



Reconceptualising Professional Learning and Development through a Froebelian lens

Early childhood educators' perspectives on professional identities in the UK and Italy

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Detailed research summary

A critical investigation and reconceptualisation of in-service professional learning and development strategies and practices for early childhood educators in England.

This research contributes to developing a reconceptualisation of professional learning and development (PLD) in two contexts of practice, in Tuscany, Italy, and London, UK, through a Froebelian lens and concentrates on the way in which Early Childhood educators develop and conceptualise their professional identities.

I have constructed two freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003), highlighting and exploring the complex interrelationships within the cases selected. I have developed this qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, activity-based focus groups and documentary research. The main strategies I have used to analyse the data are a dynamic approach to Grounded Theory supplemented by Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis. The purpose of the study is to explore PLD opportunities and the process of identity development for Early Childhood educators, considering contemporary practices in Tuscany and London to create a vision of PLD that is informed and guided by Froebelian philosophy.

This research produces new insights on what it means to be an Early Childhood educator today in London and San Miniato – with it I have shown the need for a reconceptualisation of the current PLD offer with one that is instead designed around educators' needs, starting from where the learner is and aiming to make a significant difference to the professional lives of Early Childhood educators working with young children, while staying true to fundamental Froebelian principles and philosophy.

Implications of this study suggest that a reconceptualised offer of PLD must be strictly linked to the culture of practice in the setting, where the educators' experiences and needs are used to diversify the offer to remain relevant to local realities and local practitioners. Educators' identity development must be supported with a holistic approach that also cares for their mental wellbeing to build resilience against everyday stress brought by close interpersonal relationships with children and families.

Research design

The principal research question guiding this study is: How can professional learning and development in Early Childhood Education and Care be conceptualised through a Froebelian lens in light of contemporary PLD practices in Tuscany and London?

Additionally, a series of sub-questions have been designed for this study:

What are the key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian education systems?

What is the current picture of professional learning and development in Tuscany and London?

What are the features of professional learning and development in professional contexts?

How do participants define, perceive and make sense of their professional identities?

The study is organised as a pair of 'freestanding-but-related case studies' (Stake, 2003) in London and San Miniato (Tuscany). I have used semi-structured interviews and activity-based focus groups to collect the data and have used the situational analysis method devised by Clarke (2005) to analyse the data.

Key findings

I have highlighted a system where families and children do not participate in helping Early Childhood educators learn how best to cater for their needs and the needs of their children. I have become aware of the educators' desperate need to be more actively involved with the design and delivery of PLD courses, I have met with professional identities both complex and ambivalent that wanted to be developed further through more opportunities for self-reflection and more chances to confront themselves with others. I have also highlighted how the Early Childhood educators struggle with roles that are not professionally recognised by public opinion and policy guidance.

With this thesis I have shown that providing Early Childhood educators with adequate working conditions and pay should not exclude different discourses which support their personal beliefs behind entering and remaining in the workforce. Every story is valid and professional in its own particular way – disregarding these important ambivalences would be contributing to a McDonaldisation of the ECEC workforce, effectively destroying the possibility for Early Childhood educators to be critical and creative thinkers in constructing their own identities (Ritzer, 1993). The current PLD offering fails to give enough support to Early Childhood educators to buffer against the extreme mental and emotional demands of the job.

A reconceptualised PLD offering must be flexible and feature the ability to request training when and if needed at any point of the year, supported by senior management who must have a mentoring role in guiding the educators' choices. Environments like the ones considered for this study see PLD and how it should be delivered defined externally with a

top-down approach. Decisions about the desirable outcomes to be reached with the practice of PLD can be challenging for educators' development of professional autonomy (Urban, 2008).

This study is situated in a system where, in order to achieve recognition, Early Childhood educators must construct their professional identity according to predetermined conceptualisations that are standardised and imparted from the top down. These are not representative of the educators' realities of practice, contributing to a disconnect between the conceptualisation of PLD for Early Childhood educators and its implementation in the setting (Urban, 2008).

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Read the final thesis:

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