



Q&A with the researcher

A discussion between Dr Valeria Scacchi and Dr Sacha Powell, CEO, Froebel Trust. December 2022.

Reconceptualising Professional Learning and Development through a Froebelian lens: Early childhood educators' perspectives on professional identities in the UK and Italy.

A [doctoral thesis](#) by Dr Valeria Scacchi, University of Roehampton (2021)

Sacha Powell: The title of your PhD is, “Reconceptualising professional development in early childhood education”. The word “reconceptualise” suggests to me that you felt there was a problem with professional development. Could you tell me what made you want to reconceptualise it?

Valeria Scacchi: As a practitioner, I had sat in professional learning sessions that made me angry, that made me feel like I wasn't worth anything, I wasn't worth teaching. I felt that we were just there to tick boxes, and to say, “this person has done the professional learning that was offered”. I came away thinking that my day was wasted, and that I didn't learn anything particularly new. And then I started looking into it and found that some academics had written about this. So I looked at the policy side, and I discovered I that professional learning and development seemed to be decided and offered without reference to the specific needs of practitioners and the children and families they work with. I remember looking through a Local Authority course booklet myself when I was a practitioner, and I had to choose something, but there was nothing that really spoke to me. I had wanted something different. The topics that were offered for professional learning and development didn't feel relevant to what I wanted to learn or what I felt my children needed.

Sacha Powell: You’ve been describing your experience as a practitioner in England. But your PhD research was based in England and Italy. Why did you choose these two locations?

Valeria Scacchi: In England, apart from statutory courses, professional learning and development is not compulsory. This seemed strange to me. In Italy, it is compulsory. You can't continue to practise if you haven't completed 20 hours of professional development each year.

Sacha Powell: You adopted a Froebelian lens for your study. What does that mean?

Valeria Scacchi: I've used it throughout my PhD. From the beginning, three Froebelian principles helped me to create research questions, structure the methodology, review the literature, analyse the data, and discuss the findings. The principles anchored me.

Sacha Powell: Which three principles did you use?

Valeria Scacchi: The 1st came from Froebel's "The Education of Man". Holistic pedagogy requires holistically trained educators and training is seen as a tool to enable them to construct their own individual identities. The 2nd came from 1906. All knowledge is made from experience; we cannot develop knowledge of things that we cannot experience with our senses. The 3rd was also from The Education of Man. Like-mindedness and autonomy foster companionship. This principle highlights the importance of the community aspect of learning and of developing.

Sacha Powell: Did a Froebelian lens inhibit or limit your research in any way?

Valeria Scacchi: Of course, it limited me because there were only three principles. Obviously, those ones were the one that were more relevant to the subject of the study. Someone else might have used different principles instead. So yes, it was a limitation but I think it was necessary to focus and manage a potentially huge topic.

Sacha Powell: Can you tell me who was involved in your study. Who were your participants?

Valeria Scacchi: I had 10 participants from Haringey in England, and 10 in San Miniato in Italy. They all came from different backgrounds and had worked in early childhood education from one year to twenty years. Their qualifications ranged from a diploma to a PhD and one had a medical degree. They were quite a diverse group, although there was only one man who was in London.

Sacha Powell: Can you remember anything in particular from your interviews or focus groups that really struck you at the time?

Valeria Scacchi: Yes, I remember three comments in particular about identity. Someone in England said to me, "I am nothing. I am just a member of temporary staff. I don't even have a job description. I don't have a job role. So what's the point of me talking about identity? I don't know who I am." Then there was someone else in Italy who said, "We are like Cinderellas - everyone needs us, but no one gives us enough compensation for what we do". And when I asked one practitioner in Italy about emotions in early childhood work she said to me, "I'm so tired of being asked about this. An oncologist that works with dying children is not asked about whether he uses emotions with children, why only us? I don't think it's useful to think about our role through that lens because it devalues our profession."

Sacha Powell: In your thesis, you make a connection between professional development and professional identity. How did you make that connection and what did you discover?

Valeria Scacchi: In my analysis, I developed a flowchart to explain how different things come into play. For example, one of my participants said she had entered the profession with a love for children. She described it as having “a lot of bubbles, very sparkly” and over time these bubbles fall away. Her professional learning and development reignited the bubbles and made them a little bit more purposeful and less chaotic. This leads to an enhanced professional identity. None of my participants ever said they got to a point where we didn’t need to learn any more. There is always space for further development and identity is always moving with the times and the context and their maturity as educators. It was a never ending process of development.

Sacha Powell: **You started out being critical about the professional development that you experienced as a practitioner, and you felt that it didn't really reflect what the educators, children and communities needed. When you say that professional identity is constantly evolving in connection with professional development, would you say this applies to all professional learning or just particular kinds?**

Valeria Scacchi: The educators that I spoke to welcome any kind of professional learning and development; they appreciated it. But a better offer opens up more and different avenues of development.

Sacha Powell: **What was the most significant discovery in your research?**

Valeria Scacchi: I found that professional learning and development was so far removed from the reality of the nursery and often it was imposed on the practitioners. They had no say in it. No one ever asked them, “So what do you think of this offer? What could we add that would be more valuable?” I also found that a lot of the practitioners felt uncomfortable talking about their emotions or felt guilty if they had a specific attachment to some of the children.

Sacha Powell: **How might a manager of a setting use the findings from your study?**

Valeria Scacchi: I found that some of the practitioners found it really useful to have an offer that moved with them, with their years of experience, to be able to go deeper. Also, it is helpful to have professional learning and development when it is needed, not at specific times of the year. For example, someone might have a new key child that has specific needs and training is needed there and then. I think it’s also important to listen to practitioners to find out what they need or want to learn to support their work with different children and families at different times. A practical step might be to have a staff day where everyone puts their wishes in a manifesto so that professional development is grounded in the reality of the practitioners’ working lives.

Sacha Powell: **I expect it’s difficult to provide formal professional development that is responsive to every individual’s learning or support needs at different times. Did you find more informal approaches to professional learning and development that might be easier to introduce and would feel relevant to the lived realities of practice?**

Valeria Scacchi: One thing that my participants had found really useful was to visit other settings. They said that looking at practice, on the ground, from other people always gives you new ideas. But it’s more than about making a visit. It’s about linking with others to create local communities of practice where educators can look for

help: “Do you know anything about this? Can you help me with this?” This also helps to strengthen the whole early childhood sector, which is really fragmented and lacks cohesion. Burnout in the sector is real. Many practitioners feel unable to cope and unable to protect themselves from the pressure of the work. We don't want to get to the point where educators employ strategies to protect themselves that will distance themselves from the children.

Sacha Powell: Are you saying that local networks of educators and practitioners might be one antidote, or one way of coping and perhaps reducing some of the stress, burnout and attrition from the sector?

Valeria Scacchi: Yes, they provide a way to support each and feel connected. We are stronger together, we learn more together. They can also reduce the costs of training, if knowledge shared and developed together.

Sacha Powell: So in a nutshell, what is your reconceptualization of professional development in early childhood education?

Valeria Scacchi: It would be community learning, being stronger together. Listening to the specific communities rather than providing an offer that is a one size fits all approach.

You can read Dr Valeria Scacchi's full thesis via University of Roehampton website:

https://pure.roehampton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/7621730/Scacchi_Valeria_Final_Thesis.pdf