the time."

Participants also noted that respectful communication is related to providers' own emotion regulation and that optimally regulating emotions during communication contributes to a sense of well-being, or alternatively burnout if a particular provider experiences challenges with expressing emotions.

Hiring and Retaining High-Quality Professionals

Although this study primarily documented needs related to continuing education, participants shared that hiring and retaining providers is a major challenge that impacts virtually all aspects of their careers. Participants wanted more education and support about how to train incoming providers and how to effectively manage employees.

Participants shared the desire for more support during the onboarding phase of hiring and training new providers, especially those without relevant academic backgrounds in early childhood education. For providers without that academic background, continuing education can fill that gap. One participant said, *"I really need some people on board that have that education piece as well. So [I'm] looking to really get [new providers] in some of the basic early childhood education ... so that's my main focus for next year, is to get everybody back to the basics."* Participants agreed that due to staff shortages, hiring professionals without academic backgrounds in relevant disciplines was necessary and many come with passion for the field. One participant commented, *"You really do have to love [children]. It needs to be right from the heart ... and if they come with that, we can train."* Participants offered solutions to ensure a high-quality workforce, including having new providers access a course on the foundational competencies that goes beyond licensing requirements.

Participants also wanted continuing education that addressed how to retain existing employees and promote their well-being. One participant said, *"If teachers can be better mentally, physically, you're going to be a better teacher."* She went on to note that because providers are so busy, continuing education can be one avenue for supporting their well-being while also meeting annual licensing requirements. Another participant agreed, *"Having a really calm, confident teacher ... is going to make an enormous difference in how children [develop]."*

"I really need some people on board that have that education piece as well. So [I'm] looking to really get [new providers] in some of the basic early childhood education ... so that's my main focus for next year, is to get everybody back to the basics."

Recommendations

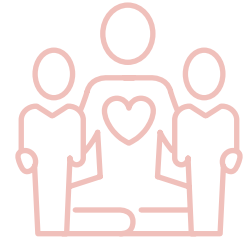
Based on the information shared by focus group participants, we offer recommendations to support high-quality continuing education for the early care and education workforce of Wisconsin. All continuing education should align with the [Wisconsin Core Competencies for Professionals Working with Young Children and Their Families](#) (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014).



RECOMMENDATION:

Offer education about child development, including individual differences and inclusive practices that support children with a range of needs

Participants expressed their desire to learn about how to best care for all children in their classroom, including children with special needs. Early care and education professionals may be the first adults to notice developmental delays or the special needs of a child. Participants shared that existing education related to inclusive practices can be difficult to navigate. To bridge the gap, we recommend that agencies supporting the early care and education sector prioritize continuing education about developmental milestones, individual differences in child development, and inclusive practices for children with special needs. Systems that support early care and education professionals can achieve the following:



1 Provide training about the different domains of child development and include information about individual differences. An important guide that describes development across early childhood is the [Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards](#).

2 Provide training that strengthens providers' confidence and skill to engage in developmental monitoring, screening, and conversations with parents.

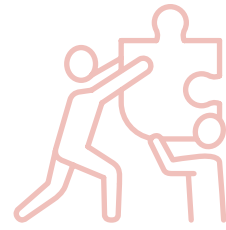
3 Raise awareness about referral processes to existing consultation services, including the following:

- [Healthy Minds, Healthy Children infant and early childhood mental health consultation](#) supported by the Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health
- [Wisconsin Wayfinder: Children's Resource Network](#)
- The [Birth to 3 Program](#) provided by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services



RECOMMENDATION:

Provide strategies for effective family engagement and encourage partnerships between parents and providers



Participants acknowledged parents as the first teacher of their children. They viewed their relationship with parents as a partnership to support the unique needs of each child and family. Participants recognized their role in providing information and resources about child development and parenting practices. When families face adversity, participants shared that supporting the entire family system is important and they appreciated their role of referring parents to appropriate community resources. We recommend prioritizing continuing education about engaging parents as partners through effective communication and respect for family and cultural differences. Systems that support early care and education professionals can achieve the following:

- 1 Share best practices for building initial rapport with new children and families, including learning about their values and expectations, and for ongoing engagement that fosters a sense of belonging.
- 2 Provide strategies that improve parent engagement in the learning process and encourage parent involvement in center activities.
- 3 Provide strategies for sharing about and referring families to parent education services, including the following:
- 4 Provide strategies for sharing about and referring families to parent education services, including the following:
 - **Wisconsin's Statewide Family Resource Center Network, Administered by Thriving Wisconsin**
 - **University of Wisconsin–Madison Extension Family Engagement and Relationships Program**
 - **Children's Wisconsin Triple P Online**



RECOMMENDATION:

Expand efforts to better support new professionals, especially those without educational or experiential backgrounds



Participants, especially those new to the field, referenced challenges in learning about continuing education opportunities. Early care and education professionals beginning their careers, especially those without formal educational or experiential backgrounds, need ongoing support. It is essential to ensure that comprehensive educational opportunities are easily accessible and well-publicized. We recommend low-cost continuing education that provides a comprehensive foundation in early childhood education for new professionals. Systems that support early care and education professionals can achieve the following:

1 Provide ongoing, in-depth education in the foundational content areas of early care and education that includes guidance and nurturing, learning experiences, child development, and family engagement.

2 Provide in-person local or regional opportunities for education, networking, and exposure to accessible systems of support.

3 Raise awareness about training and technical assistance for providers in Wisconsin, including the following:

- [The Wisconsin Registry](#)
- [Wisconsin's statewide Child Care Resource and Referral Network, administered by Thriving Wisconsin](#)
- [YoungStar Connect](#)
- [Wisconsin Early Childhood Association](#)
- [Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health](#)
- [Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners](#)



Methods

Study Purpose



The purpose of this study was to better understand the context of continuing education for the early care and education workforce in Wisconsin. Our goals were to document:

- 1

The continuing education needs of the workforce, including preferences for content, delivery model, and dose, and


- 2

The challenges the workforce faces when accessing high-quality continuing education.



Study Participants

Our sample consisted of four to seven providers per focus group for a total of 32 early care and education professionals. Providers worked in 12 counties including four designated as rural and eight as urban (WISH, 2024). Providers represented a diverse range of early childhood professionals, including administrators, infant/toddler teachers, preschool teachers, and others (Table 1). Most participants worked in center-based programs, although nearly a quarter worked in family childcare centers (Table 2). Half of the sample had worked in the profession for over 20 years, although nearly 20 percent had five or less years of experience.

Table 1. Current Positions of Participants (sample size=32)

Administrator	44%
Infant/Toddler Teacher	44%
Preschool Teacher	38%
Other	43%

This question allowed participants to select multiple choices. “Other” included positions that fell outside of those listed in the table, such as professionals at elementary schools and those at family childcare centers.

About 44 percent of providers held a degree in early childhood education or a related field. Most participants self-identified as white (94 percent), non-Latinx (94 percent), and female (94 percent).

Study Procedures

We conducted six focus groups across Wisconsin between October and November 2023. We designed the focus groups to represent a variety of geographies, including rural and urban locations, and professionals, including teachers and directors. Prior to recruitment, this study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and approved as exempt human subjects research.

We recruited professionals working in 16 counties across six regions of Wisconsin. To keep the focus groups small but meaningful, we set a goal to recruit up to seven providers for each of the six focus groups. We obtained a list of professionals by county using the Wisconsin Department of Health Services public dataset of Wisconsin Licensed and Certified Childcare most recently updated in 2022. We ensured that our recruitment pool included group and family-based professionals, those working in bilingual centers, and those in Head Start centers. The number of providers differed substantially between rural and urban counties. For smaller, or more rural counties, we called or emailed the entire list. For larger, or more urban counties, we randomly selected providers to call or email. We stopped recruiting by phone and email once we reached seven providers for each focus group.

Table 2. Current Program Type of Participants (sample size=32)

Center-Based Program	65%
Family (In-Home) Program	22%
Missing	9%
Other	3%

All focus groups were administered in-person at six sites in Wisconsin. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours and were divided into three sections. First, research study staff welcomed participants and provided them with a printed copy of an information form that contained details about the study, including that it was voluntary, participant information would remain confidential, and potential risk and benefits. We then asked participants to review nine of the Wisconsin Core Competencies for Professionals Working with Young Children and Their Families (Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners, 2014). The competencies included *Child Development; Family Systems and Dynamics; Diversity; Special Needs, Disabilities, and Inclusive Practices; Learning Experiences, Strategies, and Curriculum; Health, Safety, and Nutrition; Guidance and Nurturing; Observation, Screening, and Assessment; and Family and Community Relationships*. We asked participants to identify the competencies for which they wanted additional continuing education, such as those they felt were needed to strengthen their skill set and boost their professional growth. Afterward, we asked participants to individually select the top three competencies they would like to discuss and mark those three competencies on a poster. Next, we engaged in an audio recorded discussion with participants about the competencies they selected as well as other topics related to continuing education. Finally, we asked participants to complete a brief survey about their preferences for the mode and frequency of continuing education and their own background related to early childhood education. Each participant received \$50 for attending the focus group.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data from the focus groups, we first transcribed each audio recording and reviewed handwritten notes. We obtained transcripts from five focus groups. In one focus group, the audio recorder did not record the discussion. For that focus group, we relied solely on notes from the research team written during and after the discussion. Prior to coding, we reviewed transcripts from two focus group sites and drafted an initial coding scheme that included code categories and subcategories for each of the six questions in the focus group protocol. We divided our research team into two groups. Group A coded questions about the

core competencies for all six focus groups. Group B coded questions about participants' current continuing education experiences and barriers for all six focus groups. We coded all data, including the group for which we relied on notes rather than a transcribed audio recording, in the qualitative coding software NVivo. For both coding teams, we used a collaborative coding process called a data jam (Schmieder et al., 2018) where each team met virtually to engage in thematic coding together. During each virtual meeting, we read each question and then coded passages line by line using the established coding scheme. We added new codes as needed. We discussed disagreements about codes for each passage until we reached consensus. This approach allowed for the reflection and recognition of multiple viewpoints, and for newer researchers to learn from colleagues with established coding experience.

Quantitative data from the surveys was analyzed using descriptive frequency analysis in Excel and SPSS Statistics.

Limitations

Although this study provides a unique perspective about the continuing education needs of the early care and education workforce, there are several limitations. First, our recruitment method relied on the names and contact information of providers in 2022, although we recruited in 2023. We discovered that some providers had closed their centers, while providers who established their centers in 2023 were not included in that dataset. This likely restricted the number of providers from which we initially recruited. Second, we relied on a convenience sample that included 32 providers. This small, purposive sample limits the inferences we can make to the Wisconsin early education workforce. However, we did include participants working in rural and urban counties, and included professionals from group and family centers, representing a variety of experiences in this field. Third, our sample included primarily white, non-Latinx women. While data from a recent DCF survey found that most professionals in the ECE field are women, there is greater diversity in the profession across race and ethnicity, especially in family childcare centers, than what is represented in our study (Awkward-Rich et al., 2021).

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