

Article

Educators' Perspectives of Family Day Care in Australia: "Not Just Babysitting"

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Abstract

In Australia, Family Day Care (FDC), the caring and educating of young children in the educator's own home, plays a role in the diversity of offerings across the early childhood sector. However, FDC educators' position as professionals is often unrecognised, leaving their work devalued and their agency limited. This study focuses on what FDC educators believe they bring to the early childhood sector, against mounting constraints, positioning themselves as a viable alternative within a suite of professional, quality programme offerings. Survey data from 200 respondents informs the study, analysed utilising thematic analysis and then considered through an Affordance Theory lens. This lens highlights how FDC educators' perceptions have been shaped by culture, knowledge, ability, history and experience, in relation to the possibilities in the environment that act as either affordances or constraints. The themes identify that educators see themselves as supporting children's learning through alignment with government frameworks; building safe and nurturing learning environments; establishing relationships with families and gaining a deep knowledge of each child through sustained engagement, yet do not feel recognised for their work as professionals. The paper argues that raising awareness and harnessing potential affordances could provide opportunities for action, leading to a revaluing of FDC.

Keywords: family day care; affordance theory; learning environments; professionalisation; early childhood; Australia

1. Introduction

The early years of a child's life are a critical window of opportunity to build strong foundations for life, with success traced back to the quality of the early childhood experience (OECD, 2026). As such, there has been an expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision worldwide in line with global policy efforts (von Suchodoletz et al., 2023), where working towards quality has become the focus. This relies on government investment (monetary and policy) in 'well-trained staff, the provision of rich and stimulating learning environments, teaching that responds to each child, and the nurturing of social and emotional development' (OECD, 2006, p. 3).

In Australia, as in several countries around the world, early childhood comprises a plethora of services, described as 'complex and fragmented' (Australian Government, 2024) such as long day care (centre-based all-day or part-time care for children aged birth to 5 years), outside school hours care (before and after school hours for children who normally attend school), preschool/kindergarten (year or two before primary school), and family day care (educators working with small groups of children, usually in their own homes) (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). These services have a workforce that varies in qualifications,



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workforce profiles, remuneration, experience, positions within organisational workplace structures, and ethnicity. While this makes for a diverse and dynamic workforce ([Education Services Australia, 2021](#)), its potential is yet to be realised ([Nolan, 2023](#)), especially when considering quality. Within this landscape, this study focuses on Family Day Care (FDC). These educators become sole traders overseen by a co-ordination scheme and are required to hold the minimum qualification level to work in ECEC services in Australia—Certificate III and follow nationally prescribed frameworks that guide quality practice ([AGDE, 2022](#)), assessed by a National Quality Standard (NQS) ([ACECQA, n.d.](#)).

FDC offers an alternative for families looking for a more flexible, individualised approach to care for their child in a small group environment that enables children to build secure, continuous relationships with a single educator, thereby supporting their mental health ([Triandafilidis et al., 2022](#)). FDC is also considered to have the potential to improve access to flexible early childhood education and care in regional areas where there is limited supply of services ([Australian Government Department of Education, n.d.](#)). However, over the past few years, FDC services in Australia have declined in number from 16% of the total early childhood workforce in 2016 to just 3.6% in 2024. This decline has also been reported in other countries such as the United States of America ([Harmeyer et al., 2023](#)).

In a report commissioned by Family Day Care Australia (the national peak body for FDC) (2023), one of the reasons why educators exit is due to a lack of recognition and support from service providers and government bodies. This is perceived as highlighting a lack of respect and understanding for FDC educators' role. The 'heavy regulatory focus' (p. 12) that appears to disregard the unique nature of FDC contributes to a feeling of being undervalued. As far back as 2013, there has been debate that quality assurance standards were homogenising the evaluation of service quality, and therefore not recognising the uniqueness of FDC ([Cook et al., 2013](#)). This has acted to marginalise the position of FDC within the early years discourse ([Lyons, 2012](#)). This is further exacerbated by what is considered a lack of promotion of FDC to raise the profile so that FDC educator skills and expertise are recognised and seen as equal with educators working in other early childhood services ([Family Day Care Australia, 2019](#)). In other countries, such as the United States of America, this historical marginalisation has led to contemporary policies automatically privileging the concepts and measurements of 'high quality' of other early childhood services over FDC with little recognition of the 'distinctiveness of its potential benefits' ([Melvin, 2022](#), p. 10).

This study presents what FDC educators believe they bring to the early childhood sector, and the constraints they face, positioning themselves as a viable alternative within a suite of professional programme offerings. Their perceptions and agency, and what influences these, are identified. The questions that guide this research are: What mediates FDC educators' perceptions of (a) their services as viable, quality offerings, and (b) themselves as professionals within the ECEC sector?

2. Literature Review

Determining Quality Provision in the Early Childhood Sector

Research shows that the quality of ECEC services influences children's development, with high quality aligned with higher levels of academic outcomes, social competence and lower levels of behavioural and social-emotional issues ([von Suchodoletz et al., 2023](#); [PC, 2024](#)). This is particularly so for children experiencing disadvantages ([Melhuish, 2014](#)). Determining quality in early childhood service provision has seen an ongoing debate due to changes in socio-political structures and influences ([Klinkhammer & Schäfer, 2017](#)). As [Cohrssen et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest, the characteristics of quality differ due to stakeholders' 'different priorities and aspirations for the ECEC system' (p. 2), along with attempts to

standardise and measure quality (Elwick et al., 2018), which are deemed as ‘imperfect’ (PC, 2024, p. 13). When measuring quality in FDC, it is considered challenging due to its unique features (Hooper et al., 2023).

Internationally, specific assessment tools that check for quality in FDC have been implemented, such as the HOME Inventory (Caldwell & Bradley, 2003), which provides coverage for the types of actions, objects, events and conditions identified as important for children’s development. Also utilised are the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS) and Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) by Harms and Clifford (1984), the PRO-FILE by Abbott-Shim and Sibley (1993), the Caregiver Interaction Scale by Arnett (1986), the Adult Involvement Scale (AIS) by Howes and Stewart (1987), and the Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE) developed by the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (1996). While considered useful, it is noted that most of these tools require extensive periods of observation, with some requiring extensive training to administer (Bradley et al., 2003). The largest uptake is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980), which was reported in 2017 as employed globally in over 30 countries and translated into 12 languages (Garvis et al., 2017). According to Alpys and Hernández-Torrano (2026), the ECERS and its various iterations have an expanded role as an observational measure due to its wide usage and recognition as a benchmark for defining and interpreting quality across diverse contexts. ECERS therefore can build shared understandings of quality practice through a global evidence base.

More recently, quality has been considered as multidimensional (Slot, 2018), conceptualised across three domains: structural, process and system (Eadie et al., 2024; Torii et al., 2017). Internationally, features of quality in ECEC have been characterised as falling within two domains: structural quality and process quality (Dowsett et al., 2008); however, more recently, Torii et al. (2017) identified system quality as a third domain. Eadie et al.’s (2024) scoping review of the extent and consistency of the literature relating to quality points out that interactions between the domains are complex and require further study. Currently, structural quality consists of the foundational elements that support quality, such as leadership and governance, staff qualifications, child/adult ratios, and collaboration with families. Ha et al. (2025) define process quality as ‘children’s actual experience within a childcare setting such as interactions between educators and children’ (p. 2193). These high-quality interactions between children and educators are described as stimulating, warm, and supportive (Mashburn et al., 2008). As Torii et al. (2017) contend, effective teaching involves ‘educators who can skillfully combine explicit teaching of skills and concepts with sensitive and warm interactions’ (p. iii). By positioning this as the ‘core’ of quality (Torii et al., 2017), and ‘pivotal’ to children’s learning and wellbeing (PC, 2024, p. 4), it places educators accountable rather than ‘distributing accountability across the various structural components and processes that constitute and govern the ECEC system’ (Cohrsen et al., 2023). This acknowledges that organisational and structural factors also need to be considered to support quality service provision, such as system quality focusing on governance, regulatory standards, and the level of investment in services and programmes (Torii et al., 2017). For example, according to the 2024 Productivity Commission report into ECEC services in Australia, ‘there is no entity that holds the responsibility for quality, access, inclusion, transparency and accountability across the entire ECEC system’ (p. 24).

For over a decade, Australia’s early childhood sector has undergone a series of reforms brought about by the increased recognition of the influence of quality early childhood education on economic and social returns. A National Early Childhood Development Strategy (CoAG, 2009) was initiated in 2009 that focused on ensuring the delivery of consistent, accessible and high-quality early childhood education and care services throughout

Australia. Issues related to quality were addressed with a National Quality Framework (CoAG, 2012) that included a National Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to guide educators' practice (DEEWR 2009 updated AGDE, 2022), the National Law and Regulations, and the National Quality Standard (NQS) for children's services (ACECQA, n.d.). The NQS has been described as 'a score card' for each service and 'frames a dominant narrative around quality which situates responsibility for the enactment of quality at the setting level' (Cohrsen et al., 2023, p. 2), equally measuring quality across seven areas. This brings with it an accountability culture where benchmarks serve as measures of productivity, encouraging 'performativity' (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2013). This culture can overlook the nuances of quality practice that are not measurable, such as educator dispositions (Molla & Nolan, 2019), and limits educators' agency and flexibility (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015), thereby causing tensions between policy and practice.

3. Theoretical Framing

According to Blewett and Hugo (2016), affordances have been used extensively in education research as a theoretical lens. While the definition of Affordance Theory differs between two of the pioneers of this theory, this study builds from Norman's (2002) extension of Gibson's (1979) original definition with a focus on acknowledging the action and perceptual capabilities of the actor. These are influenced by culture, knowledge, ability and experience, in relation to the possibilities/offerings in the environment. Therefore, while affordances may be offered, this does not automatically transfer to affordances being acted upon, or as Blewett and Hugo suggest (2016), even being perceived as affordances due to the influence of social and cultural factors and experience. Interpreting the work of Zheng and Yu (2016), Xue and Churchill (2019) propose that while there are differing interpretations, agreement centres around affordances being relational and situated, contingent on the purposes of human agency and historical and socio-institutional settings.

As described by Morrissey et al. (2020) in their research in the ECEC sector, affordances are the 'relationship between people and their environment, and the opportunities afforded by a particular environment that depends on the characteristics of the individuals interacting with it' (p. 56). In other words, there is an interplay between perceptions and agency (Oliver, 2005) of people in relation to their environment. The person–environment relationship is positioned as transactional, where affordances are potentially available, may be perceived, and may be actualised by individuals (Kytä, 2002) depending on their perceptions and capabilities. This was true in this study as perceived affordances were shaped by FDC educators' previous and current experiences through their positionality, capabilities, as well as the socio-cultural and historical landscape. According to Watson (2004), Greeno (1994) proposes 'a shift in focus from how individuals process information to an understanding of what information is available to use' (p. 23). Watson (2004) coins the phrase 'ecology of participation' (p. 24) to describe the constraints and affordances generated within a classroom setting. As Watson (2004) further explains, 'By "ecology", I understand an environment in which elements, human and non-human, physical and semiotic, interact with each other in ways which result in change or perpetuation of the whole environment and the elements and relationships within it, rather than solely of the individual elements' (p. 24). Constraints to actions are 'the conditions and relationships amongst the attributes which provide structure and guidance for the course of action' but are considered as complementary and necessary for action to take place (Kennewell, 2001, p. 106). Constraints can be physical, semantic, cultural or logical (Norman, 1988), and this enables the exploration of the action opportunities that arise. However, affordances and constraints need to be considered in light of abilities (Greeno, 1994). For example, as one becomes more aware of an affordance, they become attuned (aware of or sensitive) to

the constraints (conditions and relationships amongst attributes). This knowledge enables them to make informed decisions about which actions are possible. Greeno (1994) explains ‘abilities in activity depend on attunements to constraints’ with affordances ‘understood as conditions in the environment for constraints to which the agent is attuned’ (p. 336).

Through the lens of an expanded application of Affordance Theory, considering the environment as encompassing ‘physical—spatial, ecological, sociocultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions, and being a source of symbolic meaning, affordances, novelty, attractors, and resources’ (Hocking, 2020, p. 180), a better understanding of what constitutes quality FDC programmes as perceived by the FDC educators themselves is gained, along with the challenges FDC educators face to be seen as professionals contributing valued work to the wider early childhood sector.

4. Materials and Methods

This study was qualitative in approach to capture the experiences and opinions of FDC educators in a detailed and intimate way (Patton, 2002). Taking an interpretive stance, the focus was on participants’ understandings of the subjective world of human experience (Cohen et al., 2017)—on how they interpret the world around them through their intentional actions and deliberations.

4.1. Methods

While two methods of data collection were utilised in this study—an anonymous online national survey, supplemented by online interviews, only the survey data is analysed and included in this paper. The survey was open from March 2025 to August 2025 accessed via the Qualtrics platform. It was anticipated that it would take between 20 and 30 min to complete. The survey questions began by asking for demographic information such as age, qualifications, years of experience and location of service. This was followed by asking FDC educator respondents how they explain their work to others, their engagement with the current national guidelines for practice across the early childhood sector, what belonging to the early childhood sector meant to them, their sense of connectedness to a community of FDC educators as well as to the wider early childhood sector, their experiences of being a professional within the sector and what influences this, and what could be done to support new FDC educators sense of belonging to the profession. Apart from some of the demographic questions, most survey questions were open-ended to allow for meaningful insights from participants (Gray, 2022). Approval to conduct the research was given by Deakin University (HE000812). It was made clear to potential respondents that by clicking on the survey link to begin the survey, they were giving consent for their data to be used. This process was explained in the preceding information sheet within the introduction to the survey section online. The survey link was advertised through Family Day Care Australia (the peak body for FDC), and Family Day Care Queensland (a state-based organisation) via newsletters and their usual communication channels. The screening question at the beginning of the survey ensured that only educators currently working in FDC in Australia proceeded to the survey.

4.2. Participants

In total, 200 responses were received from all states across Australia (although not evenly distributed), with representation from metropolitan (37%), regional (38%) and rural/remote (25%) locations. Survey participants were all female and highly qualified, holding Certificate III (28%), Diploma (54%), Advanced Diploma (6%), Degree (10%), and Master’s (1%) qualifications. Most survey respondents had 11 to 15 years’ experience working in FDC in Australia (16%), with those with 16–20 years’ experience (14%) and

3–5 years' experience (14%) coming in second. FDC educators' ages ranged from 18 to over 60 years, with the most responses from FDC educators aged 51–55 years (18%), followed closely by the over 60 age group (17%), and the 56–60-year-olds (16%).

4.3. Analysis

The analytical process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis (TA) that supports the exploration and sense-making of problems relating to human and social phenomena, and to 'make judgements about data' (O'Toole & Beckett, 2013, p. 25). As this is a sole researcher study, robustness of analysis was ensured by being a reflexive and 'knowing' researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2025, p. 401). That meant acknowledging that I am positioned within western knowledge frameworks, have experience undertaking a number of research studies that utilised thematic analysis, know the early childhood sector well, and checked my ongoing assumptions and potential biases through reflections in a research journal as I worked through Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase analysis—(1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) systematically coding the data, (3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up the report. First, after all survey responses were uploaded into a spreadsheet, they were read and reread, with initial thoughts noted relating to determinants of quality early childhood family day care services and being a valued professional within the ECEC sector. Initial codes were generated and then clustered under two categories—FDC as a viable, quality option, and FDC educators as professionals. Within each category, rereading occurred to define initial discursive themes, which were then grouped together and checked for consistency and completeness. This required time and thinking (Gough & Lyons, 2016) to ensure my researcher interpretations were not introducing my own ideas (Hillmayr et al., 2024). To do this, I ensured I stayed close to the data and kept going back to the data to check segments of meaning as they were identified.

5. Findings

5.1. FDC as a Viable, Quality Offering

The analysis began by focusing on descriptions FDC educators provided about their FDC service, or FDC services in general. This data generated four themes: (1) supporting each child's development and learning through alignment with government-prescribed frameworks; (2) building a safe and nurturing environment; (3) establishing relationships with families; and (4) gaining a deep knowledge of each child and having time to work with them.

Theme 1: Alignment with Frameworks. This theme highlighted how educators aligned their practices with government-approved frameworks to ensure they were meeting the learning and development expectations for young children. All FDC educators who responded when requested to explain their work (109 respondents) positioned it as strongly aligning with expectations of quality as outlined in policy documents, such as the national framework that guides practice in Australia—*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (v2.0)* (EYLF) (AGDE, 2022). According to them, the essence of their work centred around caring and educating, with two FDC educators describing themselves as 'teachers', and another two giving their title as an 'early childhood professional'. Being fully registered and compliant, and upholding the same legislative standards as other centre-based early childhood services was noted by many respondents. Attention focused on supporting each child's development and learning through the deliberate planning of activities, tailored for each child's needs and abilities. This was informed through observations of the child and in conversations with families, as well

as educators' knowledge of child development milestones. The following responses are representative of the majority in relation to this alignment.

I write a bespoke programme using The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). I observe the children and use milestones as a guide as to where they should be meeting all their developmental needs. I work closely with their parents and their routines with their child. (Educator 13)

It's like a mini classroom in my home, where I plan fun, play-based learning activities to support each child's development. Because the group is small, I get to know each child really well and can tailor what I do to their interests and needs. I also work closely with families to help support their child's growth, learning, and routine. (Educator 22)

These responses highlight the close connection with the expectations of the EYLF (AGDE, 2022) and its intention to support teachers and educators to 'extend and enrich children's learning from birth to 5 years and through the transition to school', with an emphasis on play-based learning and the 'intentional role played by educators and children in extending and enriching learning' (p. 4). Quality Area 1: Standard 1.1 of the NQS (ACECQA, n.d.) draws attention to how the educational programme enhances each child's learning and development, with its focus on curriculum decision-making contributing to children's identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators. This is achieved through Standard 1.2: Practice, where educators make intentional, purposeful and considered decisions and actions. This was very evident in the data as FDC educators described making deliberate and informed decisions in their planning to support children's growth.

Theme 2: Building a Safe and Nurturing Environment. This theme focused on the supportive environment that FDC educators felt they were able to provide to the children with whom they worked. Many responses commented on the importance of building a safe, trusting environment, as this was considered one of the key aspects in creating and offering a space that was 'welcoming' to enable the children 'to be themselves' (Educator 15) and that was 'a safe, nurturing, and inclusive environment' (Educator 77). As one educator elaborated, 'A FDC educator is responsible for creating a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment where children can learn, play, and grow—ensuring children's basic needs are met' (Educator 51). According to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 (2024), when children are nurtured, safe and healthy, able to play, imagine and grow, they thrive (p. 5). The word 'thrive' was mentioned by two educators, with one stating: 'I provide a vital role in nurturing young minds in a warm, home-like environment. Creating a safe, ethical and inclusive setting for our next generation to confidently thrive' (Educator 119).

Theme 3: Relationships with Families. This theme emphasised the importance placed on building supportive relationships with children's families. There was a strong emphasis on working 'with' families to support them in raising their child. As one educator recounted:

For me it's about the children having a secure feeling place to be when not with family that's a second home. . . I also love building a relationship with the families, so they feel at home here to share their life stories too. For me it's all about those relationships. (Educator 28)

The importance of building and strengthening relationships with children has its own Quality Area within the NQS; however, viewed as equally important is Quality Area 6 that focuses on collaborative partnerships with families and communities. Many FDC educators, when describing their services, noted the emphasis they placed on establishing

respectful and responsive relationships with families, as highlighted in the following data excerpts: ‘I also work closely with families to help support their child’s growth, learning, and routine’ (Educator 22); ‘I also work closely with the families to make sure their needs are being heard and the children feel safe, happy and supported’ (Educator 62).

Working collaboratively with families acknowledges parents’ role as their child’s first teacher, thus highlighting their significant influence. This role is acknowledged in Standard 6.1 of the NQS where the expertise, culture, values and beliefs of families need to be respected, with families included in decisions made about their child’s learning and wellbeing. This echoes the EYLF principle–partnerships, where respect for others’ perspectives, expectations and values, along with ‘building on the strength of each other’s knowledge and skills’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 14) should underpin practice. These close relationships with families supported FDC educators to feel they ‘really get to know each child well’ (Educator 75).

Theme 4: A Deep Knowledge of Each Child. A common sentiment across the data was that working with a small group size of children helped the FDC educators to build knowledge and understandings of each child as an individual. As one FDC educator responded: ‘The small group setting means I can really focus on each child’s needs and help them grow in a warm, homelike environment’ (Educator 14). This sense of being in step with children’s thoughts and feelings was viewed as supporting learning, development and wellbeing (AGDE, 2022). Another FDC educator commented: ‘It’s a beautiful blend of care, education, and meaningful relationships, all from the heart’ (Educator 77). Some educators chose to compare the higher child/staff ratio to what was on offer in centre-based services. Representative comments included the benefits of more one-on-one, personal attention: ‘Because it’s in a home setting, it’s really personal and calm, and the kids get lots of one-on-one attention’ (Educator 62); ‘A superior care environment that caters to each child due to being capped in numbers and allowing more 1:1 time with each child’ (Educator 109).

For a few educators, the intimacy created within a FDC setting where child numbers are low and relationships are built over extended periods of time, translated into viewing the children and their families as ‘becoming part of our family’ (Educator 94); ‘I help shape little minds and love watching them grow being part of our family’ (Educator 97).

5.2. FDC Educators as Professionals Within the ECEC Sector

The majority of FDC educators made it clear that they considered themselves very much an early childhood professional, for example, ‘I am a professional early childhood educator and an essential worker, that supports families and their children’ (Educator 88). One FDC educator offered: ‘The word Day Care is very outdated and does not reflect appropriately what you actually do as a profession’ (Educator 82), and ‘Think of it [FDC] like a mini childcare centre but more personal and flexible. I do everything a centre does’ (Educator 14). From their responses, FDC educators appeared knowledgeable in the policies to be followed, particularly in relation to child development, which was spoken about repeatedly across the data, for example, ‘I educate children to ensure they are strong independent learners and ready for when they go to school’ (Educator 70). Considering Molla and Nolan’s (2019) identification of five evaluative spaces to assess professional functionings—expertise (having the specialist knowledge and skills required in the profession), deliberation (being able to critically reflect on one’s professional practices; learning through reflection), recognition (being valued for one’s professional work), responsiveness (being able to appropriately meet diverse needs of children; having a social justice disposition), and integrity (being respectful and respected on one’s professional practices; acting ethically)—the educators who participated in this study aligned with

each one of these, although their sense of being recognised for what they do was limited. The FDC educators demonstrated knowledge of child development, established learning environments, engaged in purposeful relationships with children and their families and highlighted the need to really ‘get to know’ each child so they could make deliberative decisions about how best to support their learning and development. They were responsive to each child, due to having small numbers of children in their service, while also being aware of all compliance expectations and standard benchmarks. What was missing for these educators was recognition. While they generally felt trusted by the families to look after their children, this valuing did not extend to the wider early childhood sector.

The FDC educators in this study felt a sense of being undervalued as professionals within the early childhood sector when asked about their sense of belonging as a professional. As one FDC educator stated: ‘It’s frustrating and disheartening that the professional expertise, commitment, and impact of FDC educators are not always recognised. We are qualified professionals doing essential work, and yet we often feel invisible in the broader sector’ (Educator 11). Another FDC educator noted: ‘We are not included in a lot of industry discussions and very much set at a different standard compared to the wider early childhood sector, even though we hold the same qualifications and meet the same National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard (which we do as a sole worker)’ (Educator 14). The analysis identified a greater number of those not feeling valued through a lack of recognition than those who did (see [Nolan, under review](#)). The following was explained, ‘I often feel that Family Day Care exists as a separate entity from the broader early childhood sector. . . feel set apart from the wider sector’ (Educator 35); ‘We are looked down on. . . seen as an inferior type of care’ (Educator 7); and ‘I don’t think that we are overly welcomed. There seems to be the sense that we are just babysitting at home rather than educating children to a high standard’ (Educator 13). Overseeing a service located in one’s home seemed to align with being devalued when the job is positioned by others as ‘less formal or less professional’ (Educator 35). As this FDC educator further explained, ‘Our unique model “educators working independently in home environments” often leads to a sense of disconnection from mainstream early childhood education settings’ (Educator 35). This is further exacerbated when networking or professional development offerings are often not designed with FDC in mind, and policy and funding decisions do not reflect the operational realities of FDC—‘we have to make a lot of things work for us as individuals working on our own’ (Educator 24). One FDC educator laments: ‘We are never recognised for the uniqueness of the role we play. Forever lumped in with Long Day Care [centre-based care]. Policies are made without any significance to us but applied to us even if they make no sense’ (Educator 3). The ramifications of this are clear: ‘While we operate under the same legislation as long day care services, our daily realities, responsibilities, and limitations are very different. We don’t have the same operational structures or access to resources, and yet we’re expected to meet the same standards without the same support’ (Educator 92).

6. Discussion

In this study, an Affordance Theory lens was applied to understand the perceptions of FDC educators of their services as viable, quality offerings and themselves as professionals within the ECEC sector. This lens has highlighted how FDC educators’ perceptions have been shaped by culture, knowledge, ability, history and experience, in relation to the possibilities in the environment that act as either affordances or constraints.

Considering cultural affordances, FDC educators held a clear vision of what they believed was expected of an effective early childhood professional by following nationally prescribed guidelines relating to their practices. The NQS and EYLF were both mentioned

as documents that guided practice, and where these were not specifically named, the practices and principles described directly aligned. This demonstrates that FDC educators' knowledge, understandings and pedagogy link with governmental expectations of what it means to be an early childhood professional offering a quality service. As [Molla and Nolan \(2019\)](#) contend, expertise is an indicator of professionalism where the educators are appropriately trained, hold credentials and have the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their work. Holding shared values, goals and practices as outlined in guiding documents validated these educators as professionals who were part of the early childhood sector through a sense of commonality. However, FDC educators felt separated from the wider early childhood sector despite following a common framework and adhering to prescribed standards. This highlights the relational and situated nature of affordances that are contingent on the historical and socio-cultural positioning of the early childhood sector.

Historically, the early childhood sector has been plagued by a perceived dichotomy of care versus education despite [UNICEF \(2008\)](#) recognising care and education as co-existent and inseparable. The distinction between care and education sees care as 'stigmatised in the professional hierarchy' as it is aligned with 'bodily and emotional labour' ([Van Laere et al., 2014](#), p. 59), and has been discounted in policies and regulations ([Rouse & Hadley, 2018](#)). This assigns the work as non-professional ([Tuominen, 2003](#)) and a natural ability of women, thereby assuming little or no skill is required to undertake this work ([Sloan, 2025](#); [Ailwood, 2008](#)). This acts to diminish the complexity of the work ([Osgood, 2006](#)). This is in direct contrast to education that is considered to involve intellectual work ([Van Laere et al., 2014](#)). [Moss \(2006\)](#) determines that educators are often classified as technicians while early childhood teachers have been considered educators. As [Urban \(2008\)](#) suggests, this form of professionalism is constructed as hierarchical and 'contradicts the relational core of early childhood practice' (p. 135). A qualifications hierarchy adds to the divide, with early childhood teachers holding teaching degree qualifications, and early childhood educators holding childcare qualifications such as certificates and diplomas; yet, all are expected to engage with and implement policy directives such as the framework to guide practice, and quality standards regardless of qualification level. This has equity implications regarding implementation of the framework ([Grieshaber & Graham, 2017](#)). While the FDC educators who took part in this study held qualifications ranging from Certificate to Master's, with 11 to 15 years' experience being the majority, closely followed by 16–20 years, and work under different employment conditions, there was no recognition of this. As [Swartz \(1997\)](#) suggests in consideration of Bourdieu's work, credentials are used by individuals and groups to perpetuate their positions of privilege and power. The diversity of service offerings across the early childhood sector adds to this as these can encourage staff to behave in isolated and defensive ways ([Osgood & Stone, 2002](#)), resulting in a lack of a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a professional group.

Location influenced the valuing of FDC educators. For FDC educators, the home environment was seen as an opportunity to implement quality learning programmes. The FDC educators embraced this affordance and its action possibilities by providing high-quality interactions with the children along with stimulating learning programmes following prescribed government guidelines, just like their counterparts in other early childhood service offerings. Here, we see the relationship between the environment and the users and the characteristics of those interacting with it, seeing the possibilities on offer ([Morrissey et al., 2020](#)). [Gibson \(1979\)](#) points to 'the complementarity of the animal and the environment' (p. 127). FDC educators perceived the affordances of their homes as places where they can offer quality early childhood programmes, demonstrating their abilities, both physical and cognitive, to perceive and subsequently use affordances ([Young](#)

& Cleveland, 2022). This is evidenced by the many descriptions by FDC educators of what they were offering which aligned with government expectations of quality early childhood programmes and pedagogy.

Another affordance of the home environment as a workspace was that it enabled the women in this study to earn an income while working from home. However, this was viewed by others outside of FDC as a 'less professional' environment that saw the service and FDC educators positioned as lower in both status ('babysitters') and quality ('a bad second choice'). Also, the isolation of working from home, while providing choice and opportunity, can limit exposure to others outside of the service. However, many FDC educators felt a sense of belonging to the FDC community via the co-ordination schemes that oversaw them, formally or informally connecting with other FDC educators who shared similar experiences or attending professional development opportunities. But these opportunities depended on what schemes provided, the initiative of the FDC educator themselves to connect, and the relevance of the content of the training sessions to the FDC setting.

Being a sole trader provided an environment where FDC educators had agency within their service. While this is appreciated, it does bring with it an administration burden. This became more problematic when implementing universal government policies that did not hold significance or relevance or needed to be adopted for the FDC setting. When considered within the wider early childhood sector, this further restricted their agency, as they appeared to be overlooked, as often decisions for the sector were at odds with FDC. This counteracted their sense of agency, leading to feelings of not being considered in policy formation and, as such, not valued within the sector, as these decisions held the potential to constrain their practices. This denied these members of the early childhood sector equitable representation and participation in decisions relating to policy that is a hallmark of a just society (Fraser et al., 2024). Fortunately, many of the FDC educators who took part in the study recognised the affordance of this constraint and took it upon themselves to translate policies for their own situation. This shows attunement to constraints and the actions coming from this, demonstrating their capabilities to adapt and adopt government policy and initiatives to their environments to ensure quality practices.

7. Conclusions

Applying an Affordance Theory lens to the findings of this study has highlighted the relational and situated nature of affordances that are contingent on the historical and socio-cultural positioning of the early childhood sector. Affordance Theory positions the person–environment relationship as transactional, where affordances are potentially available, may be perceived, and may be actualised by individuals (Kytä, 2002) depending on their perceptions and capabilities. This was true in this study as perceived affordances were shaped by FDC educators' previous and current experiences through their positionality and capabilities, as well as the socio-cultural and historical landscape. This draws attention to the historical positioning of early childhood and the devaluing of care in relation to education. Location also plays into this positioning, with the work of those working from their own homes rather than childcare centres or preschools/kindergartens afforded less value. This is where an individual's abilities to actualise affordances can be influenced by the collective understandings about the potential and protocols of the spaces occupied (Young & Cleveland, 2022). In this study, the educators clearly see themselves as supporting children's learning through alignment with government frameworks; building safe and nurturing learning environments; establishing relationships with families and gaining a deep knowledge of each child through sustained engagement, all aspects of a quality

service. However, this is perceived as not valued within the plethora of early childhood services on offer.

By FDC educators becoming more aware of affordances, they become more attuned to the constraints. This then enables them to make informed decisions about which actions are possible (Greeno, 1994). This paper argues that raising awareness and then harnessing potential affordances could provide an opportunity for action and advocacy. This means reflecting on experiences to uncover underlying factors that might explain actions and reactions. With this understanding, more considered decisions can be made. Strengthening the sense of being connected to the FDC community could capitalise on collective understandings, thereby operationalising opportunities for action such as having the courage to speak up. Connecting with other FDC educators through established networks could build collective confidence to advocate for recognition of their work and service offerings. One focus of this action could be building the awareness of the broader sector as to what affords quality ECEC and effective, professional educators and what works against this for FDC. This could include advocating for care as a social principle within education and socially constructed ideals of professionalism (Harwood et al., 2013) and pushing back against the imposed constructions of professionalism through actively challenging, negotiating and reforming the discourses (Osgood, 2006). Several FDC educators are already engaging in this (r)evolutionary work, and this could be expanded by joining with other early childhood educators outside of FDC in realigning the importance of care within quality practice. These insights offer direction for strengthening cultural and environmental affordances that can enhance the positioning of FDC as an important, quality service offering within the early childhood sector, along with the valuing of FDC educators as professionals. While this study focused on FDC educators' experiences in the Australian context, similar studies utilising Affordance Theory could uncover interesting results in other countries where the work of caring and childcarers is undervalued or overlooked. Identified affordances and constraints that trigger inequities of the system can then be addressed to support government early childhood workforce initiatives. Hopefully this will lead to a broader acknowledgement of quality early childhood services no matter the location.

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