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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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Reconceptualising professional learning and development through a Froebelian lens: Early Childhood educators ’ perspectives on professional identities in the UK and Italy

by Valeria Scacchi BA, MA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

Department of Education
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Abstract

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.

“The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference EDU 18/150 in the Department of Education and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton’s Ethics Committee on 15/05/2018”.

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To Kara: it is finished now, my love.

Foreword

In undertaking the study for a doctorate, I have found the need to articulate and make more explicit the Froebelian positioning, hitherto in the background but which in reality supports and guides the way in which I approach work. Froebel's Spherical Law has in reality played a central role. Froebel's spherical law takes his starting point in the self, a unique self, made of morality, intellect, emotions and thinking, the development of which is influenced by practical actions, strictly linked to the environment in which the self exists and within nature (Liebschner, 2001). Froebel's spherical law can also be linked to a postmodern perspective of knowledge as being culturally shaped, produced and consumed by individuals who are strictly influenced by their geographical position and historical context, as will be further elaborated in Chapter 3, Methodology in this thesis (Clarke, 2005). Wasmuth (2020) describes Froebel's law of the sphere as supporting individuals to fulfil their potential through education, it is through the process of education that the law of the sphere will become clear to educators and where the implications of it for everyday practice can be reflected upon so that thinking, feeling and doing, can all be supported in equal and holistic ways. Froebel believed that 'each individual is always a part (…) of a larger whole' (Wasmuth, 2020:61) where 'unity and allness, the individual and the total are connected' (Wasmuth, 2020: 72). Both Liebschner (2001) and Wasmuth (2020) being German natives presented an authentic view of Froebel's thinking translating it as closely as possible so that the original meaning in his philosophy was not lost in the translation, both authors emphasise self-awareness, relationships with others and a fundamental relationship with the universe to explain the law of the sphere, knowing oneself in all relationships is at the heart because this is the fundamental characteristic of becoming educated according to Froebel. Bruce (2021)

describes this as Froebel's belief that we are never in a fixed state but always in a process of becoming. The spherical law also foregrounds the threefold life unification processes. These are known as the Forms of life, Forms of beauty and Forms of knowledge (Tovey, 2017), the forms of life are used in making meaning of everyday life experiences this aspect is an important element in this thesis. The second forms involve seeing patterns and this is a fulfilling process, described by the mathematically minded Froebel as seeing and searching for Beauty (Tovey, 2017). The third is engagement with knowledge that connects with the first two processes, also this form is an important feature in this thesis as I examine the knowledge that educators are acquiring through the professional learning and development courses available to them and I connect this to their everyday practice aiming to make links with the educators' everyday realities of practice. These Froebelian tenets have been fundamental in guiding me to become more self-aware, and to know who I am as a starting point. Due to the issues discussed in this thesis, I find it fundamental to introduce who I am and how the Froebelian philosophy has guided me up to this point in my life, so that my positioning through this doctoral research can become more evident. The Froebelian concept of Unity, which is at the heart of the Spherical law, makes central the need to connect how self-awareness relates to others in the development of relationships with colleagues (Bruce, 2021). Connections and relationships to others begins in the family context, but in professional life these are essential too, understanding that knowledge is formed from within, is a fundamental Froebelian principle (Hargreaves et al., 2014 in Smith, 2018) that can support us in understanding how others work and feel about their work and how these feelings are helped and enhanced, expanded and better used by knowing what is important for educators in their specific work contexts. In order to understand and situate the

individual narratives developed by participants in the research undertaken it has been important to engage with the important features of their everyday lives, the patterns that are important to them, and to begin with the knowledge they bring. The Froebelian state of becoming supports knowledge as being shifting and situated and related to the geographical and political contexts under exploration. In addition, their personal experiences in relation to key ideas of love, professional love and professional identity will be more easily explored as I keep in view how I am positioned in relation to these, which may chime and resonate, or not, with how other practitioners view their work with children, family, and their colleagues, to situate the individual narratives developed in this research, seeing individuals as being heavily influenced by the context in which they exist, thus reaching an understanding of knowledge as being shifting and situated and strictly related to the geographical and political context under exploration. In chapter 7 ‘Conclusions’, I will present details about some fundamental characteristics that a professional educator should possess as reflected in the data for this research as well as acknowledging the long-standing debates about what this means for the early years field. Using the spherical law, awareness of self, in relationship with others and relationship with the peopled universe of nature, has given a clear sense of my own position and afford me opportunities to then write from an argued position. I understand this research to be intricately bound to my personal experiences and professional perspective of what it is to be an educator of young children. This stems both from my personal background, and my identity.

This starting point opens the possibility for becoming an advocate for educators working with young children by amplifying their voices through this research.

Froebel argues the importance of self-awareness, and understanding of what matters for self, enables the possibility to support colleagues in developing how they see their work. The possibilities for fruitful co-construction are opened up so that the everyday working experiences of practitioners become illuminated and articulated, in a community of practice, or as Froebel describes it establishing communities aiming to transform people's way of life through enhancing the link between family and school (Froebel in Lilley, 1967), important patterns are identified together, and further understanding and knowledge results in the Froebelian Forms acting as guidance for practice.

I started my Froebelian journey as a BA Early Childhood Studies undergraduate, I remember sitting in my first lecture about Froebel fascinated by what Dr Jane Read was describing, I listened about the educationalist philosopher who valued play, children's self-expression and self-activity, at this moment I saw Froebel as being only concerned with children, I couldn't yet see just how far his philosophy of education went, but I was happy to find out more. With Dr Suzanne Quinn I learnt about the importance of learning in a community, of considering the connection of people to each other, recognising 'the strength of the child and the family, and to act in the spirit of community to help the child to feel secure and confident enough to take risks' (Quinn and Greenfield, 2019:166). I have started to consider the effects that environments can have on children and educators to either support or constrain their experiences and development, and to understand children's and educators' lives in terms of interconnectedness and interdependent (Quinn and Greenfield, 2019). I listened about the importance of having a whole system supporting the child and the family, seeing the child's life as being strictly linked to the community around them,

the community needed the child as much as the child needed the community, they both supported each other in different and fundamental ways. It is only when I started my MA in Early Childhood Studies that I started to see the connection between Froebel's thinking and the educator. Thanks to Dr Peter Elfer (Page and Elfer, 2013) I became passionate about issues of professional love for educators, and I started to deeply consider the need to advocate for a nurturing and loving professional to work with young children, understanding professional love as fundamental but also extremely demanding on educators, requiring the building of 'deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal' relationships with each child (Page, 2011:313). I became familiar with Noddings' (2003) concepts of care and the cared for, she sees this relationship as being unequal but mutual, where there are important exchanges where the cared for acts like a sounding board for the carer by giving feedback (verbal or non-verbal) to the carer about the caring received, making the carer feel valued and appreciated, and recognising that the care received is being welcomed. I have related Noddings' theory on care and the cared for with what Froebel calls the development of self-awareness, as this enables the individual to know what it is important to them and seek to satisfy their needs through a healthy caring relationship with the carer (Bruce, 2021). During the MA I started to see how Froebelian philosophy did not stop at the child, but it linked with the educator and their training, the support offered to them to become attuned to the children's needs was a pillar of Froebelian philosophy that I did not consider before, this is why Froebel maintained that the educator's primary concern must be to develop relationships with young children (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Educators' relationships with children should be close, trusting, responsive, interactive and intellectually challenging (Tovey, 2017). On the other hand, I also understand that it is simply not

possible for educators to love all the children in their care equally, Tovey (2017:44) explains that a 'genuine bond' with both the child and the family is a fundamental requirement in order to build a 'close, responsive, tuned in and consistent' relationship, however we cannot and should not treat love and professional love in early years as being on-demand, something that automatically gets turned on and off, because one of the fundamental characteristics of love and by the same token, professional love, is that it is freely given. It is unacceptable that love should be seen as one of the products for sale in the market of early years, supporting an entrepreneurial discourse where love is part of the total childcare package (Campbell-Barr, 2014), love cannot be commercialised, it is a non-commodifiable concept (Page, 2011). In discussions around love and professional love, educators often appear disembodied as if they do not have a choice over the giving of love, love and pedagogical loving are an expectation, this view is unacceptable and supports a problematic as supporting a problematic conception that 'women (…) have natural capabilities for caring…if, for example, all women are natural mothers, so all women make natural workers with children…' (Moss, 2003 in Miller et al., 2012:50). It is important, to shift our attention to considering how educators respond to the complex emotional demands of children's needs for intimate attention and support educators to develop a healthy work ethic while not depriving young children of their right to meaningful and close relationships in setting (Elfer et al., 2018b)

During the MA I was offered the possibility to apply to join a small team of well-respected researchers working for the Froebel Trust funded project in Soweto, South Africa, to develop a sustainable learning environment which was culturally appropriate to the children and educators in the township (Bruce et al., 2015). This

experience was important for my Froebelian identity, here I made the important link I was not ready to make as an undergraduate, I started to see how Froebelian philosophy could be clearly translated in a community of practice where the 'highest truths are perceived and expressed' in relationship with others and the importance of this concept (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:43). During my time in Soweto, I had the opportunity to see how a Froebelian approach can be translated to a different culture without erasing the cultural identity of the people in the community, using the ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) approach initially developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993 in Louis, Bruce and Bruce, 2021) as an approach that aims to highlight the link between training for work and community development seeking to empower communities in decolonised ways. The team, which comprised the staff of the school, and the research team, supported the staff in identifying their strengths and the assets of the community and worked to develop those instead of imposing the values of one culture to another and looking at the community is Soweto with a deficit point of view, instead building continuously on the strengths of the teachers and children in the settlement in Soweto (Bruce, 2010; Louis, Bruce and Bruce, 2021). We worked at a pace that suited the community, valuing the local culture, without transplanting and imposing a Froebelian approach onto the educators in South Africa, helping the educators to share and link with others stimulating excitement in their personal learning journeys (Bruce, 2010; Louis, Bruce and Bruce, 2021). In Soweto I understood the practice of Froebel's principle of starting from where the learner is, (Froebel, 1974) and this applied both to the children and the educators, I learnt how to listen to the voices of the educators to adapt a Froebelian approach to the needs of the community that arose from reflective debates and adjustments of practice so as to be relevant to the educators in the setting without

imposing my own culture and way of doing to the educators (Bruce et al., 2015). I came to this experience without much reflection on what it meant to start from where the learner is, I started from being rather prescriptive with my teaching and left with a deeper understanding of the power of working and learning in a community; seeing Froebelian philosophy being translated to practice in front of my eyes completely changed my engagement with Froebel's philosophy. I understood what Froebel meant when he explained that learning must be connected to people's lives and experienced as a meaningful whole (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). I have started to notice just how much the community in Soweto was enriched by the diversity and uniqueness of the educators who were part of it, so that the educators could gain a sense of belonging and connection to the community (Tovey, 2020). When the shift in my understanding happened, I started to build on the educators' and the community's strengths, instead of relying so much only on myself without reflecting on the situation in front of me, to share, exchange and co-construct with the educators in a community of practice where I could learn about others as well as about myself and my views of a Froebelian approach. By understanding learning as linked to participation in communities of practice, I could focus on an understanding of the learner and, by the same token, the learning process as an ever-evolving activity, seeing Froebel's process of becoming in the way that would now be termed a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Lilley (1967) explains, Froebel himself was not primarily concerned with national systems of education, he was instead concerned with the establishment of true communities, very similar to what Lave and Wenger (1991) call communities of practice, that would transform people's way of life through the family and the school.

When I came back from South Africa in 2015, I wrote an article for Nursery World on my experience in Soweto (Scacchi and Partridge, 2015). I was still constructing my Froebelian identity, I decided to write about the importance of learning how to stand back and on my reflections about the role of the adult, who, according to Froebel (Liebschner, 2001) should be a facilitator and guide, setting the ground for learning experiences to take place, but without interfering in the learning process of others, thus letting the educators to plan and engage in their own learning process. I reflected on the importance of observing and supporting educators as they construct their own understanding, seeing Froebelian philosophy as empowering educators and helping them to realise their own capabilities, while supporting them to develop these. This experience is when my understanding of the links between Froebelian philosophy and practice with children and educators developed the most. It is during this time that I started to reflect on educators' professional identity development, looking at it from a Froebelian understanding of who the educator is, my ideas considered professional identity as fluid and difficult to fully define as Lightfoot (2015:3) says, professional identity 'is about who we are rather than the part we are playing'. The most important contribution that a Froebelian approach made to my own thinking of professional identity is the concept of interconnectivity, as Bruce (2021) explains, the needs of educators are connected to the wellbeing of children, by the same token, family and educational life are also connected. This important reflection really cemented my understanding of professional identities as being strictly linked and dependent on the context and culture that the educator is part of. When I started teaching at Roehampton University as a visiting lecturer, I took my Froebelian identity with me, I delved deeper into understanding the Froebelian concept of unity of self, as being self-aware in relationship with others who belong to

a community of learners, who in turn will transport my teaching and their understanding of it, to a wider context in their day-to-day work with young children. Link always links, Link only link (Tovey, 2020; Bruce, 2021) this central tenet of Froebelian philosophy afforded me the opportunity to understand the parts and implications of my teaching, developing self-awareness through working in relationship with others, thus making the links between the learning happening in the classroom and my students' everyday practice in their jobs with young children (Bruce, 2021). I became extremely aware of this in relation to Froebel's concept of unity, explained from Froebel (1851 in Wasmuth, 2020:63) as the 'divine core'. The concept of unity is a central tenet of Froebelian philosophy, Froebel described it as being formed of every individual who contributes to the whole in eternal interconnectedness, we cannot have the whole without the individual and vice versa (Wasmuth, 2020). I became aware of what was important to the students, including the importance of constructing a nurturing environment for their creativity to flourish, in the same way that mine was allowed to flourish during my BA. I considered both myself and the students as individuals but also as being part of a larger whole and I aimed to stimulate 'unity of feeling, thinking and doing' through creating a nurturing, caring environment where I could guide them to realise their place within the larger whole (Froebel, 1851 in Wasmuth, 2020: 72). I became even more aware of the importance of learning in relationship with others and being flexible about who I present myself to be according to who I am working with, thus starting with the learner in mind and not the content that I must teach. Froebel kept clearly in mind, through his work, the idea of the educational process as a process of interaction, a process, though which the spiritual experience and the ideal values of human life, are mediated and communicated to the individual so that they can be

made sense of in terms of the individual's experience (MacVannel, 1906). Thus, I have understood the concept of unity as fostering interdependence and connection, needing to be considered holistically to be fully achieved (Wasmuth, 2020).

The concept of interconnected and holistic education is not something that I was fortunate enough to experience during my experiences as an early years educator, a few years ago, I sat in a professional learning and development session on singing and I mostly left feeling confused and a bit angry at the way that my time was being used. We spent the whole time being told how to sing and what to sing, but the trainer never asked any of us which songs were important to us, or even if we knew how to sing, she started from her own knowledge without considering where our starting point was as learners, she simply transmitted her knowledge with a one-size-fits-all mentality, expecting every single person in the room to acquire the knowledge transmitted without considering if this was relevant to our ways of learning or experiences of practice. If she tried to find out how we all fitted together in relationship to each other and to our own interests, I would have told her that I wanted to know the theory behind singing in order to make an informed choice next time I was singing the children's favourites Twinkle Twinkle Little Star or The Wheels on the Bus. Instead, all I had to do was sing, like a robot, without knowing why I should sing, or why it is good for children (and adults) to sing, in this case, I saw an example of training being compartmentalised without showing any links to the wider context of working with young children and families.

During my doctoral research I had to position myself in various ways to allow the participants to express their views, telling me what they believed was important about their professional identity construction and the system of professional learning and development in their specific communities, I needed to recognise that choosing

only one role and applying it through the whole investigation was not possible (Walford, 2001). Froebel's principles of 'freedom with guidance' (Froebel, 1974) and starting from where the learner is, were reflected in the ways that I have understood my role in the research. I have shifted positions according to the needs of the research and of the participants, at times more freely and sometimes by capturing the clues that the participants gave me about who they needed me to be in our conversations, my role needed to be fluid in order to tune in with the participants and understand their starting points while allowing them to bring their own thinking and impressions freely (Walford, 2001). In the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, I had to shift between being a confidante helping the Early Childhood educators to work through their beliefs about their professional identities and the current PLD offering, gently encouraging them to delve deeper, while at the same time not being able to reciprocate by sharing my own point of view because I did not want to lead their answers in any specific direction. As a result, the decision was made during the focus groups to leave participants free to discuss issues by working in a group, and by keeping to the schedule of activities and rather than encouraging discussions only with me. Observing their interactions and recording thoughts and feelings expressed by the group participants, made it possible to note what would be helpful to explore further. It felt important to adapt through taking a variety of roles according to the different contexts and situations and more specifically to the Early Childhood Educators. During the focus groups, I decided to leave the participants free to discuss any issues with me, but I also had to encourage them to work in a group, to have rich discussions and stick to the schedule of activities. I have never forced my presence upon them – I have been satisfied to sit at the side observing their interactions and recording interesting thoughts that I wanted to explore further. Choosing only one

‘me’ to be, was not the way forward for this study. I had to be several ‘mes’, adapting to contexts and situations and more specifically to the Early Childhood educators I had in front of me. I see myself as being intricately linked to all aspects of this research –I am an emerging academic and an Early Childhood professional at the same time, I am an Italian living in London, and I have experienced professional learning and development as an Early Childhood educator in the past. In some ways I could say that I share some parts of my identity with the participants of this study. A Froebelian philosophy has helped me to recognise myself as working and thinking in relationship with others, understanding relationships as being essential to form a strong community of practice where learning is supported but not imposed, this has become a fundamental feature of my Froebelian identity and of my interpretation of a Froebelian philosophy. Teaching is a tool to cause thought, it is an activity that is done socially and that is meant to be shared with others, therefore teaching becomes a way to encourage thinking rather than to dictate a method trying to bring those who are learning to come our views, equipping the individual with the fundamental skills to autonomously understanding when and where to ask for help to further the learning and deepen the thinking (Bruce, 2021). Froebel sees the collaboration and relationships between individuals as fundamental to learning allowing the learner to think and work through their understanding without being instructed what to do (Bruce, 2021).

In this thesis a Froebelian lens supports and guides interpretation in professional learning through which I have interpreted professional learning and development (PLD) as a system building on Froebelian principles foregrounded through the spherical law, and life unification of the process of becoming through self-awareness, in relationship with others and from this engaging with the wider world

of people. The interdependence and connectivity of these is of central importance. Being part of the development of a community of practice helps in the articulation of like-mindedness and autonomy fostering companionship (Froebel, 1906) and as a whole new way to thinking about educators based on a set of principles and values. I consider a Froebelian lens to be fundamental in this research to provide an in-depth understanding of current practices and ideas surrounding professional learning and development helping me to produce new ideas that will allow to move forward with more strength and confidence (Tovey, 2017). A Froebelian lens can be defined as looking at Early Childhood educators in a holistic way and not seeing current practice as primarily serving an economic or political agenda. A Froebelian lens should not be mistaken as adding a layer of objectivity, instead it offers me an advantage point from which I can look at the data and using it as a filter, to better conceptualise and design every aspect of this doctoral research study.

A challenge for my positioning in the way that I read, interpreted and presented the key findings for this study was the Covid-19 pandemic that gripped the world from February 2020. The following reflections have been a kind of Pandora's box for me, a source of unexpected distractions that has brought a great deal of tangential thinking to how the recommendations for this study could ever be implemented. Am I advocating for something that will not be possible in practice? During the study I have become more aware that Early Childhood educators want to have more control over professional learning and development directed at them. They want to be left free to request any specific training when and if the need arises and not to be tied so strictly to a schedule of training that is determined in advance and sometimes imposed by management. Taking into consideration that, with this thesis, I am

advocating for more collaboration and face-to-face interaction between educators, I am also aware of the current global pandemic. These unprecedented times have meant that close face-to-face contact has been limited and I am unsure that the suggestions developed in this study could be as effective if done remotely. I believe in the power of human interactions and learning in relationships with others, face-to-face support and conversations between Early Childhood educators to present infinite possibilities in which creativity can be expressed and new understandings that challenge our assumptions can be constructed. Through these processes Early Childhood educators can develop their own ethos and beliefs, upholding their practices critically and constructing strong and assertive professional identities that will enrich the ECEC system. I am a believer in workshop sessions spent on the floor, drawing on big pieces of paper with my colleagues, heads bumping and hands touching, finishing the day with achy rainbow fingers but with a feeling of having made something from nothing. Then I look out, I listen to the news, and I am suddenly not sure if these experiences will be available ever again. How will newly qualified Early Childhood educators construct something from nothing in a group? Will it be the same remotely, drawing on big pieces of paper alone on the floor of our rooms, and then proudly presenting our ideas to a webcam? How will the dynamics of Early childhood education and care settings change and how will the dynamics between groups of Early Childhood educators be different? I guess these are all questions that I am trying to understand. The suggestions in this study can be adapted certainly, but will they be as powerful? This is still a work in progress– maybe I just need to get used to the 'new normal' and the new generation of Early Childhood educators will feel that nothing is missing, while it will be left to us, who trained before the pandemic, to reminisce about rainbow fingers, heads bumping and hands

touching and about how good it felt that our colleagues were (literally) there to catch us if we stumbled.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research contributes to developing a current picture of professional learning and development (PLD) in two localities of practice – Tuscany, Italy and London, UK through a Froebelian lens. It looks at the current PLD offering that Early Childhood educators can access and concentrates on the way in which they can develop and conceptualise their professional identities. The Froebelian philosophy which supports and shapes my thinking is used as a thread for this doctoral thesis through which I have interpreted the evidence collected, designed the study, shaped the findings and interpreted the conclusions. This lens has helped me to see Early Childhood educators in a more holistic way, not seeing current practice as primarily serving an economic or political agenda. In this way, I have become aware of PLD as a system where like-mindedness and autonomy fostering companionship are fundamental principles. Using a Froebelian lens to illuminate and guide every aspect of this research has allowed me to introduce a specific Froebelian perspective on concepts such as a community of practice, used to understand how educators' PLD experiences could be modified in future initiatives to better support their needs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). I have considered both the learner and learning as an ever-evolving activity which is never static and cannot be repeated unchanged in different contexts of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to a Froebelian understanding of the learner and the learning process, these cannot be seen as static or as part of a system of education that sees learning only as a process of transmission and assimilation. It must also be seen as being made of relations and intersecting cultures – in this way learning can grow with the learner without repeating itself in circles through different life periods. One of the most significant

elements of Early Childhood education and care policy is the social and cultural context in which such policies are created. These shape the way that children and families are viewed, as well as society's attitude towards them and how they should behave and be supported (Baldock et al., 2013). My views on the importance of culturally situating practice have been a fundamental stance in this thesis and have defined how the practices observed have been considered.

This research contributes to the identity construction debate by stating that, as Manning-Morton (2006) explains, there is a need to abandon a deficit view of practitioners and their professional identities. Instead, the idea of professional identity should be promoted as ever-changing and not fixed, closely linked to the context of practice in which it develops and on the agency that society believes children to possess. If Early Childhood educators believe children to be vulnerable and incapable, then their conceptualisation of their professional identity will concentrate mainly on custodial and care characteristics, showing personal values centred mainly on keeping children safe, fed, and clean. If, on the other hand, there is a view of children being promoted as capable, strong, and active, the educators' identities will be more holistic – they will see the child as a whole, in need of care and affection but also experiences which stimulate all of their senses and challenge their thinking, promoting development of all of the children's capabilities. Settings, therefore, will become places where children and families can act and interact from an equal standpoint and where Early Childhood educators can thrive and evolve as professionals in the full knowledge that the process of recognition of the self as a professional is evolving constantly – it is never fixed and can include many sub-identities that the individual educator might hold simultaneously in the workplace, as

well as being highly dependent on the context (Davis & Dunn, 2019). In the following chapters I have developed an investigation into the different constructions of PLD for Early Childhood educators through a Froebelian lens

Through this study, I have aimed to reconceptualise the current offering, keeping in mind the importance of PLD being a community effort, undertaken in groups and through peer support, not in isolation and as a mechanical activity. I have considered two different realities of practice and have analysed how these can inform local practice and enrich the educators' knowledge. I believe in the importance of seeing other realities of practice not as a model to follow, but as a way to shine a light on existing practice, considering its strengths and weaknesses and finding ways to support change in a manner that is meaningful to the context while respectful of educators' cultures and beliefs. I have highlighted the importance of considering learning and the learner as ever-evolving and never static, as exemplified in the Froebelian philosophy underpinning this research, which has been used as a thread guiding and informing the entire process of enquiry (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In line with this philosophical underpinning, I have explored the importance of considering learning and the learner as a dynamic dual part of the system of education, where high-quality ECEC services are strictly dependent on the care that is put on the training of Early Childhood educators (European Parliament and Council, C (2008)/C 111/01 in Silva et al., 2018). Furthermore, I have highlighted the many concerns that Early Childhood educators have about their work. These are also echoed by Louis (2020), who says that many Early Childhood educators can feel disempowered and fearful due to the emotional and mental pressures that working with young children entail. Through PLD initiatives, Early Childhood educators must

be supported in gaining confidence and voicing their professional opinions while achieving job satisfaction. As McMullen et al. (2018:16) rightly point out, it is impossible for Early Childhood educators to 'respond quickly, reliably, predictably and appropriately to young children' if they are not being respected as professionals and are worried about their finances and job security. How can Early Childhood educators give their best 'if they are constantly stressed?' The wellbeing of children is dependent on the wellbeing of the Early Childhood educators who care for them (McMullen et al., 2018:16).

1.2 From childcare to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The increasingly varied offer of services for young children and families is seen by Urban (2008) as being crucial for educational success, because services focused on young children are the foundation for concepts such as lifelong learning and social inclusion, leading to a more equitable society. Due to continued attention spanning more than two decades, a significant transformation of the underlying concepts and understanding of the nature of ECEC services has taken place. As a result, their purpose and their targeted audience has received a new focus (Urban, 2015). This continued transformation is also reflected in the change of terminology that has taken place. Before 2010, the term *childcare* was used in European Union policy documents, showing a focus on the individual child's need for care but not education (Urban, 2015). From 2010 onwards, the new term *Early Childhood education and Care* (ECEC) was introduced by the OECD in their first 'Starting Strong' report authored by Bennett in 2001, focusing on the connection between the terms education and care, together with a focus on a critical period of development rather than on the individual child (Urban, 2015; Gibbons, 2007). In this way, Early

Childhood has become a focus ‘rather than just the provision of childcare services’ for individual children and their families (Urban, 2015:295), with the two components ‘care’ and ‘education’ seen as social constructions relying heavily on the context (Gibbons, 2007). The European Union and European commission were slow to adopt the term, but from 2010 it became the accepted term in all European Union documents and policies, however it is important to point out that outside of the European Union and the OECD policy context, many other terms are used, and most importantly, continue to be used (Urban, 2015). ECEC should allow all children the right to use the services and experience the different elements that are integral and fundamental to its culture (Migliorini et al., 2016). Its aims have progressively changed from an exclusively custodial service towards a service based on educational and developmental aims and objectives, including a prominent role in supporting and helping families (Migliorini et al., 2016).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines ECEC as a global term encompassing all arrangements which provide care and education for children under compulsory school age (Hagemann et al., 2011). However, according to Gibbons (2007), the assimilation of care into the education discourse may be problematic because it presupposes care being assimilated into the educational model, rather than letting the concept of care infuse the educational context. A problematic distinction between care and education refers to care as being the sustenance of young children while education refers to the enhancement of children’s learning. This promotes the view of care as an inferior practice to education, running the risk of moving childcare from being a community service to a business, prioritising the balance sheet rather than the wellbeing of children

(Gibbons, 2007; Kilderry, 2006; Campbell-Barr, 2014). The above points of view also show some of the discursive truths created as a way to control educators, using ways to normalise and shape them towards an 'ideal' of being which will favour policy makers and public policy (Campbell-Barr, 2014). As a result, the market has constructed parents as consumers of a service and ECEC providers as producers of a product for sale. This has important implications for the way in which ECEC services and Early Childhood educators are considered by the public (Campbell-Barr, 2014). Children are viewed as resources and objectified as mere economic identities who are important for their potential of becoming 'productive citizens' in the future (Wong, 2007:146). Such a view leads to narrowly focused ECEC systems, aiming to condition children to be compliant to authority, where only the children that are viewed as being able to contribute to society are considered worthwhile. Wong (2007:146) says 'this construct reflects dominant Western liberal/progressive ideals of individuality and freedom' and fails to recognise how political, economic and societal factors affect children's chances to thrive. It is important that the above issues are kept in mind when discussing and defining the concept of ECEC and that the power relations between different groups of women, of whom the workforce is mostly comprised, as well as between women and men, are fully acknowledged and understood (Ailwood, 2008). To conclude, as Penn (2014) discusses, there is no one universal way to define the term ECEC. This is especially important as this study compares two countries and different contexts will have different understandings of the same term. I have understood and used the term ECEC as describing a service for children of working parents as well as a social welfare service for vulnerable children, including both the aspect of early education and the aspect of care for children aged between birth and four years (Penn, 2014; Waters & Payler, 2015).

The term *Early Childhood educator* is used in this enquiry to encompass the range of roles held by adults who are charged, as part of their professional role, with the care and education of young children (Waters & Payler, 2015; Brock, 2006).

1.3 ECEC systems in England and Italy

The ECEC system in England is a hybrid – education administrations are technically responsible for all services, however, in practice, there are different methods of funding and separate regulatory requirements for the different parts of the system (Naumann et al., 2013; Penn, 2014). The UK has largely favoured a private for-profit market in the provision of Early childhood education and care services in the hope of generating larger private investments to meet some pre-determined childcare targets (Penn, 2014; Moss, 2014). The English ECEC system is mainly focused on pre-school education for children aged three to five years old through 'publicly-funded part-time settings, alongside childcare 'specifically focusing on children aged three months to three years of age provided mainly by informal carers or private for-profit companies' (Naumann et al., 2013:30). Overall, the ECEC system in England 'is not yet integrated in terms of continuity of entitlement from birth to school age' and is relatively expensive both for the state and for families when compared to other EU nations (Naumann et al., 2013:41) The present picture in England is a patchwork of fragmented services and policy landscapes with uneven investment in ECEC where children under three years of age are almost exclusively served by private for-profit or voluntary provision (Naumann et al., 2013; Penn, 2014; Moss, 2014; Waters & Payler, 2015; Lightfoot & Frost, 2015).

Day Nursery: Centre-based care for children 0-5 years old

Playgroup/pre-school: Part-time for children 2-4 years old

Nursery class/nursery school: Primary school, part-time 3-4 years old

Reception class: Primary school at 4 years old

Children's Centre: Includes ECEC but also services for families

Childminding: Family day care for children before compulsory schooling age

Home Carers: Informal care provided by family members, friends or nannies

School-age childcare: After school care

Figure 1.1- ECEC services in England from Naumann et al. (2013:31)

In Italy, municipal administrators play a significant role in governing the ECEC system (Lazzari et al., 2013). The Italian Early Childhood education system used to be split under the auspices of different government departments: childcare centres (*Asilo Nido)* for children from three months to three years old under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and pre-schools (*Scuola Dell'Infanzia)* for children aged three to six years under the Ministry of Education (OECD, 2006; Urban et al., 2012; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014; Lazzari et al., 2013; Musatti & Picchio, 2010). This changed in 2015 with a fundamental reform of the ECEC system, the *Buona Scuola* (The Good School) Reform Law 107/2015 (Bove & Cescato, 2017). Part of the reform is dedicated to integrating the ECEC system, in terms of governance and school continuity for children from birth to six, with the compulsory school system, making the Italian ECEC system a unitary one under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, University and Research (Bove & Cescato, 2017; Silva et al., 2018).

For the present investigation, only the *Asili Nido* have been taken into consideration. These charge fees according to family income and the child's frequency of attendance and they are run by local municipalities or subsidised by them in the case of private initiatives (Migliorini et al., 2016). The *Asili Nido* are also responsible for the arrangement and provision of PLD for Early Childhood educators (Falcinelli et al., 2002; Musatti & Picchio, 2010; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). At national level, governmental accountability for the *Asili Nido* lies with the Ministry of Welfare, while the responsibility for their implementation is enacted at regional and local level (Lazzari et al., 2013; Musatti & Picchio, 2010). In an example of blatant differences that characterise regional economies and political administrations in Italy, the expansion of services for young children described above has been heterogeneous and mostly concentrated in the north and centre of the country (Lazzari et al., 2013; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014).

The diffusion and quality of ECEC services in Italy is uneven – public pre-primary schools are present in 18% of Italian municipalities, with 60% of the nurseries concentrated in the north, 27% in the centre and 13% in the south of the country (Silva et al., 2018). An additional important feature of the Italian system's workforce structure is the professional figure of the pedagogic coordinator or *pedagogisti* (Lazzari et al., 2013). The *pedagogisti* have managerial responsibilities to help and support educational practices within the services (Lazzari et al., 2013). Nowadays, the professional role of the *pedagogisti* is widely spread and present in almost all municipalities. This role has evolved and now includes support for educational practices at team level and the promotion of innovation through the organisation of PLD provision across services (Lazzari et al., 2013; Musatti & Picchio, 2010).

Asili Nido: Full-time centre for children 3 to 36 months

Opening Hours: 7.30-9am to 4-6pm

Ratio adult/children 1:6

Parents pay fees according to family income and schedule

Scuola dell'Infanzia: Pre-school provision for children from 3 to 6 years

Opening Hours: 8-9am to 4-4.30pm (10% opened only until noon)

Ratio adult/children 1:25

State pre-schools are free of charge

Figure 1.2 - ECEC service and personnel in Italy from Musatti and Picchio (2010:144)

1.4 Early Childhood teacher education in Italy and England

Education, according to Gothson (2016), must be seen as a commonwealth – a right for all. In this way, education is not exclusively a need of the individual but a fundamental need for a democratic society (Gothson, 2016). In recent years there has been growing pressure in England and Italy to increase the qualifications of ECEC educators, often up to a bachelor's degree in education and teaching. However, this aim comes with a need to invest in the development of 'human capital' (Gibson, 2015; Wong, 2007:145). Several policies have been created in different countries with the aim of 'professionalising' the workforce and building one that is skilled and qualified to achieve certain policy aims (Urban, 2008; Campbell-Barr, 2014). This has contributed to the notion that working in Early Childhood is a legitimate profession with an associated need for professional development of its workforce (Dalli et al., 2012). However, while a bachelor's degree is seen as a desirable qualification by policy makers, and central to increasing the quality of ECEC and

outcomes for children, there is still a reluctance by qualified Early Childhood educators to work in settings. This could suggest that other factors are also fundamental for staff retention, such as adequate pay, professional recognition and parity of status with primary and secondary school teachers, all of which are lacking at the moment in the field (Gibson, 2015).

Early Childhood teacher education entails acquiring mastery of a defined set of knowledge and skills that Early Childhood educators should learn before beginning to work with young children (Dayan, 2010). The overall understanding is that their training should focus not only on the acquisition of theory and practice, but on the relationships between the two (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). In Italy, this has been achieved by providing work placements to be completed within the educators' initial preparation. In this way situated learning is facilitated and ECEC settings play a crucial role in allowing Early Childhood educators to gradually grasp the culture of practice (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Being an Early Childhood educator is subject to many ongoing transformations of its meaning. Politically, teacher education programmes are responsible for ensuring that the care which Early Childhood educators give in settings is consistent with expectations for children's experiences that are centralised and standardised and, at the same time, that they reflect the children's place in local communities (Gibbons, 2007). The emphasis of current teacher education and development programmes seems to be focused on developing a set of competences that Early Childhood educators need to acquire, rather than focusing on supporting a discussion on identity development and what it means to be a professional today (Brock, 2006). Early Childhood educators learn about childcare in isolation from the more 'serious' subjects such as pedagogy and curriculum

implementation, spending less time on childcare-orientated subjects which, in turn, diminishes their experiences in the field (Gibson, 2015). The current paradigm diminishes education to a simple technical process which repeats itself through the individual's career. In this way, the educator could be seen as a 'simulacrum of education and care theory' trained to produce the 'simulacrum of the competent child' (Gibbons, 2007:127). Here, nothing has been considered about the professionals themselves, their beliefs, ideologies, relationships, feelings and passion for the job (Brock, 2006). Early Childhood educators often rely on 'short and mediocre training that restricts their opportunities for social mobility', fortifying the idea that knowledge is a subordinate requirement for the profession and a predilection for working with children is all that is needed (Núñez, 2018:2).

The Early Childhood education and care workforce in England includes a mix of Early Childhood educators who are vocationally qualified and Early Childhood educators who are unqualified (Waters & Payler, 2015). Traditionally, the workforce has been made up of under-qualified and underpaid groups of working-class women who receive minimal in-service training once in work (Vincent & Braun, 2010). Issues around poor pay and conditions have been shown by Manning-Morton (2006) to be one of the reasons why Early Childhood educators feel neglected and undervalued in respect of their colleagues working with older children. As Penn (1995 in Manning-Morton, 2006:43) aptly illustrates, 'the quality of care for children aged two and under is directly linked to pay and conditions of work of staff, and to staff support and training'. England's current statutory framework still allows for 50% of Early Childhood educators to be untrained, with the highest level of

qualification required to lead provision being a two-year college vocational qualification.

However, specifically since 2006, there has been a government-funded effort to increase staff qualifications (Waters & Payler, 2015). There has particularly been a drive to increase graduate leadership – this has raised England's level of qualifications for Early childhood education and care staff, with at least 42% of providers employing a graduate (Waters & Payler, 2015). This drive to increase educators' qualifications has seen vocationally-trained Early Childhood educators undergoing further training to reach graduate level. As a result, the existing professional learning and development offer has had to encompass Early Childhood educators with a wide range of qualifications and skills (Waters & Payler, 2015). Up until 2005, a bachelor's level qualification was required for Early Childhood educators working in state-maintained settings in England, but not for those working at private, voluntary, and independent providers (Oberhuemer, 2012). The 2017 Early childhood education and care Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017:10) states that, in order to work within the Early childhood education and care Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, providers must employ at least one member of staff with a relevant Level 3 childcare qualification and at least half of other staff working with children must hold a Level 2 qualification. The DfE has committed to raising the number of specialist graduates entering the Early childhood education and care workforce. However, a bachelor's degree is not mentioned as essential. Because of the drive to increase educators' qualifications, some significant government investments were made, starting in 2008 when the first Statutory Framework for the EYFS (DCSF, 2008) was published. These, however, started to dwindle. As a

consequence, employers were left with higher salary costs to pay more highly-qualified members of staff, with a rising tendency for the younger and least educated members of staff to be working with babies and toddlers (Powell & Goouch, 2018).

In Italy, there are also great variations in the key features of the workforce, their professional preparation and status (Lazzari et al., 2013; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Early Childhood educators involved in services for children under three are called *educatori* or *educatrici* (educators) and most of them are women (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). The minimum qualification required to practise is an upper secondary school diploma or vocational qualification. Both are valid for accessing university (Lazzari et al., 2013; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Recent regional laws have started to require graduate status through a three or five-year university degree within the Department of Education Sciences. Currently, however, most Early Childhood educators still hold a vocational qualification or a middle school diploma (Lazzari et al., 2013; Migliorini et al., 2016). Early Childhood educators working with children over three years of age are called *insegnanti* (teachers) and a five-year degree in *Scienze della Formazione Primaria* (Educational Studies) is a mandatory requirement, qualifying them for pre-primary and primary school teaching (Lazzari et al., 2013). Early Childhood educators working in services for children aged three to six years old benefit from parity of status with primary school teachers. This does not include Early Childhood educators working in services for children under three. They are not thought of by Early Childhood educators in other sectors as having the same status and their work is considered inferior, involving mostly care and characterised by a profile likened more to babysitters than Early Childhood educators (Lazzari et al., 2013). Early Childhood educators working with the youngest

children, in turn, differentiate their work in ECEC from that of teachers in primary education, the latter being seen as an establishment where the child and the importance of play are wiped out in favour of schoolification. (Guevara, 2020). Different qualification requirements have also brought different working conditions for ECEC Early Childhood educators and a significant gap in professional status across the ECEC sector (Lazzari et al., 2013; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). This has affected the professional relationships between different staff working in the ECEC sector (Lazzari et al., 2013).

The systems being considered are constructed in multiple ways and are highly dependent on the context in which they are created (Wong, 2007). Initial qualifications accepted to enter the profession in England included a bachelor's degree (BA Hons/Level 6) but also vocational qualifications such as the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) and Level 3 Certificate in Childcare and Education (NCFE/Cache). The workforce also includes unqualified Early Childhood educators taking more temporary but, nevertheless, important roles. Even though priority for employment is usually given to Early Childhood educators holding higher qualifications, currently the majority of Early Childhood educators still hold a vocational qualification or a middle school diploma (Lazzari et al., 2013; Migliorini et al., 2016; Bove & Cescato, 2017). The 2017 Early Years Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017:10) states that 'Early Years providers must employ at least one member of staff with a relevant Level 3 childcare qualification and at least 50% of other staff working with children must hold a Level 2 childcare qualification'. Even though a Level 6 (BA) qualification is not openly required by the latest guidance, at least 42% of UK providers report employing a graduate (Waters & Payler, 2015). In Italy, 'Law

Decree no. 65/2017 states that, as from 2019/2020, either a bachelor's degree in Educational Science with a focus on Early Childhood education or a five-year degree in Primary and Pre-primary Education' will become mandatory (Bove & Cescato, 2017:9). In Italy, around 25% of Early Childhood educators currently employed in Early childhood education and care settings are qualified to a degree level (Bove & Cescato, 2017).

According to Guevara (2020:440), the very notion of teacher education in general needs to be considered as a 'profoundly political practice'. However, this aspect is often not given the attention it deserves. Guevara (2020:441) understands teacher education as 'a political space where professionalism is (re)negotiated and constructed within the professional community'. It is here that educators' resistance to stereotypical concepts of professionalism come to the fore. As shown in this section, the characteristics of the ECEC workforce in terms of qualifications are 'split according to whether the work is considered to be care or education' (Naumann et al., 2013:25). Teachers working with older children are mostly qualified to a higher level and benefit from better pay and work conditions, whereas Early Childhood educators working with younger children, deemed to be in the 'care' sector, are qualified to a lower level and suffer worse pay and working conditions. Issues around professionalism will only ever be considered by society if Early Childhood educators are the first to resist the stereotype and make people outside the workforce recognise the issues.

1.5 Why London and San Miniato? Introducing the selected case studies

The two settings that have been selected are important. They are amongst some of the most innovative in regard to training in the creation of training hubs and partnerships with the local community, aimed at building a support net for Early Childhood educators to further develop their knowledge in collaboration with others. This study is organised as a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) aimed at understanding the complex interrelationships between the cases selected (Stake, 1995). The case studies have not been compared – instead they have been treated as independent units with a 'story to tell', as my interest is to explore how each setting functions in its ordinary pursuits (Stake, 1995:1). I aim to illuminate specific features of practice that are relevant and interesting without necessarily stating how one case is more worthy than the other. According to Urban and Dalli (2012), comparing the cases instead of studying their particularities results in them competing against each other, obscuring the messy and unique knowledge which originates from these particularities.

The English case study is an integrated nursery and children's centre in North London, which is situated in a highly diverse borough, with 38% of residents from BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) groups and more than 180 languages spoken (Haringey Borough, 2018). Children between the ages of birth to 17 make up 22% of the borough's total population (Haringey Borough, 2018). The nursery school participating in the present study is based on a New Zealand curriculum philosophy, focused on outdoor and inclusive learning for children (Warmington, 2012). The nursery and children's centre are well integrated within the local community and have become a point of reference for local families who use the

services. The setting prides itself on an ethos of highlighting each person's unique qualities for learning, with a commitment to disseminating practice through in-house training of staff and action research and attendance at local events and conferences. In 2011, the setting became part of a Training Consortium with two other nursery schools in the borough. Through a close strategic partnership with the local authority and other partners, the Training Consortium offers a range of professional learning and development opportunities for the Early childhood education and care workforce.

The Italian case is an example of a competent system (Urban et al. 2011, Urban 2012, Cameron & Moss 2007, Miller 2008). Tuscany was amongst the first Italian regions to have 33.3% of children between three and 36 months enrolled in a nursery setting (Silva et al., 2018). Tuscany is also one of the first Italian regions to legislate on ECEC services for children, from birth to three years of age (Silva et al., 2018). In 2013, the New Regional Law Regulation n.41 clearly defined professional profiles and requirements for pedagogical coordinators working in settings, by making it compulsory to obtain at least a junior degree in Pedagogy or Psychology (Silva et al., 2018). The selected case is an important example of the Tuscan system of Early Childhood education and care services. The municipality leads the Valdarno Inferiore Area, taking responsibility for ECEC legislation, the quality of training offered to educators, authorisation and accreditation procedures of both individual professionals and services, monitoring of the ECEC services network, and more general training of the workforce (Fortunati, 2014). This small municipality has become a hub for new practice and understandings of how ECEC services must work and a driver for change in the whole sector, making it a 'fertile ground' for the

implementation of a modern system of ECEC practices represented by the 'Tuscany Approach' (Catarsi & Fortunati, 2012; Silva et al., 2018:237). This aims to eliminate the divide between care and education so prevalent in many systems of ECEC, favouring an alternative interpretation that sees education and care complementing each other instead of being in conflict (Fortunati & Pucci, 2014). Fundamental to this approach are three strands – the attention to how spaces for children are designed, a flexible curriculum open to different possibilities and the inclusion of families in the design of the experience (Fortunati & Pucci, 2014).

1.6 The study

The aim of this investigation is to explore professional learning and development opportunities, and the process of identity development, for Early Childhood educators. It considers contemporary practices in Tuscany and London in order to contribute to a reconceptualisation of the current PLD offering and create a vision of professional learning and development that is informed and guided by Froebelian philosophy. This study aims to produce a current picture of professional learning and development initiatives both in Tuscany and London, looking anew at what it means to be an Early Childhood educator today while highlighting how a PLD offer designed around their needs has the power to make a significant difference to their professional lives. This research investigates the key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian education systems through a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in two local contexts with a view to highlighting and exploring the complex interrelationships within each.

In order to construct a new understanding around PLD grounded in Froebelian philosophy using two freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003), I posed the following research questions – *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?* with the subsidiary research questions: *What are the key characteristics of professional learning and development 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?*

1.6.1 Strategies of data collection and analysis

I have used a purposive sampling strategy to select both cases for this research. The freestanding case studies include 20 Early Childhood educators in total, ten in London and ten in Italy. The total number of participants for the focus group phase was 13, seven in Italy and six in London. All of the participants work in Early childhood education and care in a variety of roles, ranging from managers to Early Childhood educators with differing levels of experience in directly working with young children. This qualitative research was developed in three phases – a one-to-one semi-structured interview, an activity-based focus group and documentary research. The documentary research was aimed at assisting in framing the issue, exploring the regulations, opportunities for funding and the underpinning conceptualisations around the topic. The semi-structured interviews looked at understanding each interviewee's unique experiences of professional learning and

development and professional identity. Finally, the activity-based focus group was developed from the themes which were identified during the semi-structured interviews and from the documentary research. This aimed to further explore the features of PLD in professional contexts and the ways in which the participants discussed issues of identity, facilitating their co-construction of a new understanding of PLD interpreted through a Froebelian lens. Some key themes of the Froebelian approach have been used as outlined in the Foreword for this thesis, namely the Law of the Sphere, as a way to understanding the development of the self as being strictly linked to the environment in which the self exists and within nature (Liebschner, 2001), and the threefold life unification summarised as Unity, interconnectedness and interdependence, these have been used in relation to the self, seeing each individual connected and a part of a larger whole (Wasmuth, 2020), but also by considering the self as being in a fundamental relationship with others which is always in a process of becoming linked to others in the community and the wider world (Bruce, 2021). The threefold life unification processes have been important in this thesis as highlighting the meaning of everyday life experiences, seeing and searching for Beauty (Tovey, 2017) and understanding knowledge as being linked to educators' everyday realities of practice to be meaningful to the context in which they live and develop. These fundamental tenets of a Froebelian approach are both central to Froebelian approach and also central to the issues explored in this study.

Data from the case studies was analysed using a dynamic approach to classic Grounded Theory, coupled with Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis. Initially I analysed the data from the semi-structured interviews and activity-based focus group through a process of preliminary and advanced coding. This coding strategy allowed

me to identify how the participants discussed issues around their professional identities and their opinions on the current offering of PLD, together with suggestions for change. I used MAXQDA for this phase of data analysis. Audio recordings from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed in their original language. I decided not to translate the material gathered in Italian in its entirety as I did not want to risk any change of meaning. Instead, I chose to only translate some of the material to aid the reader and construct an understanding of the data collected in both contexts.

I used Situational Analysis to look at the collected data from a different angle and expand the focus of attention by considering the contexts of practice in which the participants were situated (Clarke, 2005). Using situational, relational and social worlds/arena maps allowed me to understand the collective sites of social action, as well as capturing the interactions which took place regarding PLD and professional identity construction, and conceptualise them by analysing their relevance.

1.6.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations have permeated the entire study and informed the research from its conception and throughout its conduct (Silverman, 2005). All participants signed consent forms which detailed their right to withdraw at any time during the research and without giving a reason for it. I have fully recognised the participants' entitlement to privacy and ensured that the collected data respects the rules of confidentiality and anonymity. The settings used in this research have not been identified (BERA, 2014). No harm to participants resulted from this research.

1.6.1 A Froebelian approach for the research

Friedrich Froebel (1906) was a pioneer of kindergarten education, concerned with issues regarding world citizenship and respect for the needs of the individual, while holding the concept of community at the forefront of his educational philosophy (Bruce, 1997). Froebel successfully produced an approach to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services and practices that 'fitted into the space between home and school' (Ailwood, 2008:158).

A Froebelian approach relies on several tenets: the Spherical Law has played a central role in this research. Froebel's spherical law takes his starting point in the self, a unique self, made of morality, intellect, emotions and thinking, the development of which is influenced by practical actions, strictly linked to the environment in which the self exists and within nature (Liebschner, 2001). Wasmuth (2020) describes Froebel's law of the sphere as supporting individuals to fulfil their potential through education, it is through the process of education that the law of the sphere will become clear to educators and where the implications of it for everyday practice can be reflected upon so that thinking, feeling and doing, can all be supported in equal and holistic ways. The spherical law also foregrounds the threefold life unification processes. These are known as the Forms of life, another tenet of a Froebelian approach, Forms of beauty and Forms of knowledge (Tovey, 2017), the forms of life are used in making meaning of everyday life experiences this aspect is an important element in this thesis. The second forms involve seeing patterns and this is a fulfilling process, described by the mathematically minded Froebel as seeing and searching for Beauty (Tovey, 2017). The third is engagement with knowledge that connects with the first two processes, also this form is an important feature in this thesis as I examine the knowledge that educators are

acquiring through the professional learning and development courses available to them and I connect this to their everyday practice aiming to make links with the educators' everyday realities of practice. These Froebelian tenets have been fundamental in guiding me to become more self-aware, and to know who I am as a starting point.

Interconnectivity is another fundamental feature of a Froebelian approach, just as the needs of educators are connected to the wellbeing of children, so family and educational life are connected (Bruce 2021), according to a Froebelian approach, children and educators are to be encouraged to recognise their place and connectedness with the family and the life of the community around them so as to understand the vital connections that are part of their existence (Werth, 2019). Connections and relationships to others begins in the family context, but in professional life these are essential too, understanding that knowledge is formed from within, is a fundamental Froebelian principle (Hargreaves et al., 2014 in Smith, 2018) that can support us in understanding how others work and feel about their work and how these feelings are helped and enhanced, expanded and better used by knowing what is important for educators in their specific work contexts. A Froebelian approach argues the importance of self-awareness, and understanding of what matters for self, enables the possibility to support colleagues in developing how they see their work. Self-awareness, relationships with others and a fundamental relationship with the universe to explain the law of the sphere, knowing oneself in all relationships is at the heart of a Froebelian approach because this is the fundamental characteristic of becoming educated according to Froebel (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020).

1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters including this one. In Chapter 1 I introduce a picture of how the current ECEC system was formed and the most important and significant transformations it has undergone up to the present day. I also present the current specific local ECEC systems in the two settings in the UK and Italy. In this chapter I set the scene in which the study takes place and present the research design, research questions guiding this enquiry, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations. Finally, I briefly describe the contents for each chapter to come.

In Chapter 2 I explore the existing research, discussing ECEC systems in both Italy and England with a focus on professional learning and development and the process of identity formation and development for ECEC educators. This includes a reflection and an explanation of the significance of the Froebelian lens which is used to frame this study and several important discourses about the place that emotions have in work with young children, together with definitions of what is intended by PLD and a discussion on the concept of professionalism as having an influence on educators' identity development and construction.

In Chapter 3 I explain and justify the philosophical and methodological assumptions underpinning this research. I describe how the case studies have been selected and constructed as a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in London and Tuscany, aimed at understanding the complex interrelationships within the cases selected (Stake, 1995). I also describe the methods selected to collect data for this

study together with the methods of analysis, including some important ethical and the benefits of the chosen research methodology.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I present the findings for the study and the themes and sub-themes which I have identified in the data in regard to how Early Childhood educators construct identities, the way in which practitioners define the process and how they make sense of who they are in relation to their profession. In this chapter I also present a current picture of PLD in both localities and consider the educators' discourses on emotional labour and how the values they adopt in their practice have shaped and constructed their professional identities over time. The discussions in this chapter have been framed and organised through a Froebelian lens which has provided an additional layer of analysis for the data collected.

In Chapter 6 I discuss the findings of the study, developing several discussions on the importance of PLD for educators' development. I also examine any connections and disconnections which have been identified and explore the ways in which Early Childhood educators exist and evolve in the current system of ECEC. In this chapter I present several reflections through the use of critical questions to the reader. In this way I aim to construct a dialogue between the data and the existing research reviewed for this study, taking into consideration different aspects that I have identified in the case studies constructed around PLD, but also the struggles felt by Early Childhood educators embedded in the complexity of relations and intersections. Using a Froebelian understanding of the learner, I have conceptualised learning and the learner as a dynamic part of a system of education that sees learning

as being made of relationships, and intersecting cultures, a process that grows with the learner without repeating itself in circles (Froebel, 1906).

Finally, Chapter 7 summarises the main achievements for this thesis, including several considerations and reflections on my positioning in the research, including the challenges I faced, and the steps taken, including a reflection on the unprecedented global health crisis in which this thesis was produced. In this chapter I have discussed practical recommendations on how a reconceptualised PLD offering could support diverse and complex professional identities, the importance of caring for the carer's mental wellbeing and a discussion over the necessary inclusion of children's and families' voices in newly-designed PLD for Early childhood education and care educators. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications and recommendations for further study and some final thoughts on the processes of reflexivity and integrity in this research.

Chapter 2 : Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores existing research discussing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems in Italy and England with a focus on professional learning and development (PLD) and the process of identity formation and development among ECEC educators. Critical reflections on these principal themes allowed me to further expand the focus of the discussion to issues of professionalism and the professionalisation of ECEC educators, considering the ethics of love and care involved in their everyday work and examining the current requirements and trends that shape current teacher education policy in England and Italy. For this review of literature I have only selected published texts and peer-reviewed journals issued in the past 30 years as well as some important seminal work on Froebelian philosophy, which I believe is needed to correctly contextualise my philosophical framework for this research.

I begin by reflecting on a definition of the meaning of a Froebelian lens (2.2), as this is a key approach for the research. It is through a Froebelian lens that I aim to reconceptualise the system of professional learning and development in both of the developed case studies. I believe that a reconceptualisation of existing PLD through a Froebelian lens is needed to radically challenge staticity in lifelong education, as what worked in the past will not necessarily work now, in the future, or in any context. I aim at developing and considering the importance of promoting an approach to professional learning and development that is firmly grounded in Froebelian philosophy, values and practices. This is to make sure that the PLD being

offered is in line with modern understandings about how people learn and develop continuously through their lives, with a goal to 'strategically transform education in socially progressive directions' (Urban & Dalli, 2012:166). I will then move on to a section on Learning to Labour with Feelings… Who Cares for Children? (2.3). This discusses the ethics of care and how Early Childhood educators currently use their practice to relate to the children in their care. After this section, the professional learning and development offered in both contexts will be discussed (2.4), and the process of educators' identity. Discourses on vocation, talent and natural dispositions for the job which discuss identity formation for Early Childhood educators (2.5) will be used to analyse whether the concept of professionalism influences educators' identity formation and development (2.5.1). The chapter will end with the presentation of the research questions (2.7).

2.2 **A Froebelian lens**

The present investigation is focused on considering the different constructions of in-service professional learning and development for Early childhood education and care professionals through a Froebelian lens – which can be defined as looking at Early Childhood educators in a holistic way and not seeing current practice as primarily serving an economic or political agenda. In this way, PLD is interpreted as a system building on Froebelian principles of like-mindedness and autonomy fostering companionship. However, this research is not about developing a Froebelian perspective on professional learning and development for Early Childhood educators. The Froebelian perspective is a position, while the empirical position for this study is the professional development of Early Childhood professionals. The Froebelian principles guiding me, specifically a holistic pedagogy

requiring holistically schooled educators, are conceptualised as a vantage point from which I can explore the current provision for PLD, using the Froebelian lens to better explore and reconceptualise what it offers for educators, and their experiences of it. While auditing the evidence to determine whether it should be included, I have asked several critical questions to the literature to understand if and how it would connect with my ideas and support my interpretation of a Froebelian philosophy. I have asked the evidence whether its guiding principles were different from Froebel's, whether they were similar and how, if fundamental differences were highlighted, these could be reconciliated, focussing also on the aspects that I could not reconcile, determining whether these meant that the evidence should not be included or considering if inclusion was still deemed essential. This kind of thinking and interrogating of the evidence, helped to clarify my own position in relation to the Froebelian philosophy guiding the research and forming my Froebelian identity in the process.

The Froebelian lens for this research relies on several tenets of Froebelian philosophy: the Spherical Law plays a central role in this research and in this chapter it has supported a shift in focus from the simple act of knowledge acquisition for educators, to considering their holistic development in order to support their identity development process. Froebel's spherical law takes his starting point in the self, a unique self, made of morality, intellect, emotions and thinking, the development of which is influenced by practical actions, strictly linked to the environment in which the self exists and within nature (Liebschner, 2001). Wasmuth (2020) describes Froebel's law of the sphere as supporting individuals to fulfil their potential through education, it is through the process of education that the law of the sphere will become clear to educators and where the implications of it for everyday practice can

be reflected upon so that thinking, feeling and doing, can all be supported in equal and holistic ways. The spherical law also foregrounds the threefold life unification processes. These are known as the Forms of life, Forms of beauty and Forms of knowledge (Tovey, 2017), the forms of life are used in making meaning of everyday life experiences this aspect is an important element in this thesis. The second forms involve seeing patterns and this is a fulfilling process, described by the mathematically minded Froebel as seeing and searching for Beauty (Tovey, 2017). The third is engagement with knowledge that connects with the first two processes, this form is an important feature in this thesis to examine the knowledge that educators are acquiring through the professional learning and development courses connecting to their everyday practice aiming to make links with the educators' realities. As Bruce (2021) reminds us, Froebelian education requires professionals who are committed and well educated, with intellectual lives that are well fed and developed through being with children and observing their lives. According to Froebel it is not correct to think of the educators' capacities for learning as intensifying as the years of training increase, therefore education should not repeat itself unchanged through the life of the educator, making the Forms of Knowledge an ever-evolving characteristic (Lilley, 1967). It is harmful, according to Froebel, to regard the development and education of people as static and as an isolated process, which merely repeats in different forms thorough the person's life from childhood to adulthood, instead the process of education to be diversified and extended so as to always evolve with the educators' needs at the fore (Froebel in Lilley, 1967).

Interconnectivity is another fundamental feature of Froebelian philosophy which has been used in this research to define what a Froebelian lens entails, and to highlight that just as the needs of educators are connected to the wellbeing of children, so family and educational life are connected (Bruce 2021), children and educators are to be encouraged to recognise their place and connectedness with the family and the life of the community around them so as to understand the vital connections that are part of their existence (Werth, 2019). Connections and relationships to others begins in the family context, but in professional life these are essential too, understanding that knowledge is formed from within, is a fundamental Froebelian principle (Hargreaves et al., 2014 in Smith, 2018) that can support us in understanding how others work and feel about their work and how these feelings are helped and enhanced, expanded and better used by knowing what is important for educators in their specific work contexts. Another example of how the tenet of interconnectivity has been used in this chapter is evident in the discussion on the importance of supplementing theoretical knowledge of educators with first-hand experiences, these are far more powerful, according to Bruce (2021:43) than 'an explanation in words'. As Froebel describes the only way that we can give meaning to theoretical knowledge, is by connecting first-hand experiences to the theory to supplement our observations of the world and stimulate creativity (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). The Froebelian lens for this research argues the importance of self-awareness and understanding of what matters for self. Self-awareness, relationships with others and a fundamental relationship with the universe to explain the law of the sphere, knowing oneself in all relationships is at the heart of the Froebelian lens for this research because this is the fundamental characteristic of becoming educated according to Froebel (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020). Furthermore, Considering the principle of like-mindedness

fostering companionship (Froebel, 1906) has been important to reflect on the ways in which the literature presented in this chapter, exemplifies the importance of regular and meaningful physical and emotional connections between educators, children, and families, something that Froebel thought was fundamental in his principle of interconnectedness. In Froebel's view, people always form relationships, these associations are seen to be formative to the identity of the individual, therefore the educator must always be 'conscious of his own intentions and actions and finely sensitive' to the needs of the children, families and the community as a whole and recognise his power of creating and maintaining relationships for the wellbeing of children and families (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:23).

The Froebelian lens has been used to look at specific concepts and their connection to Froebelian philosophy such as a community of practice, which is used to understand the experiences of Early Childhood educators (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By understanding learning as linked to participation in communities of practice, we can focus on an understanding of the learner and, by the same token, the learning process as an ever-evolving activity, satisfying the Froebelian tenet of interconnectivity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The learner and their learning, according to a Froebelian approach, must never be seen as static or as part of a system of education that regards learning as only being a process of transmission and assimilation – it must be seen as being made of relationships and intersecting cultures. In this way, learning can grow with the learner without repeating itself through different life periods. Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas are an extension of the Froebelian philosophy that forms the core of this research, bringing a new and modern dimension to the Froebelian understanding of the learner. This sees

participation as fundamental for learning, so that Early Childhood educators are ‘both absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice’, thus making the culture of practice theirs, showing interconnectedness, seeing as everything in the life of the educator as being linked (Lave & Wenger, 1991:95).

A further important tenet of Froebelian philosophy used in this thesis is the concept of starting from where the learner is (Bruce, 1997), to supplement reflections on the existing literature on PLD and exploring the aims of the current offer for educators. The main aim of teaching, according to Bruce (2021:15) should be to ‘observe, support, extend’, the principle of starting from where the learner is, has important implications for the way in which Froebel designed his training courses and conceptualised his teaching, presenting a fundamental point to consider when evaluating the literature on PLD and exploring the current offer for educators. The starting points and principles from which the PLD offer is designed are as fundamental as the end results that the PLD offer is trying to achieve. In this chapter, the fundamental Froebelian principle of freedom with guidance has been used to understand whether the current PLD offer allows educators to think for themselves, giving them opportunities to make choices and pursue their own interests while developing their practice further (Tovey, 2020). Froebel’s educational philosophy reflected his belief that human life unfolded naturally from infancy through childhood to adulthood (Ailwood, 2008). Froebel’s idea that learning should start where the learner is, not where the teacher thinks he/she should be (Bruce, 1997), has important implications for the way in which Froebel designed his training courses. These reflected his view that regarding development and education as a static and isolated process is extremely disadvantageous; the process of education should not

repeat itself in different forms through life but grow with the learner (Froebel, 1906). Education, according to Froebel (1906), is a means to stimulate freedom and self-determination in the learner. This will result in the learner's inner will being enhanced and produce a sense of empowerment (Froebel, 1906). In this way Froebel presented an alternative view of the teacher, moving the focus away from teaching and learning by rote, bringing the attention to more intricate ways of learning in community with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Froebel succeeded in joining discourses of motherhood and teacherhood, thus legitimising the important role that women had to play in the education and care of young children and finding a valid position beyond marriage and the home (Ailwood, 2008). Today, the concept of lifelong learning 'highlights the extent to which in our times we share the idea that keeping up to date is necessary in all professions' (Balaguer Felip, 2012:146).

The importance of critically reflective practice in professional development is a principle at the forefront of this research, used to emphasise the latent power of the individual's capacity for learning, together with understanding PLD as being 'sustained by a culture of mutual learning based on participation and shared understandings' (Lazzari et al., 2013:136). Participation in social practice is a crucial element that has the power to promote a view of knowledge acquisition as being highly linked to the social world and the specific context under investigation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

2.3 Learning to labour with feelings. Who cares for children?

‘Labouring with feelings’ can be defined as labour that is ‘divided between the simple dualism of the manual and the mental but may incorporate important emotional work too’ (Hochschild, 1983 in Colley, 2006:16). This aspect of labour also includes managing one’s feelings in order to stimulate particular feelings in other people, an important function according to Hochschild (1983 in Colley, 2006) – contributing to sophisticated social relationships with the only specific characteristic that this kind of emotional labour and management of feelings is openly sold in the market of Early Years.

The field of ECEC services is ‘historically embedded in maternalist discourses of motherhood and the ways in which women’s place in the paid labour market is understood’ (Ailwood, 2008:157; Zembylas et al., 2014). In fact, it was Froebel in 1896 who suggested that the ECEC educator should practise as ‘the mother made conscious’ (Steedman, 1985 in Ailwood, 2008:158). His philosophy of education saw the role of the educator as not replacing mothers in the lives of children, but as complementing their work. The ideas behind the training of young women to become Early Childhood educators were coupled with the discourse that being a good mother was essential for a healthy childhood (Ailwood, 2008). Caring, according to Noddings (2003), is about considering another’s point of view while stepping out of our own personal frame of reference to consider that of other people. Moreover, care is both about practice and the personal disposition of the individual doing the caring (Zembylas et al., 2014). When we care, we consider the other person’s needs, but also their expectations of us acting with special regard for them (Noddings, 2003). This is an incredibly important perspective to consider, specifically when looking at

the ethics of care for Early Childhood educators and young children – the act of care that the children receive will then inform their own experience and future practice in caring for others. According to Page (2011), in the present system, Early Childhood educators must not only consider the ethics of care and education but also the ethics of love when caring for children, as they are all inextricably linked. Experiencing physical close interactions, such as being cuddled and rocked, is an essential practice to help children develop good physical and mental health (Manning-Morton, 2006). Therefore, caring and the act of caring for others is a fundamental issue to consider when thinking about the roles and the resulting shifts and renegotiations taking place for Early Childhood educators today.

In the current system, ECEC can be conceptualised as an entrepreneurial discourse (Campbell-Barr, 2014) – 'love (…) is one of the products for sale, a distinctive (and purchasable) part of the total childcare package', reducing care and love to 'a function of employability and labour market participation' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005:91; Colley, 2006:15). However, according to Page (2011), the concept of love is non-commodifiable. In her study, many contradictions arose when discussing the act of effectively 'paying for love' and considering love as part of the economic transaction between the parent and the childcare provider (Page, 2011:316). Our current reality is that caring responsibilities are assigned to specific groups (often women) allowing the majority groups (often men) to 'simultaneously rely on and disavow the work of these groups' (Zembylas et al., 2014:201). As a result, the caregiving work that less advantaged groups of the population are busy with is often ignored and poorly rewarded, both financially and in status (Zembylas et al., 2014). The current understanding of care, and work involving labour with feelings,

represents a failure from policy makers to understand its nature and neglects the analytical distinction between different forms of care and the skills involved. In this way care is seen as a commodity no different from other services provided by society (Lynch & Walsh, 2009). Lynch and Walsh (2009:51) highlight how two fundamental characteristics of care work, namely mutuality and commitment to each other, ‘cannot be provided for hire as they can only be produced over time in relations of intimacy and engagement’, rendering the very idea of a commodification of love and affection in ECEC impossible.

The above points of view illustrate the fact that nursery work can be exhausting – feelings of stress and exhaustion are often the cause for job withdrawal and lower productivity, leading to serious cases of burnout in the workforce (Elfer et al., 2018; Elfer et al., 2018b). When Early Childhood educators establish close relations with young children, some ‘deeply held personal values and often deeply buried personal experiences’ can resurface. This makes it essential for Early Childhood educators to be supported in how they address these without depriving young children of close personal relationships which are fundamental for their wellbeing (Manning-Morton, 2006:46). Manning-Morton (2006) cautions that if Early Childhood educators are not adequately supported in understanding and valuing their own emotional responses, they have been observed refusing to emotionally engage with young children. This promotes the idea that getting close with children is not professional and is therefore an undesirable trait for an educator.

The ECEC workforce is largely comprised of women, with only about 1-2% across the whole of the UK being male (Naumann et al., 2013). The gendered nature of

Early Childhood educators Early Childhood educators refers to both the overwhelmingly female composition of the workforce and to the type of tasks that the profession involves – often Early Childhood educators perform tasks that are considered to be 'women's work', with a high dependence on emotions such as love and compassion being essential in their professional roles (Núñez, 2018:2; Dalli et al., 2012; Lynch et al., 2009). What Page (2011:313) calls 'the intellectual experience of *pedagogical loving*' is extremely demanding on educators, as it requires building a 'deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal' relationship with each child in the setting. This can lead to anxiety among Early Childhood educators about whether or not attachments are formed in the nursery and how these will be regarded by the children's parents (Elfer, 2012). As a result, emotional labour is usually not valued or acknowledged, as it is seen as arising from a natural disposition rather than being a properly formed and supported skill (Elfer, 2012). Gender is inextricably linked to the Early childhood education and care workforce, creating an intrinsic tension between the role of the caregiver to a child who is alone, and the role of a mother who should be caring for her own children (McGillivray, 2008; Campbell-Barr, 2014). The construction of the Early Childhood educator as a substitute mother is problematic according to Moss (2003 in Miller et al., 2012:50) because it supports the notion that 'women (…) have natural capabilities for caring…if, for example, all women are natural mothers, so all women make natural workers with children…'. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007 in Elfer, 2012:130), discuss how the experience of nursery for young children should be focused on facilitating interactions with peers rather than looking to make 'nursery an attachment-based extension of home'. However, even if according to Woodrow (2012:31) the discourse concerning gender 'problematises the positioning of a

professional discourse within discourses of femininity and motherhood', there is a need for serious consideration from parents, Early Childhood educators and policy makers of children's need for love, and especially to receive love when in day care (Page, 2011). Often the good Early Childhood educator is described as being 'nurturing, caring and committed', required to be seen as a respectable and gentle subject who is altruistic and selfless, who adopts the correct dress code and actively participates in the culture of care that the role requires with natural motherly instincts (Núñez, 2018:2; Ailwood, 2008) and who likes all children in their care (McGillivray, 2008). Often, being maternal, and kind, loving, warm and sensitive, are the only desirable traits for someone working with young children (Brock, 2006; Colley, 2006; McGillivray, 2008). Even though the role of attachment relations in Early childhood education and care settings is contested, a wealth of evidence has advocated for their importance. What must be considered is how Early Childhood educators respond to the complex emotional demands of children's needs for intimate attention (Elfer et al., 2018b).

The educator is instructed to be a 'careful carer' when learning the rules of care (Gibbons, 2007:129). The above constructions, however, imply that working with young children is innate work with only an unsubstantiated relationship to established bodies of knowledge about child development (Vincent & Braun, 2010). These understandings lead to the profession often being associated as appropriate for women who have failed or were marginalised at school, seeing the career as a 'prevention of slipping downwards' rather than an opportunity leading to public recognition or social mobility (Núñez, 2018:2). ECEC becomes the 'new panacea of the masses', filled with redemptive discourses explaining the reasons for wanting to

enter training (Vincent & Braun, 2010). Colley (2006) discusses how some Early Childhood educators see the work as allowing them to gain respectability while 'rescuing themselves and others from the mass of the non-respectable' (Colley, 2006:18). By relying on a redemptive discourse, negative aspects of the job, such as low pay and working conditions coupled with constant emotional demands, can be experienced in a positive way, offering a sense of self-worth and sometimes even superiority. This relies on the view that care is a moral obligation where selflessness and self-sacrifice are fundamental characteristics, making the role a duty, not a job (Lynch & Lyons, 2009; Colley, 2006). Furthermore, gendered social norms determining the work of Early Childhood educators in ECEC create a sense of accountability to the work which can sometimes be used to outweigh its monetary reward, with caregivers being so dedicated to others that they won't pay attention to whether their own needs are cared for or not (Lynch et al., 2009; Zembylas et al., 2014). Because Early Childhood is considered as 'women's work', it is automatically positioned as not being important enough to be properly remunerated and valued, to be given the status it deserves and be considered a 'real profession' (Dalli et al., 2012; Dalli, 2010). Brock (2006) reports that most Early Childhood educators mention gaining an enormous personal satisfaction from their work. They enjoy it and are clear about the specific rewards they gain – they have a passion for education for its own sake and for enthusing others, and these beliefs permeate their lives. Similarly, Ailwood (2008) explains that many women take pride in their identities as teachers/mothers who have a natural calling to the job. However, it is important to acknowledge that others have attempted to refuse the above discourse, pointing out that extensive education, qualifications and professionalism must not be undermined

by maternalistic discourses heightening the struggle for professional status (Ailwood, 2008).

A key part of childcare work is to learn to manage both the educators' emotions and those of the children as a way to learn to 'labour with feeling' (Vincent & Braun, 2010: 205). Managing emotions is traditionally understood as a female role, where Early Childhood educators are expected to suppress certain feelings to produce desired responses in others while developing a genuine carer/child form of attachment as an expectation (Vincent & Braun, 2010). In this way, emotions must be authentic but also controlled, carefully warm and restrained to produce a meticulously balanced 'detached attachment' with the children in the educators' care (Vincent & Braun, 2010:205). In this instance, Colley (2006) argues that women 'face much higher costs' in working with emotions than men, due to the fact that the display of emotions is an integral expectation of the stereotyped female nature of ECEC work. Participants in Dalli's (2010) research said that having 'respect' and being 'fair' were part of how they expressed their pedagogical orientation. Early Childhood educators emphasised respect for the child's individuality and developing trust and caring relationships with the children in the setting, showing how warmth and attunement with young children or an attitude of 'being present' are fundamental qualities that define the pedagogy guiding Early Childhood educators.

Tensions arise from the contradictions between a workforce that is seen as caring, maternal and gendered and one that is seen as professional, highly educated and highly trained (McGillivray, 2008). Further tensions also arise between an ECEC system that considers care as being the opposite of learning, but also sees it as

impossible that the two concepts can exist simultaneously (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). At the same time, assumptions have always been made that being a mother is one of the only necessary characteristics to work in ECEC, supporting the stereotype that caring for children is an easy job that can be done by anyone who likes children or feels inclined towards caring for them (McGillivray, 2008). Early Childhood educators have constantly worked 'within, through and sometimes against' stereotypical maternalist discourses that are embedded in the public's definition of their work (Ailwood, 2008:158). However, in most cases, emotional labour is conducted with pleasure and regarded not as a skill that can be learned and factored in practice, but as an innate characteristic of work that involves caring for others (Colley, 2006).

A strategy to support Early Childhood educators through the emotional demands of the job and manage conscious and unconscious anxieties that could affect their practice has been proposed by Elfer (2012; Elfer et al., 2018) in the form of Word Discussion (WD). This is a model of professional reflection in the form of a forum, which Early Childhood educators can utilise to talk about their feelings without being criticised or blamed for not being able to manage stress associated with the emotional demands of the job (Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018b). WD is a form of ongoing structured professional reflection which focuses on the relation between emotions and professional practice, eliciting discussion of the educator's own thoughts in relation to their colleagues' thoughts and aimed at considering emotions evoked at work and their bearing on the web of relations with children, families and other Early Childhood educators (Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018, Elfer et al., 2018b). This strategy could be integrated in the current PLD offer to provide a bridge

between theory and practice in the setting, relieving and containing stress and anxiety resulting from social interactions with children in everyday practice. It can also be used as a 'space for the voices' of Early Childhood educators as 'a key constituency in a wider democratic discussion about nursery relationship policy, in particular societies and cultural contexts' (Elfer, 2012:132). An additional strategy proposed by Louis (2020) to help Early Childhood educators feel supported and understand that they are not alone in their struggles, fears and feelings is Work Group Supervision. This strategy is based on Early Childhood educators discussing their observations of children and focuses on how they interpret and understand them. The discussions, which are developed in a group supported by a facilitator, are intended to promote dialogue between Early Childhood educators from the safety of peer-to-peer support, where they can voice any issues they are struggling with (Louis, 2020). Hopkins (1988 in Louis, 2020) shows that giving Early Childhood educators a non-threatening way to express and understand their feelings about specific aspects of practice allows the development of a deeper understanding of themselves as professionals and of their practice ethos.

By viewing settings for young children as spaces that offer children and adults alike a wide range of possibilities to engage together, then education is one of the many possibilities for engagement. The concept of care is conceptualised in an ethical way, undertaken within the setting and infusing all practices and relationships between children and adults, but also between different group of adults in the setting, irrespective of whether they are parents or educators. In this way, an ethic of care becomes a choice, a dimension that can be present in different degrees, informing all aspects of 'moral life' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005:92). In this way, we can see care as a

‘social, political, and emotional practice’, where its existence is dependent on the context, therefore taking away the stereotypical view that care is a particular gender or race’s responsibility – caring can become more of a collective act rather than a dyadic relationship between the caregiver and the dependent care receiver (Zembylas et al., 2014:203).

2.4 Professional learning and development (PLD)

The general concept of professional learning and development (PLD) is that it consists of a varied range of experiences and activities that directly benefit the individual, group or setting, contributing to the quality of practice (Day, 1999). This is an ongoing process requiring continuous discussion and mediation with Early Childhood educators in order to best address their specific needs in their day-to-day practice (Lazzari et al., 2013). Within the activities, Early Childhood educators review, renew and extend their commitment as agents in the system of early education, developing knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence to enhance their professional thinking and planning (Day, 1999). Friedman et al. (2000:4) expand the definition of professional development beyond teaching, defining it as ‘the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner's life’.

This is also echoed by Migliorini et al. (2016). Their research findings stress the importance of continuously updating educators’ knowledge on issues related to their practice, considering positive working relationships with families, children and partners as needing constant training and practice. The pivotal role played by PLD in

supporting practitioners' competencies and contributing to the overall quality of ECEC practices has been widely recognised in international policy debates (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). There is now a need to invite and support dialogue during PLD initiatives so that the process of discussion is given the power to change learners and society into one that praises diversity as a tool for learning (Gothson, 2016). Achieving a conceptualisation of the educator who is 'democratic and reflective', who values dialogue, critical thinking and practising with an open mind, can be done through education and PLD (Dalli et al., 2012:8).

Results from the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011) show that successful PLD programmes combine mutual interplay of theory and practice with a focus on sustaining the development of reflective competences among educators. Which are deemed to be at the core of Early Childhood professionalism, together with being based on a vision of the competent child (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014; Peeters, 2012). Through close collaboration between training institutions and ECEC services, a reciprocal relationship is built that sustains practitioners to make some important critical reflections on their practice (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Currently, however, understanding around learning is based on a system where the learner internalises knowledge in various ways, usually by transmission or experience, and assimilates the learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way, learning is constructed as an 'unproblematic' process relying on simple transmission and assimilation. However, Lave and Wenger (1991) present an alternative to this construction by proposing learning as participation in communities of practice. Learning is then seen from a holistic point of view, not only regarding the processes of transmission and assimilation presented above. This understanding creates a critical ecology for a

profession that identifies as a learning community, moving from questioning individual practices to questioning the system as a whole (Urban & Dalli, 2012). This alternative view acknowledges the relational interdependency between the educator and the community, seeing learning and thinking as being made of relations among people when learning, their views arising from a world that is socially and culturally structured (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Viewed from Lave and Wenger's (1991) perspective, learning takes place in relation to a system which values relations among people, which both define and are defined by the learner. Thus, learning is seen as allowing the person to construct many different identities according to the possibilities enabled by the systems of relations.

Interestingly, the Italian word used to define professional learning and development is *formazione* which, in contrast with the English word *training*, refers to the idea of gradually 'taking shape', thus encouraging a process of professional and personal growth (Lazzari et al., 2013). ECEC settings in Italy have a long tradition of providing PLD for their Early Childhood educators and significant investment is focused on it. It aims to provide Early Childhood educators with opportunities that stimulate a constant discussion of their roles in the settings and in society, according to the rapidly changing needs of families and sociocultural conditions. ECEC staff are granted a generous amount of paid working hours for attending PLD initiatives, meetings and parents' evenings (Migliorini et al., 2016; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). This concept relies on Early Childhood educators engaging in critical reflection on their everyday practice to evaluate what is needed from their PLD experiences in order to provide them with meaningful knowledge (Lazzari et al., 2013). In-service training is used mainly to translate theoretical knowledge acquired during the initial

preparation to the educational practice in settings (Musatti & Picchio, 2010). In Italy, local governments mainly use research agencies and universities to provide in-service training for educators. This kind of training stimulates the emergence of action research done in collaboration with other researchers, Early Childhood educators and pedagogical coordinators as a result of discussions stimulated by the training (Musatti & Picchio, 2010; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). In this way, PLD is understood as fundamental to improve the competences of educators, focusing not only on typical competences of care, but also on the ability of settings to respond to the specific needs of children and families (Migliorini et al., 2016; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Thus, in this context of practice, PLD sessions are used to construct an 'educational alliance between practitioners and families' (Migliorini et al., 2016:168).

Colmer et al. (2014) illustrate how in educational contexts professional development has predominantly been offered as a one-off workshop type session, without considering that different activities might require more time to be explored and assimilated (Burgess et al., 2010; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). In the PLD described by Colmer et al. (2014), the mere transmission of theoretical knowledge to Early Childhood educators makes it more of a passive process with a teacher-learner dyadic relationship at the core, where the Early Childhood educators are the recipient of training instead of being actively involved in it (Lazzari et al., 2013). Historically in the Italian context, PLD was mainly done on the job, through up to 200 hours of allocated non-contact hours within working agreements (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). The responsibility for the professional development of Early Childhood educators is devolved to different institutions – a national agency called

Servizio Nazionale per la Scuola Materna is responsible for teachers working in state-maintained pre-schools, local authorities are responsible for Early Childhood educators working with children 0-3 in municipal services, and private providers are responsible for their own provision of PLD (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Furthermore, PLD experiences often presented to Early Childhood educators are concentrated on the individual – the role of teachers is for the most part played by external experts and lecturers where recipients have a passive role (Hmelak, 2010). However, as Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, 'learning is never a simple process of transfer or assimilation: learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in one another'. As a result, a learning curriculum should be grounded in practice and opportunities for active engagement about what there is to be learned, so that engaging in practice, rather than being a passive recipient of it, can become a condition for meaningful learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Professional development (Fekonja et al., 2002 in Hmelak, 2010) is intended to upgrade existing knowledge and strengthen the professional competences of educators, together with making Early Childhood educators aware of new and alternative forms of work and thinking in children's development. In addition, the idea underlying the design of PLD for Early Childhood educators must be to give a central role to the teacher, as participation is a key element in generating and assimilating new knowledge (Balaguer Felip, 2012). The content and delivery of professional development should enable Early Childhood educators to build on their existing knowledge and expertise and include space for critical reflection, not just on their role as Early Childhood educators but on the social and political context in which they work (Osgood, 2008; Urban & Dalli, 2012). This is an important focus,

as educators' practice and professional identities are a result of stances they take as part of a service which is situated in the public sphere and that, therefore, is inevitably an ethical and political practice (Balaguer Felip, 2012). One of the focuses of PLD should be to make Early Childhood educators confident and comfortable enough to question presupposed norms, opening the way for innovation and seeing Early Childhood educators as active participants, not passive recipients of information (Lazzari et al., 2013; Urban & Dalli, 2012). Time and space for sharing is of pivotal importance for PLD (Louis, 2020). Appleby and Pilkington (2014) propose the creation of learning spaces where the professional can engage in thinking and reflective processes. Peer-initiated learning spaces can be utilised to support critical professional perspectives and learning – it is more than simple knowledge acquisition or a 'one-off' training approach (Appleby & Pilkington, 2014). Peer group support can also be used to enhance the educators' self-understanding and self-development, opening the door for discussions that consider their emotional reactions to the work, reflecting on possible assumptions and receiving support through sharing with a peer (Louis, 2020).

Current experiences with professional learning and development are mixed. A study conducted by Lightfoot and Frost (2015) illustrates how English Early Childhood educators demonstrate a commitment to making a difference in their profession but also express frustration with some forms of PLD available to them. Participants in the study state that the courses did not address their professional development and were a 'wasted morning' (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015:414). For many educators, PLD is still seen as a one-off event or short courses, often away from school, of variable quality and relevance, delivered by a range of external providers (Bentarage, 2005;

Lightfoot & Frost, 2015; Migliorini et al., 2016; Hmelak, 2010; OECD, 2006; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Burchinal et al., 2002; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2006; NAEYC, 2005). These findings from England are validated by international findings of the CoRe project – short-term courses that are not rooted in coherent policies are questionable at least and contribute little or nothing to improving the competence of learners (Urban et al, 2011). This raises questions about whether Early Childhood educators need to participate in courses to further their knowledge or if they are just box-ticking exercises to conform with current policy (Urban et al, 2011). Appleby and Pilkington (2014) also arrive at similar conclusions, illustrating how one-off learning sessions have a limited capacity to transfer knowledge into wider long-term practice. One-off professional development training that seemed to have little connection to the reality of their practice was perceived more as a staff obligation to fulfil organisational requirements. Hmelak (2010) sees a range of benefits when PLD courses are provided internally within each setting, such as an increased focus on educators' participation in the planning process and the production of versatile knowledge that accommodates different skills and styles of learning, values and beliefs. These views are also echoed by Lazzari et al. (2013), where centre-based PLD activities relevant to concrete matters arising from day-to-day practice make a significant contribution to staff qualification.

Importantly, Gibbons (2007) argues for professional development to be the way in which Early Childhood educators receive appropriate learning in order to better understand the distinctions between education and care that are present in his/her work profile, so that they can reconcile the two parts that make an informed and educated educator. Future PLD initiatives, according to Migliorini et al. (2016),

could focus on helping Early Childhood educators to further define their professional roles, without underestimating the effects of a sound emotional and relational competence. In her study, Early Childhood educators found it difficult to plan potential future development for their roles, expressing feelings of inadequacy in regard to their professional proficiency, possibly because the work included many challenges that must be learned on site and could not be anticipated. In addition, Balaguer Felip (2012) suggests that when planning for PLD initiatives, understanding of the current system will be aided by asking questions such as who should decide what training to develop, how Early Childhood educators can participate more fully in the training design, and which modes training should be in, such as individually or in a team. Time seems to be an essential characteristic of a reform of current PLD initiatives. According to Balaguer Felip (2012), time must be given to Early Childhood educators to train within their working hours and time is essential for sustaining group work between practitioners and enhancing cohesion. Finally, time is needed for educators' research activities to explore the realities of their practice further and benefit a common project within the setting. Managers and leaders also play an important role – according to Louis (2020) they have the responsibility to show to Early Childhood educators that PLD matters. By creating an atmosphere where Early Childhood educators feel empowered to express their opinions and difficulties, they contribute towards developing trusting relationships in the context of practice (Louis, 2020). New ventures trying to propose an alternative model of PLD should focus, according to Balaguer Felip (2012), on understanding how the courses will reflect and represent current ideas about childhood and the place of the child in society, the importance of Early Years, not as a period of preparation for later schooling but as a standalone period of development, and the

implications of the current PLD offering for parity between Early Childhood educators Early Childhood educators and other teachers. Therefore, initial qualifications for Early Childhood educators must be considered so that PLD provision can be diversified according to the educators' profiles and competences (Migliorini et al., 2016). The challenges that a reconceptualisation of PLD pose cannot be developed by the individual educator – change requires cohesion between teams who value Early childhood education and care as an important field in which to invest and provide support for educators' professionalism and lifelong learning (Balaguer Felip, 2012). In this way change becomes a ripple. It involves not only individuals and settings but extends to reconsidering the administrative capacity of the whole education authority which positively uses change to sustain both settings and individuals (Balaguer Felip, 2012).

2.5 Early Childhood Educators' identity: Discourses of vocation, talent and natural dispositions for the job

Because identities are created within the specific contexts in which different discourses live, we need to understand identity formation, as produced in specific historical and institutional sites, within specific discursive formations and practices. The process of identity development involves knowing who we are and knowing who we are seen to be by others, looking at individuals as members of collectives. Jenkins (2008) sees identity as a process, as something we do, rather than something that we possess. Similarly, Epstein (1978) pictures identity development as a continuous flow in the life of the individual. Epstein (1978) also sees other elements as being closely linked to the topic of identity development, such as a person's social status and their role in society, including how certain roles are articulated within a

close social and political system. Erikson (1968 in Epstein, 1978) and McGillivray (2008) see the achievement of identity as a process that is in continuous development throughout a person's life. When exploring identity formation, the main focus is with processes that sit at the core of the individual's development and how it is shaped by communal culture (Epstein, 1978). Finally, Sachs (1999 in Brindley, 2015) and Jenkins (2008) state that identity cannot be considered as a fixed 'thing'. It is instead a negotiated, open and ambiguous concept resulting from culturally-influenced meanings and their power-laden enactment; identity is not immutable or primordial, it is utterly sociocultural in its origins and it is somewhat negotiable and flexible (Jenkins, 2008; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

Specifically talking about Early Childhood educators, the notion of professional identity and what it means to be a 'good practitioner' has become a focus of public policies internationally (Núñez, 2018). The process of developing a professional identity for Early Childhood educators has been an ongoing and contested debate for several years (Manning-Morton, 2006). Early Childhood educators construct a social identity deriving from their membership of a specific social group made up of other Early Childhood educators (Lynch et al., 2012). The constructs around what it means to be an ECEC educator have the power of influencing the career choices made by those who want to work with young children. Individuals can either consider themselves as having the desired qualities to be an educator working with young children or strive to possess those qualities and develop them through training (McGillivray, 2008). Early Childhood educators have an important professional role in a democratic development of the context of practice, with education being the key element that makes democracy work in practice (Gothson, 2016). Early Childhood

educators, according to Campbell-Barr (2014), often identify themselves using a predominantly romantic child discourse built on the concept that children need nurturing and protection – as a result, ECEC provision is designed to provide safeguarding and protection in a nurturing atmosphere for young children. Professional self-identity is mostly constructed in the most immediate contexts in which educators participate –their actions in their everyday roles underpin their concepts of self-identity and professionalism (Urban & Dalli, 2012). The way practitioners see themselves is also influenced by gender issues and regulations within the field, as well as the ways in which communities and families consider Early Childhood educators and see their role as being relevant or not (Urban & Dalli, 2012). Further tensions about the status of workers arise between Early Childhood educators who decide to join the workforce because of their caring qualities and those who have aspirations for management and leadership roles, the tensions being emphasised by discourses on the professionalism and preparation of Early Childhood educators (McGillivray, 2008).

The participants included in this research have a wide range of qualifications, roles and responsibilities, giving a varied picture of how Early Childhood educators negotiate and perceive their professional identities. This is important in order to provide recommendations for policy and practice that are meaningful to their experiences with PLD (Lazzari, Picchio & Musatti, 2013). Educators' identities are often dependent on maintaining 'appropriate' appearances. Thus, dressing norms, together with behavioural expectations and evidence of scientifically-acquired knowledge, become important symbolic actions that serve to legitimise the profession to the public (Vincent & Braun, 2010; Colley, 2006). Professional identity

is not an individualistic matter, but rather, Bernstein claims, ‘the result of embedding a career in a collective base’ (2000:66). Results from Bridley’s study (2015) reveal that identity and professionalism are made of a spectrum of beliefs. Núñez (2018) also reports that Early Childhood educators in Chile found it difficult to verbally explain the meaning of their identities as Early Childhood professionals. This was also articulated by Brock (2006), who found that educators’ identity is not just about meeting learning goals but includes their attitudes to the work, their ideologies and passion for the job. Núñez (2018) and Brock’s (2006) findings could explain the reason why, historically, it has been difficult to define the nature of professional identities for Early Childhood educators.

Interestingly, Núñez (2018) says that Early Childhood educators often describe the reasons and beliefs behind their choice of role as being a ‘vocation’ or having a ‘talent’ (McGillivray, 2008) and regard these as the most important qualities for an Early Childhood educator. Similarly, Gibson (2015) describes how Early Childhood educators sometimes refer to themselves as heroines, whose job is to rescue the children in their care, ensuring that their needs are met, with almost childlike qualities themselves (McGillivray, 2008). Furthermore, Ailwood (2008:158) states that women are considered the ‘high priestesses of the cult of childhood’. She uses this rather powerful expression to illustrate how a religious ideal, which can be linked to what Núñez (2018) calls ‘vocation’ and McGillivray (2008) calls ‘talent’, has embedded itself in the history of how Early Childhood educators think about and consider their identities and the reasons why they decided to work in the field. In this way, teaching is understood as a way of life, a commitment of the educator contributing to the idea that the teaching practice has moral dimensions relying on a

calling that will support the educator during adversities and difficulties (Núñez, 2018). Seen from this point of view, Early Childhood educators don't rely on their specifically-acquired pedagogical knowledge and skills consider themselves good Early Childhood educators – rather, they rely on a vocation, which is a gift that can't be learned or developed. Often, they are idealised as 'loving children and having endless patience', even if this is not representative of the entirety of the workforce (Elfer, 2012:130). Furthermore, Gibson (2015) adds that the Early Childhood educators in her research could also be described as 'Heroic Victims' because their work is deemed to be important but not understood or valued by society in the way it deserves. These discourses bring an understanding of the profiles of Early Childhood educators as being divided between a carer, more like a mother figure, and the educator, requiring superior skills to those of the carer, a critical researcher co-constructing relationship with the child and the wider social and political context (Gibbons, 2007). In practice, Early Childhood educators are required to continuously adjust their behaviour to the different people with whom they interact during the day and are expected to provide differentiated answers to parents' implicit and explicit requests (Musatti & Picchio, 2010). These discourses reinforce the perception of a redemptive workforce, offering children no more than protection and safety, seeing practitioners as nice people with a strong desire to work with children (McGillivray, 2008; Vincent & Braun, 2010).

The concept of having a vocation is 'an act of giving one's heart, one's life and love to the other, in this case the most vulnerable' (Núñez, 2018:7). The vocation acts as a way to regulate the educators' behaviours and their identities of themselves. Following a calling means to be selfless and committed to the children and the

workplace, positioning themselves as humble servants of society (Núñez, 2018). Acting on a vocation rather than on learned and developed skills and knowledge places the Early Childhood educators in a position of tension regarding their professional status. On the one hand they follow what it means to be a good and conscientious worker – on the other, these understandings undermine their professional position, allowing exploitation of their work and difficult working conditions that have to be faced with optimism, strength and passion (Núñez, 2018). This can result in a sense of well-being and contentment with one's actions without any concrete rewards such as heightened status or pay conditions (Vincent & Braun, 2010). In the same way, ECEC educators' identities can be described as both heroes and victims. While the heroic educator supports the image of a child deserving of respect and recognition in the most crucial years of their lives, the victim educator supports the view that young children, because they are free and innocent, are not yet in need of education or a teacher, rendering the profession unimportant and not needed (Gibson, 2015). To balance the different identities – from a more 'religious' idea of the educator as having a vocation and a natural and innate disposition to work with children, to the heroic victim educator who is both important and not needed – a critical engagement with policy is fundamental so that Early Childhood educators are prepared to respond to the latest directions and strategies in the field and are confident in discussing their multiple identities in their practice (Gibson, 2015). In this way, caring for young children generates a dependence upon them to enhance the educators' sense of worth. This leads to a construction of educators' identities as being heavily reliant on the powerlessness of others – in other words, the dependency of children on the Early Childhood educators makes them feel they are capable and having a real impact (Vincent & Braun, 2010).

2.5.1 The concept of professionalism as having an influence in educators' identity formation

Crook (2008) illustrates how professionalism is essentially an historical construct, ever-changing in its definition and traits, culturally and socially situated (Guevara, 2020). Professionalism is not something that is possessed by the individual educator but a result of interactions and meaning-making activities within the community of practice (Dalli & Urban, 2010). According to Simpson (2010), to define professionalism we need to pay attention to individuals' dispositions and orientations as to what it means to be a professional, as this cannot be defined in universalistic and fixed terms or through a list of qualities and attributes (Dalli, Miller & Urban, 2012 in Guevara, 2020). In turn, the professional identity of Early Childhood educators is a negotiated, shifting and ambiguous entity mediated by personal experience and beliefs about what it means to be an educator and what the individual's aspirations are for the future (Francis, 2001). Both the notion of professionalism and educators' professional identity are closely linked and inseparable parts of what it means to act professionally in ECEC (Guevara, 2020). In more specific terms, Malaguzzi says teachers' professionalism needs 'to be formed – or rather re-formed – within in-service professional development. As [human] intelligence is strengthened by using it, in the same way teachers' capabilities are developed through everyday practice. Teachers do feel the urgent need to enhance their competence by turning facts into thoughts, thoughts into reflections, reflections into transformative thoughts and practices' (Malaguzzi 1993: 86).

Educators' professionalism is enhanced, according to Lazzari et al. (2013), through organised discussions between Early Childhood educators which, in turn, increase

their capability to deal with everyday problems. The notion of professionalism is understood as being socially constructed and highly dependent on context (Grey, 2011). A sense of professionalism is often found in educators' everyday practices and actions, and less so in outside measures such as qualifications or a professional title, which might suggest that being professional for Early Childhood educators Early Childhood educators means 'linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical (Van Manen, 1977 in Urban & Dalli, 2012:160). In the ECEC context, an ideal of professionalism has been promoted that regards some areas of educators' expertise as being more valuable than others, contributing to alienating Early Childhood educators from the teaching profession even more (Manning-Morton, 2006). This ideal has contributed to the distancing of physical and emotional care from a workforce which is pushed to consider academic knowledge as being superior to practice, therefore privileging an approach that is more rooted in educative practices and devaluing 'the art of caregiving' (Lally et al., 1997 in Manning-Morton, 2006).

Robson (2006) rightly argues that professionalism is a socially constructed and contested term with different meanings at different times attached by different people. Being a professional provides the individual and the community that belongs to the same field with a collective identity that has agreed values, recognised responsibilities and acceptable or required behaviour in the field (Appleby, Pilkington, 2014). Defining what it means to act professionally as an Early Childhood educator is a complex endeavour, as the everyday reality of Early Childhood educators is far from being the same in every context. Thus, professionalism in Early childhood education and care is defined within a

professional community (Guevara, 2020). Furthermore, professionalism for Early Childhood educators is mainly defined in relation to their role in the setting. The educators' everyday practice and their title is central to how most of them define their professionalism, the immediacy of their roles underpinning their image of themselves as professionals (Urban & Dalli, 2012). Gender and class are also important features of the Early Childhood field that are sometimes in tension with the notion of professionalism and they may have a role to play in such low public recognition of the profession (Núñez, 2018). This understanding subjugates Early Childhood educators to the power of a patriarchal society determining how they should be educated and how they should behave and work in order to be recognised as a 'good educator' (Núñez, 2018).

In a study conducted by Smedley and Hoskins (2015), professionalism is understood to be made up of passion together with practical accomplishments. Professionalism is not only defined by skills and qualifications but also the relationships between the Early Childhood educators and the professional community and their work environments (Guevara, 2020). The previous statements show a focus on ability and experience when trying to define what professionalism means for Early Childhood educators (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2010). In this instance, ability can be understood as being gained during teacher qualification courses and experience as a way to measure ability through the practical knowledge acquired in the field (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2010). However, Gibbons (2007) advocates for an understanding of professionalism as being linked to learned qualifications, in order to construct a different discourse around educators' professionalism than the present one. Findings from a study by Ongari and Molina (1995 in Musatti & Picchio, 2010) show that

when Early Childhood educators were asked to represent their ideas of their professional roles and identities, their responses included the educational dimension of their work but also other varied responses that were strictly linked to the culture of Early Childhood in the region in which they worked. Some specific values were dependent on individual characteristics, highlighting the complex nature of Early Childhood educators' understandings and beliefs around professionalism. For example, Early Childhood educators participating in Dalli's (2010) research saw their professional roles as being linked to the community, as they were the ones who were tasked with making links with different agencies and services according to their understanding of the cues that children and families were giving them during everyday practice.

Smedley and Hoskins (2015:14) make a recommendation for a 'critical approach to professionalism (...) which enacts Early Childhood educators as interpreters rather than implementers of the statutory curriculum'. Brock (2006) also sees the notion of being a professional as not just about holding the appropriate qualifications, but also about educators' values, ideologies and beliefs, including their personal code of ethics when working and their capacities of interpreting the best strategies to work with children and families. In Guevara's study (2020: 443), the notion of professionalism was used to resist 'banalisation, schoolification' and a view of work in the Early childhood education and care as a mechanical and standardised activity. Guevara's findings (2020) show that Early Childhood educators tend to refuse definitions of their professional identities which see them as nothing more than glorified baby-sitters whose work is a simple task requiring little professional preparation and denies the profession's educational function. Early Childhood

educators also seem to resist the use of contents and practices used in primary education because they feel that this risks devaluing the importance of kindergarten education and Early childhood education and care as being important in their own right and not as preparation for further study (Guevara, 2020). These practices of resistance, together with reflections and discussions provided during teachers' education, have allowed, according to Guevara (2020), Early Childhood educators to discuss and define what it means to act professionally and what does not. The Early Childhood educators assert that education is a respectful, significant and intentional practice while resisting elements that they perceive as de-professionalising their roles.

In her research, Brock (2006) developed seven dimensions of professionalism to illustrate her belief that being a professional is made up of a cluster of related concepts. Brock (2006) divides her understandings of what makes a professional between knowledge, education and training, skills, autonomy (including standards and the educator's voice in public policy), values, ethics (including the educators' code of conduct, confidentiality and trustworthiness) and reward (including the educators' social status, power and the concept of vocation). Early Childhood educators participating in Karila and Kino's research (2012) saw their professionalism as being rooted in the ability to maintain a balance between being removed from a situation and being emotionally available to the children. This notion included being able to control one's mood by relying on learned skills and experience which dictate the educators' everyday actions.

While professionalisation of the workforce can create space for debate, reconstruction and reconceptualisation of what it means to be an Early Childhood educator, there is also a danger of silencing the voices of agents who do not want to take part in the professionalising discourse (Gibbons, 2007). Early Childhood educators must be strong enough to protect their always developing professional values against pervasive social undervaluing of their profession (Adams, 2010). Therefore, when looking to regulate and qualify carers, it is important to take their voices into consideration so as not to silence the very people who are immersed in the reality of practice (Gibbons, 2007). In his way, the educators' passion will be the essence of their professionalism and will be supported by active discussions around it during PLD sessions (Brock, 2006). These discussions can then be used to build a system that listens to the voices of educators, allowing policy makers to acquire their thoughts on what they believe to be the professional aspects included in their role (Brock, 2006).

2.6 The place of the family and parental involvement

This section will discuss the importance of including parents in the life of early years settings, although this research does not include parents and carers in its sample for participants, I believe the points below to be important to consider, to create a complete picture of the systems involved in the lives of young children. Parental involvement and the sharing of educational aims is internationally recognised as being extremely beneficial and as having a positive effect on children's development (Hargreaves et al., 2014), as Athey (2007:209) states 'the effect of participation can be profound'. The school, according to Froebel, must be clearly connected to the life of the family, highlighting his principles of unity and the importance of strong communities forming around the child (Froebel in Lilley, 1967) in order to create 'carefully cultivated' 'explorations of shared meaning' between

parents and educators (Athey, 2007:202-203). According to Froebel, parents need encouragement and support as much as children do, if the system aims to empower them (Bruce, 2021). Parents and families that are a part of the early years system must be respected and valued so that the school can achieve one of Froebel's aims, to be united with the life of home and family (Bruce, 2021). Importantly, a strong participation of parents in the life of the setting, can be of great benefit to educators as it contributes to 'their own pedagogy (becoming) more conscious and explicit' (Athey, 2007: 209). The Froebelian principle of link, always link, is evident in the way that parents are considered interconnected with children, who are also interconnected with the communities and the wider world as a result (Bruce, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecological systems emphasizes that family, school and community contexts are the foundations for children's development, in these systems the families' and educators' support influence children's learning of the different contexts (Ma et al., 2016). Athey (2007:202) also fund that as parents and educators start to work together, also the physical environment starts to change and grow as the interactions mature, becoming a place where differing points of view and ideas were considered and reflected upon, in this way, the initial differences between parents and educators also became less evident because finding a shared agreement on how to best work for children became the priority instead, fostering reciprocity between educators and parents, resulting in the boundaries between the 'professionals and non-professionals' to change and develop in different ways. The social context of early learning as explained by Hargreaves et al. et al. (2014), is fundamental, children's cognitive development must be interpreted within a network of social relationships and cultural influences in which parents and carers are very much the protagonists in setting the scene and the expectations for the children.

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979 in Greenfield, 2014:71) provides an example of the unique characteristics that can influence the systems closer to the child, these include ‘culture, society, family, and their relationships with children and their own parents’. Ma’s et al. (2016) understanding of the importance of the different systems influencing children’s development also has strong link with Froebel, who believed that the family is where some important development for children takes place, such as the very understanding of the values of life (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Educational policy and practice must promote parental involvement in children’s education, and this should be developed and formed continuously (Ma et al., 2016). Athey (2007:201) explains that often parents are included in the life of their children’s settings with narrowly prescriptive tasks, this shows a reluctance to let parents in but this is due to a ‘lack of previous shared experiences typical of disparate groups of people who start to work together’ without a clear and evident shared understanding between the aims of parents and educators.

Developing shared areas of agreement with parents directed to help individual children is an important strategy to ensure that families are involved in every aspect of the life of the early years setting children are included in (Tovey, 2017). Results from the Froebel Fellowship project showed that there are some fundamental trust issues to be worked out between parents and educators were parents felt that educators did not take into consideration their observations of the children at home, concluding that in this case, the divide between school and home was still too wide and that further strategies needed to be developed with the aim of closing this gap and including parents in the day-to-day life of the setting including the administration of it (Hargreaves et al. et al., 2014). Greenfield (2012) explains that

collaboration between parents and educators is fundamental to promote trust and an atmosphere of mutual respect where listening and accepting alternative points of view is encouraged; on the other hand, when there is a disconnection between the setting and the home cultures, children will ultimately be disadvantaged as their learning experience will be supported differently at home and in the setting. According to Maude et al. (2009:38), professional development for educators must also focus on developing skills and knowledge of working with diverse families so that they can include and value input from all parents and carers in the setting, 'achieving a level of competence which continues to grow over time and with experience'. Parents and carers, according to Greenfield (2014), could be inadvertently discouraged from working in a full partnership with the educators in the setting, assumptions that educators and parents might make about each other can create fundamental barriers which will make creating an equal relationship even more difficult. The effects of parents' participation and inclusion can be profound (Athey, 1990 in Bruce, 2021) as co-operation between educators and families can greatly influence children's intellectual development (Liebschner, 2001). Schools and early years settings are, according to a Froebelian understanding, an integral part of the community, for this reason, it is important that educators build a relationship with and between parents bringing a sense of belonging and a feeling of being supported to the system (Bruce 2021). It is also fundamental, according to Ma et al. (2016:775) to share power between families and schools creating a system that values open communication, healthy relationships and mutual respect also acknowledging the inevitable differences between different people with the result of creating 'a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighbourhood can't slip through'.

Not only children benefit from a setting which includes parents as active participants, parents and educators also benefit from the inclusion and collaboration. Some parents welcome the chance to develop themselves and offer their expertise and talents to the settings, resulting in feeling respected and valued (Draper and Wheeler, 2010). Furthermore, when settings plan to include parents in the life of the setting, this could reduce parental isolation and help to support a network of parents and carers within the nursery (Draper and Wheeler, 2010). Educators will gain different views of family lives to broaden their perspectives and will understand the life of children outside the setting in a more holistic way. According to Ma et al. (2016), there is a difference between families' overall involvement with children and the systems which influence their development, and only involving parents in children's education, it is recommended that parents and carers' inclusion must be considered from a holistic point of view instead. Only including parents and carers in a compartmentalised way with carefully restricted activities shows a failure to include parents and carers in the governance of the setting, Froebel explain how interconnectedness between the different systems where the child exist is fundamental in his words: 'the world within us and the world without are related in their modes of development' (in Lilley, 1967:8). His principle of unity exemplified how 'all things remain in connection' (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:14), he believed that humans should be in a relationship with everything else connected in a chain of being, showing the importance of inner unity and interdependence so that the community could be represented through the action of children, parents, carers, and educators.

As children's success is positively influenced by family background and parental involvement in the educational setting (Nalls et al., 2009), so educators' professional and personal development can benefit greatly from the involvement of families and carers in every aspect of the life of the setting, including professional learning and development. Promoting parents' involvement, according to Froebel, highlights his fundamental principle of living for and with children in practice, by promoting family life the early years setting also educates the nation (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Studies looking at parental involvement in early years settings, show that parents welcome the perspectives of well-trained educators, but they would also like to have more involvement in the life of the setting and in the organization of the services so as to become more equal partners (Draper and Wheeler, 2010). Furthermore, as parents and carers play a leadership role in shaping up educational systems, family engagement and partnering with parents to discuss approaches and goals to achieve for children is an incredibly powerful way to ensure that educators' knowledge links with the children's needs and realities at home (Ma et al., 2016). 'A successful partnership involves a two-way flow of information, and flexibility and responsiveness are vital' (Draper and Wheeler, 2010:185). According to Draper and Wheeler (2010) it is crucial to have a close working relationship with parents and carers, opportunities for involvement in the governance and development of the settings can enrich the offer for children as well as making educators more aware of parents' values and opinions. The inclusion of all parents in the life of the setting is never going to be easy, educators must work to gain an understanding of the many different cultures and practices that are relevant to the parents and carers in their setting and then aim to form relationships with parents that demonstrate trust and consideration for differing ideas and practices (Greenfield, 2014).

2.7 Summary

The advantage of using a Froebelian lens as a position to interpret present practice concerning the system of PLD offered to Early Childhood educators and settings in London and San Miniato, Italy, has allowed me to look at the educators' role as being independent from a political or economic agenda. Using selected Froebelian principles as a guide, I have positioned myself at a point in which I can explore the current PLD offer in both contexts and reconceptualise it, aiming to build on Wenger and Lave's (1991) concept of a community of practice seeing the learning process as an ever-evolving activity which continues through a person's life.

This chapter reveals a complex and ever-changing ECEC system strictly dependent on the geographical and political context. During the chapter, practitioners' roles evolved from being apolitical and independent from market trends to being highly dependent on political commitments made by governments on the development of the Early Childhood system and the role of its educators. This major evolution depended on the fact that, in the ECEC sector, there is a need for policies designed to ensure the necessary institutional conditions to support and further educators' passion and commitment to their jobs (Núñez, 2018). The research for this chapter painted a picture of an English system mainly focused on pre-school education, with fragmented provision for children under three years of age. The ECEC system in Italy favours state-maintained settings for children under three years of age and is characterised by blatant regional variations in terms of service provision and funding, no statutory curriculum guidance and no bodies tasked with inspections of services.

Overall, the two systems have revealed a reality for Early Childhood educators that is filled with uncertainty and ambiguity as a result of rapid changes in policies and the absence of an established sense of identity in the workforce (McGillivray, 2008). This, coupled with a lack of voice in policy discussions, runs the risks of new policies being imposed on Early Childhood educators without endorsement from the educators themselves, fuelling even more conflicts about the kind of workforce needed in Early childhood education and care (McGillivray, 2008; Dalli et al., 2012).

Furthermore, growing pressure to increase the qualifications of Early Childhood educators with the aim of professionalising the workforce points to the need for PLD (Dalli et al., 2012). However, professionals in the sector feel that adequate pay, recognition and parity of status with primary schools are the main priorities to increase professionalisation of the workforce. Professional training currently focuses on the acquisition of theory, but there is a need for training to also focus on practice and the relationships between practice and theory in order to make PLD more meaningful to Early Childhood educators and more linked to their everyday working reality (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Rather than just developing a set of pre-determined skills, training should focus on supporting discussions over what it means to be a professional in the educators' contexts (Brock, 2006). The current split of professional profiles according to whether Early childhood education and care work is considered care or education must be avoided in a system that is looking to reconceptualise PLD practices for Early Childhood educators (Naumann et al., 2013).

The current debates over what it means to be an Early Childhood educator have brought me to consider the conception of the Early Childhood educators based

around maternalistic conceptions of ECEC service and the profiles of the workforce. As mentioned earlier, Colley says that in the current ECEC market 'love (…) is one of the products for sale, a distinctive (and purchasable) part of the total childcare package' (Colley, 2006:15). It is no surprise that intrinsic tensions have been generated when a workforce largely made of women, seen as caring, maternal and gendered and with tasks often involving emotions and attitudes of love and compassion which are regarded as essential to their professional love (Núñez, 2018; Dalli et al., 2012), comes up against a view that the role of an educator should be professional, highly educated and highly trained (McGillivray, 2008). Often, being maternal, kind and loving are the only traits required from someone who works with young children (Brock, 2006; Colley, 2006; McGillivray, 2008). I have been brought to consider the following questions – is work with young children an innate role? Where would this understanding leave the need for PLD and development of the workforce?

This chapter has also considered the important role that PLD plays in contributing to the overall quality of ECEC provision (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014). Future PLD initiatives should focus on establishing a dialogue between Early childhood education and care settings and PLD providers to discuss how ECEC settings can be best supported to promote a conceptualisation of the educator as a 'democratic and reflective' practitioner, who values dialogue, critical thinking and practices with an open mind (Dalli et al., 2012:8). Creating a learning community can provide Early Childhood educators with a shared professional identity, leading to a heightened feeling of belonging to a specific learning community that moves from questioning the individual's practices to questioning the system's competences and

responsibilities as a whole (Urban & Dalli, 2012). Furthermore, according to the research reviewed for this chapter, new ventures should focus on several key elements, such as building an understanding of how the courses can benefit the particular political and geographical context in which they take place, and which ideas about childhood and the place of the child in society they convene (Balaguer Felip, 2012). PLD must be diversified according to the educators' profiles and competences (Migliorini et al., 2016). The process of implementing change in the current system of PLD requires cohesion between every part of the services forming the ECEC system. Finally, change must be seen as a ripple, involving not only individuals and settings but considering the administrative capacity of the whole education authority as well (Balaguer Felip, 2012).

To summarise, this chapter has shown several fundamental strands that are important in the formulation of the research questions in section 2.9. The Froebelian lens used to interpret present practice concerning PLD offered to Early Childhood educators and settings both in London and San Miniato has helped me to come to several reflections. Firstly, a gap in the research about the general question 'Does training matter?' still needs to be explored (Fukkink & Lont, 2007). Núñez (2018) and McGillivray (2008) highlight a discourse in their findings about educators' professional competence being intrinsically linked to their vocation as a prerequisite for their job choice, or as a redemptive figure rescuing children and ensuring that their needs are met (Gibson, 2015). Most of the Early Childhood educators who participated in the study by Núñez (2018) struggled with the socially unappreciated nature of their jobs, which they regarded as the most difficult aspect of their roles. They also saw it as one of the most important factors for the low salaries and

precarious working conditions that they experience. These issues are constant in the narratives of educators. However, despite feeling angry and upset about the underestimation of their roles, their demands were always juxtaposed with a sense of guilt about demanding better pay and arguments about the wellbeing of the children being paramount in their roles (Núñez, 2018). In this way, their demands for better job conditions are seen as jeopardising their vocation as Early Childhood educators (Núñez, 2018). This discourse threatens the professional role of Early Childhood educators, trivialising their work and dismissing their skills as a gift that cannot be learned. As a result, they feel deprofessionalised, putting their psychological and emotional wellbeing at risk (Núñez, 2018).

When looking to reconceptualise understandings of educators' learning, and the factors which influence the process of their identity formation, the voices of the very people who are immersed in the reality of everyday practice are fundamental and should not be silenced (Gibbons, 2007). In this way, the educators' passion will be the essence of their professionalism supported by PLD activities that consider both the individual and the significance of the context in which practice takes place. Building on a system that constantly listens to what Early Childhood educators have to say therefore allows for policy changes to be closely linked to everyday practice in ECEC settings. Importantly, it can be informed by a Froebelian lens – to date there is limited research considering a Froebelian approach to PLD.

2.8 Research questions

The review of literature presented in this chapter has formed the conceptual landscape from which the following research questions have arisen. The process of

their formulation and a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings supporting this study will be presented with more details in the next chapter detailing the methodology.

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:

1. What are the key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian education systems?
2. What is the current picture of professional learning and development in Tuscany and London?
3. What are the features of professional learning and development in professional contexts?
4. How do participants define, perceive and make sense of their professional identities?

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As stated in the introduction, this study will consider the different constructions of in-service professional learning and development (PLD) for Early Childhood educators by exploring contemporary practices in Tuscany and London. These, together with notions of educators' identities and understandings of professionalism in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the municipality of San Miniato in Tuscany, Italy, and in the borough of Haringey, London, will be used to identify ways of reconceptualising PLD strategies and practices. In this chapter I will demonstrate the methodological and ethical considerations which led to the design of this study. In sections 1.1 and 1.2 I explore the underlying philosophies and principles behind the study and the rationale for collecting data. I then discuss the research design in section 1.4, together with ethical issues and the role of the researcher in sections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2. Section 1.6 considers the study's research questions. I then present the research site and research participants with a specific focus on the chosen sampling strategy in section 1.5 and the methods of data collection selected in section 1.7. Finally, I briefly present the data analysis method used for this study in section 1.8.

3.2 A Froebelian lens to guide the methodology

In the methodology chapter the Froebelian lens has supported the design of this study and provided links with different theoretical perspectives that have supported the research. I have considered a postmodern approach from a Froebelian lens, by combining a postmodern approach with Froebelian philosophy I have made sure to link the research design with a specific social and historical context, so to recognise

the full worth of people's work and see them as active builders of the physical and social reality around them (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991 in Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013). Froebel (1906) states that regarding development and education as a static and isolated process is extremely detrimental. He maintains that the process of education should not repeat itself in different forms throughout a person's life but should grow with the learner and be strictly linked with the context that the learner is in, as well as the capacities of the learner (Froebel, 1906). Similarly, postmodernists believe that it is crucial to situate the social reality under exploration, and the voices of the participants, within their social, political and moral context in order to avoid getting lost in a cycle of eternal relativity (Packwood & Sikes, 1996). Froebel (1906) understood that holistic pedagogy requires holistically educated educators – their training is seen as a tool to enable them to construct their own individual identities. With his holistic philosophy, Froebel can be seen as a 'pre-modernist'. He rejected the strict dualism, which results in a narrowing of knowledge and a separation of culture from life, that is at the heart of modernism (Lyotard, 1993). Froebel believed that all knowledge is made from experience and that we cannot develop knowledge of things that we do not experience with our senses (MacVannel, 1906). Links with Froebel's thinking can be made with a postmodernist approach to research which situates the narratives of the individual and understands that knowledge is shifting and situated. This contributes to the shaping of identity in people and allows for usually silent meta-narratives to be heard. It also allows for presumed truths and realities to be made problematic (Packwood & Sikes, 1996; Dickens & Fontana, 1994). I have adopted selected Froebelian principles, such as like-mindedness and autonomy fostering companionship, as a vantage point from which I can explore current provision for professional learning and development (PLD). These are

combined with a postmodernist paradigm which sees social movements as being situational and strictly related to the geographical context – where centralised powers disappear and where individuals are seen as social beings constructed by the different systems in which they reside (Grbich, 2004).

Furthermore, the Froebelian lens have been used to develop a dynamic approach to Grounded Theory, my dynamic understanding of Grounded Theory represents a natural elaboration of previous Grounded Theory strategies that takes more modern approaches to data collection and analysis into consideration. I interpret my approach to Grounded Theory as dynamic because I have not generated any new theory through systematic testing of hypotheses. Instead, I have produced 'theory' through exploring interpretations of the socially and culturally constructed reality inspired by the participants' views and opinions. In this way, the selected Froebelian principles have been used as a lens to look at the data collected. Instead of starting with several hypotheses to test, three Froebelian principles are the basis of the research design. The dynamic understanding of classic Grounded Theory recognises that there is no established knowledge from society, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintain, but accepts that people are active agents in their lives rather than passive beings in receipt of social norms, giving the participants some control over the situation being studied (Charmaz, 2006).

Moreover, the Froebelian lens have also been used to understand and analyse the ethics linked to my role as a researcher, during the interviews and focus groups I have used the fundamental principle of freedom with guidance as exemplified by Froebel, my aim was to help the educators to think and to take action for themselves,

quietly guiding and supporting the participants' thinking on key issues around their professional learning and identity development (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). During the focus groups I have carefully observed the situation to understand what the participants needed of me, my role was developed according to the needs of the group in front of me and not decided at priori, observation has guided everything I have done and how I have presented myself to the participants, so to start from where the educators were, the semi-structured nature of both the focus groups and the interviews presented a plan devised before the data collection took place, however during the data collection I have been careful to rely on the educators' starting point on issues around professional learning and the construction of identity and built on those with the interview questions and opportunities for discussions in the focus groups.

3.3 Theoretical perspective

A central issue when discussing the epistemological position for this study is whether I consider the study of the social world to be in need of a different logic and research procedure from the ones applied in the natural sciences, in order to better represent the 'distinctiveness of humans as against the natural order' (Bryman, 2012:28). I maintain a research theoretical perspective to be culturally based. The overarching perspective for this study, which has accommodated a constructivist qualitative paradigm, is a postmodernist approach. I maintain that the world is made of multi-layered realities, the understanding of which is strongly affected by the context in which actions occur (Newby, 2014).

A postmodern perspective views all knowledge as socially and culturally shaped knowledge is inferred to be produced and consumed by specific groups of people

who are. According to postmodern understandings, any claims of knowledge or experiences as being universal are simplistic at best (Clarke, 2005). By the same token, questions of social ontology are engaged with the nature of social entities (Bryman, 2012). The central question here is to understand how social entities are and should be considered (Bryman, 2012). My ontological position in this research is oriented towards the constructivist view. I therefore understand social phenomena and their meanings to be socially constructed and ever-changing according to the social actors which actively influence a particular reality (Bryman, 2012). In this way, I have placed a particular focus on the human experience, highlighting the understanding that experience creates meaning (Newby, 2014). It is my position that social interactions construct and influence social phenomena, contributing to the constant state of revision that these singularities experience (Bryman, 2012). The belief that culture can be seen as an external reality that limits people, and on which humans have no influence, is not possible for me. I understand reality and culture to be in a constant state of construction and reconstruction by social actors (Bryman, 2012).

According to Packwood and Sikes (1996), removing the voice of the researcher from the research perpetuates the metaphor that the process must follow a prescribed recipe, with the belief that the research results represent the absolute truth. Postmodernism, according to Clarke (2005:6), is an 'ongoing array of possibilities' used to address global conditions while also acknowledging the unintelligibility of the world. As a result of the positions for this research previously discussed, the chosen paradigm is a qualitative one centred on interpretation (Stake, 1995). Investigating conceptualisations of professional learning, the policies and practices

underpinned by these conceptualisations, and the individual and collective transformations resulting in these praxes, required a methodological approach capable of dealing with complex structures and interdependencies of diverse data sources. Creating a better understanding (Schwandt, 2004) of this complexity lends itself to a qualitative constructive methodology based on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). My aim is not to use measurements from outcomes scales to show the productivity and effectiveness of the criteria chosen a priori in order to make the case for this research. Instead, I aim to highlight the quality of the issues under investigation by depicting them with a narrative description using interpretive assertions about the cases being explored (Stake, 1995).

Kuhn (1962) brings a very important and critical perspective to the issues surrounding scientific rationality. According to Kuhn (1962), it is counter-productive to consider a paradigm as an object for replication. We must look instead to a paradigm as an object to stimulate further articulation under some predefined boundaries and conditions (Kuhn, 1962). The main function of a paradigm is to provide the researcher with some definite and specific criteria from which to understand rationality (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). A paradigm can function independently even if an agreement over rationalisation hasn't been reached (Kuhn, 1962). It is one of Kuhn's (1962) main arguments that science has become too rigid. He views paradigms as providing the research community with pluralism and freedom to work on different problems in different ways – not as containing a rigid set of rules that can be used to discredit different paradigms to prove that there can only be one that correctly represents reality and science (Gibson & Hartman, 2014).

Because of these views, Kuhn (1962 in Gibson & Hartman, 2014) maintains that a researcher's choice of a specific paradigm is not only a rational one, but social, political and psychological factors are essential in determining how a researcher sees and understands the reality to be investigated. Glaser and Strauss (1967) were heavily influenced by Kuhn's (1962) views. They maintain that a qualitative methodology is the most efficient way to design a study in sociology. This is because it is suited to data that looks for the structural conditions of a situation, searching for consequences, processes and norms in a specific area of study. This is a position I strongly agree with. I believe that qualitative research celebrates the interaction of the researcher with the issue being researched, as well as the researcher's communication with the participants of the study (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, qualitative research recognises that inaccuracies and advocacies are an integral part of its design, in this way preventing the presumption of sanitation (Stake, 1995). These are the reasons why I have chosen a qualitative approach. But, in line with Kuhn's (1962) thinking, I will not use a qualitative approach to discredit a quantitative approach. I simply believe that a qualitative approach is the most suited paradigm for this specific research design. As Kuhn (1962) explains, dwelling for too long on philosophical assumptions behind a research design is unproductive, as there is no consensus, and there never will be in my view, about philosophical issues in research. The researcher should just accept the specific philosophical issues behind a research design and 'go on doing what he or she does best – collecting and analysing data' (Gibson & Hartman, 2014:16).

This enquiry is situated in the interpretivist paradigm, using a qualitative approach aimed at understanding how the participants perceive their social and material

circumstances surrounding the issue under investigation (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). While a quantitative approach tends to treat unique cases as an error, I see and represent the uniqueness and peculiarity of individuals in the contexts under research as being an important feature (Stake, 1995). Critics of the qualitative approach are concerned that it is too subjective, mainly because the researcher both collects data and interprets it (Rajendran, 2001). By the same token, qualitative research is mainly focused on establishing an 'empathetic understanding for the reader', using specific descriptions to convey the experiences of the sample being researched (Stake, 1995: 39). Despite the criticism that qualitative research is too subjective, it can convey messages to an intended audience that go well beyond the mere listing of figures and variables.

In qualitative enquiries, the researcher tends to have a personal contact with the people and the situation being studied – however, from a positivist paradigm perspective, subjectivity is the antithesis of scientific enquiry (Rajendran, 2001). Treating individualities which come from specific cases under exploration as being important will emphasise the particularity of that case for readers (Stake, 1995). In qualitative enquiries, data collection is not an end in itself – analysis, interpretation and presentation of the findings are the culminating activities (Rajendran, 2001). The most striking difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that quantitative research looks for causes while a qualitative approach searches for happenings, to try and understand human experiences as a chronology rather than merely being a succession of cause and effect (Stake,1995). Quantitative researchers are interested in finding explanations for the phenomena being investigated and exercising control over their research sample, while I want to develop an

understanding of the complex interrelationships between the research participants and the topic being explored (Stake, 1995).

3.4 Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis as dynamic approaches to research

According to Clarke (2005:29), 'Grounded Theory methodology is itself grounded epistemologically and ontologically in symbolic interactionist theory'. It is considered by Holton and Walsh (2017:4) as an 'integrative research paradigm for discovery', therefore being an epistemological and ontological flexible methodology. One of the main characteristics of Grounded Theory is that comparisons between the data are made in a more exploratory and creative way, not to test specific hypotheses (Gibson & Hartman, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser sees the main aim of Grounded Theory as the generation of probability statements about the relationship between concepts – in other words, it is primarily to produce hypotheses developed from empirical data and he sees the researcher as being separate from the object of study (Glaser, 1998; Holton & Walsh, 2017). This idea is diametrically opposed to how I have designed this research and it is why I will follow a Straussian approach to Grounded Theory instead. Grounded Theory, as envisaged by Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), follows certain qualitative features, such as recognising the researcher's influence and seeing reality as being socially constructed (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Instead of striving to be a researcher without preconceived professional ideas, interested only in consistently testing hypotheses in order to generate theory, I will use my preconceived experiences and knowledge of the field to determine the main focus for this study, see research as being subjective and

closely bound to the values of the context, and focus on induction and discovery (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

My central focal point in this research is to explore the social life and experiences of Early Childhood educators in Italy and England, specifically relating to existing professional development practices, with a view to extending these by reconceptualising current realities through a Froebelian lens. When Glaser and Strauss created Grounded Theory, they understood that the method's specific characteristics would need to evolve as time passes (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). This is precisely what my dynamic understanding of Grounded Theory represents – a natural elaboration of previous Grounded Theory strategies that takes more modern approaches to data collection and analysis into consideration. I interpret my approach to Grounded Theory as dynamic because I have not generated any new theory through systematic testing of hypotheses. Instead I have produced 'theory' through exploring interpretations of the socially and culturally constructed reality inspired by the participants' views and opinions. In this way, Froebelian principles have been used as a lens to look at the data collected. Instead of starting with several hypotheses to test, three Froebelian principles are the basis of the research design:

1. A holistic pedagogy requires holistically educated educators – their training is seen as a tool to enable them to construct their own individual identities (Froebel, 1906)
2. All knowledge is made from experience and we cannot develop knowledge of things that we cannot experience with our senses (MacVannel, 1906)
3. Like-mindedness and autonomy fosters companionship (Froebel, 1906)

The dynamic understanding of classic Grounded Theory recognises that there is no established knowledge from society, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintain, but accepts that people are active agents in their lives rather than passive beings in receipt of social norms, giving the participants some control over the situation being studied (Charmaz, 2006). This can be clearly linked to the constructivist ontology used in this research – it expands the concept that knowledge is constructed by the agent in the context, to considering the agents themselves as being active beings in charge of determining their lives. However, according to Clarke (2005:14), in most Grounded Theory research the aim of giving the participants an 'unmediated voice' can be problematic. All reports in research have to be considered as being deeply mediated by the researcher, as have my own in this investigation by my understanding of the data and of the context under investigation and striving to represent the perspectives of participants risks narrowing the representations of their own perspectives. I have instead concentrated, as Clarke (2005) suggests, on analysing my own interpretations and thinking about how I have given a voice to the different perspectives in the collected data, who and what was omitted or silenced in this process, and why. In keeping with a dynamic approach to classic Grounded Theory, all data collection methods in this study are interrelated and connected. The use of documentary analysis allowed me to construct semi-structured interview schedules for the participants, which, in turn, have supported me in building activities for the focus groups.

My approach to Grounded Theory is supplemented by Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis, an alternative approach deeply rooted in the constructivist paradigm.

Situational Analysis will be fully discussed in section 3.9 of this chapter, but I would like to introduce its conceptual foundations here, making the case for a Situational Analysis approach in this investigation. According to Clarke (2005), most of the methodological advances in qualitative research since postmodernism have been too focused on representing the voices of the participants in research – as discussed earlier, this carries its own problems. Clarke (2005), says that a method is needed that can intentionally capture the complexities of a social situation rather than aiming at simplifying it. What Clarke proposes with Situational Analysis is a supplement to classic Grounded Theory, that allows the researcher a new lens to see the data (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). According to Charmaz (2006:10), an alternative approach to Grounded Theory should aim to construct several grounded theories from our past and present 'involvements and interactions with people, perspectives and research practices'. Its aim should not be primarily concerned with the generalisation of theory and this is not the aim of the present study. This new approach to research data has allowed me to recognise and honour my involvement in the process merely by acknowledging being part of the world that is under research (Charmaz, 2006). Walsh et al. (2015) make an important distinction which is particularly useful to define the current study. Grounded Theory is considered a 'full package' and when a researcher picks certain aspects of the package to use with other methods and techniques, they do not produce a Grounded Theory study, but a study drawn on the tenets of Grounded Theory. This is an important distinction to make. In framing the current study, I have not used the entirety of classic Grounded Theory methodology but a dynamic interpretation of both Straussian Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis and applied it to both data collection and interpretation (Clarke, 2005).

3.5 Aims and objectives of the present study

The aim of this investigation is to explore professional learning and development opportunities for Early Childhood educators, considering contemporary practices in Tuscany and London. The following objectives will also be covered:

1. To investigate key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian education systems through a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in the English and Tuscan PLD context
2. To explore the complex interrelationships among the cases selected
3. To build the necessary knowledge base that will enable a reconceptualisation of PLD
4. To explore how Early Childhood educators understand professional identities

The research's expected contribution to knowledge is to:

- Produce a current picture of professional learning and development initiatives in Tuscany and London with a view to suggesting strategies that best suit educators' needs.
- Explore links between professional learning and development initiatives and children's experiences in Early childhood education and care settings.
- Provide a new look at what it means to be an Early Childhood educator today, with a view to the main features of professional learning and development to inform future policy.

3.6 Research design

In this section I will show how the study was planned and managed in order to do justice to the epistemological perspective described in the first section of this chapter. I will begin by discussing the ethical issues considered in planning the study and throughout its duration. I will also examine important issues such as the need for informed consent in educational research, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, as well as looking at specific issues that require special consideration when planning and conducting research that seeks to understand participants' personal experiences and beliefs. These issues are rooted in the importance of understanding power balances between researcher and researched and I have strived to minimise imbalances of power that are bound to be present in such a project. These concerns are at the heart of the research process, influencing the choice of methodology, the ways in which I conducted the research, and the relationships that I tried to build with the participants. From there I will illustrate the reasons behind choosing a case study design and I will specifically look into the choice of having a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) without looking to have a comparative research design.

3.6.1 *Ethical issues*

Ethical issues do not stop at obtaining informed consent from participants – instead, they permeate the entire study, from the design of the research questions and methods to the dissemination of the results (Birch et al., 2012). Ethical issues informed the research from its conception and throughout its conduct (Silverman, 2005). The main stance was to recognise the ethical implications of the research prior to requesting access and participants' permission (Stake, 1995). As Aubrey et al.

(2000:5) highlight, ethics are concerned with how we 'logically draw together data from the raw processes' and the general rigour of the analysis without forgetting how the data is interpreted. In addition, ethics in research must also consider who has benefited from the research, together with the best ways of informing participants about the findings (BERA, 2018). Participants in this research have given their time and expertise when taking part and I have considered the best ways to engage with them in order to elicit lively discussion and feedback over the findings. The specific strategies employed will be detailed in Chapter 4.

The proposed research complies with the University of Roehampton's ethical guidelines (2014) as well as the ethical protocols set out by the British Research Association's (BERA) revised guidelines (2014). Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants. I explained the research in detail so that they were fully aware of what was involved in their participation and what they had agreed to (University of Roehampton, 2014; BERA, 2014). The consent form included a brief outline of all parts of the project. Participants were informed of the total numbers of the sample considered and whether any video recording was used, both in writing and verbally, before the start of the data collection process (University of Roehampton, 2014). The consent form set out the conditions of participation including anonymity, data storage and the right to withdraw at any time (Bryman, 2012). Informed consent, according to Howe and Moses (1999 in Cohen et al., 2011), is a cornerstone of ethical behaviour as it respects the right of individuals to exercise control over their lives and to take informed decisions about their actions. Consequently, the need for informed consent arises from the participants' right to freedom and self-determination. As informed consent also implies informed refusal,

participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point (Cohen et al., 2011). Gaining and maintaining access has to be considered a process rather than a once-only decision – thus it is useful to consider access as a continuum, where the researcher gradually moves from gaining access to the site to a series of developed relationships with some of the participants (Walford, 2001). In this way, the process of gaining access to the research site has to be continually negotiated and interpreted as a process of building a relationship with the participants (Walford, 2011). In this research, access has always been considered as provisional as permission and trust from the participants can be revoked at any time (Walford, 2001).

The participants' entitlement to privacy has been recognised by ensuring that the data collected respects the rules of confidentiality and anonymity to protect the participants' rights and that the settings have not been identified (BERA, 2014). The legal requirements set out by the Data Protection Act (1998) in regard to disclosure and storage of data have been adhered to. The data collected is kept in a secure space and the subsequent publication of any material will not breach agreed confidentiality and anonymity (BERA, 2014; University of Roehampton, 2014). The participants' anonymity has been ensured with the use of pseudonyms and by eliminating any identifying factors from the data (Cohen et al., 2011; University of Roehampton, 2014). Participants were also debriefed at the conclusion of the research to provide them with a summary of the main findings (BERA, 2014). The location chosen for the interviews and focus groups was familiar to the participants to facilitate the feelings of safety during the fieldwork (Walford, 2001).

3.6.2 *Ethical dilemmas for the participants of the study*

This section will explore and acknowledge the ethical dilemmas for participants in more depth as well as defining my role as a researcher during the data collection.

Husband (2020) explains that it is impossible to predict with absolute accuracy what the impact of research on the participants might be, this is because, especially when using interview methods, we have to consider that individuals are unique, and they will react differently to the interview questions presented. Furthermore, according to the Froebelian lenses used to guide this study, every learner is unique and starts from a different point, our job as researchers and educators is to understand the learner's starting point and work to build on their strengths in a way that is accessible and appropriate to the participants in this research.

In this research, some specific interview questions focussed on determining the participants' sense of their professional identity and explored their thinking around who they perceived themselves to be in relation to their professional roles, these questions had the potential of stirring some powerful emotions in response, in this case I had to be aware and acknowledge that some deeper responses from the participants were going to be inevitably elicited due to the nature of the issues examined (Husband, 2020). During the interviews the participants were asked to re-envisage their previous learning and analyse past practices engaging them in investigating and sharing ideas with me through a discussion (Husband, 2020). My role during the interview was to listen and be respectful of the participants' opinions, whether I agreed with them or not, without letting my perceptions interfering with the research. Transparency about my position and potential biases and assumptions, is vital to tend to the specific needs of the participants in the study (Reid et al., 2018). In this instance, the Froebelian lens to helped to navigate and make sense of some of the ethical dilemmas in this research, especially the ways that I worked with the two communities of practice identified, being careful to work with the strengths of the

educators helping them to share their knowledge and to take pride in their learning journeys, without imposing my own culture and way of doing to the educators (Bruce et al., 2015). During the research the Froebelian principle of starting from where the educators were was important, seeing their diversity of opinions and uniqueness as enriching the picture of their situations, so that the educators' connection to the communities they belonged to, was evident (Tovey, 2020). The central tenet of a Froebelian approach, links always links (Bruce, 2021) has been used, to conceptualise the questions to the educators as being a part of the community of practice that the educators belonged to, using self-awareness of working with others to understand the links between the questions to the educators, and their everyday practice in settings, keeping in mind the essential relationship of the participants with everything else around them (Froebel in Lilley, 1967) while, at the same time, understanding my place within the larger whole to satisfy Froebel's concept of unity (Froebel, 1851 in Wasmuth, 2020). By understanding what was important to the educators, such as having a nurturing environment where they could express their feelings and thoughts, the practitioners were encouraged to feel as individuals who were fundamental parts of a community of practice where their thoughts and impressions were valued and contributed to a larger whole (Wasmuth, 2020). The participants were also able to talk to me after each interview and focus group sessions if they wanted to discuss any concerns, I made sure to remain available in the settings for a few hours after the interviews were completed and spent time exploring the setting and writing my own notes in a space that the setting manager provided for me. I have made sure that the participants felt comfortable about their level of involvement with a debrief after each focus group session, the emotional well-being of the participants remained a priority throughout the research.

Dialogue is, according to Noddings (1993 in Caine et al., 2020:267) 'an acknowledgment of our existential longing to hear and be heard', by listening to what the participants had to say during the semi-structured interviews, I wanted to connect with the participants, by attending fully and openly to what the participants wanted to share. Noddings' concept of ethics of care has provided support to reflect on the ethics of care in this research and explore the research relationship that was being established with the participants during the interviews, while at the same time acknowledging and respecting the right of the participants to not wanting to engage in a relationship (Caine et al., 2020). The memos produced during the research helped me to monitor my bias after each interview and focus group, in these memos I have considered if the portrayal of the participants' impressions matched their perceptions of the issues discussed, throughout the research I have monitored and acknowledged my own subjectivity by writing several memos also relying on several conversations with the supervisory team and some colleagues to discuss my perceptions and biases, this process helped me to examine my own assumptions about the data and check that my interpretations were valid and linked to the evidence collected.

As Allmark et al. (2009) explain, the researcher may take a dual role, especially during one-to-one interviews, as a scientist and a therapist. The boundaries between research interviews and counselling interviews could sometimes become less defined, however, it is important to co-construct some important ethical guidelines with the participants as the interview progresses, to allow the researcher to respond sensitively to the participants' needs as and when they arise (Allmark et al., 2009). I

have seen my role during the data collection as being close to what Husband (2020:7) describes as an intermediary of 'co-produced knowledge through the discursive process of question and response', by actively engaging with the participants to construct knowledge in partnership, being aware that while constructing the answers to some of the questions, the participants had to consider some issues in depth which they might not have previously engaged with before. Certain lines of investigation have been abandoned if the participants' words or body language indicated that they needed to set a boundary around a particular issue (Allmark et al., 2009). A potential issue that presented itself in this case regarded the relationship between myself and the participants, there was the possibility that I 'might find herself over-involved with (any of) the participant(s)' (Allmark, et al., 2009:50). In one case, a participant confided that she was really struggling to define her professional identity due to being a temporary member of staff at the nursery. The participant expressed feeling 'like nothing' that they did not matter because they did not have a definite job role and the precarious nature the work contract did not help to reflect on this important issue. In this instance, they reminded me of myself as an early career educator. As a result of these feelings, I struggled to remain impartial during her account, but it would not have been right to be impartial and show no empathy to their struggles. In this instance, the Froebelian lens have been applied to consider the importance of this formative interaction as every relationship necessitates being finely tuned in to the other person to be aware of the person's specific needs, considering the participants' individuality and diversity has supported the Froebelian principle of starting from where the learner is, and has made the connections with this principle and the ethical dilemmas for participants in this research evident (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). The role of the researcher, in this instance,

strived to respond sensitively to the participants, attending to their fears and concerns in an active way and by responding with compassion if difficult moments arose, but understanding, at the same time, that the role was not a cathartic one (Allmark et al., 2009). The ethical code for this research is to retain a 'reflexive and emotive human response to the individual and the circumstances' (Husband, 2020:7) rather than maintain distance with the participants' responses. In some ways it could be argued that the role veered towards a therapeutic role in some instances, but I prefer to see it as being aware and sensitive to the reality of the participants to 'begin to feel its reality' so that I could act accordingly to make the participant feel that they were cared for and their feelings were acknowledge as valid (Noddings, 2013 in Bergmark, 2020:339).

3.6.3 *Role of the researcher*

As Stake (1995:95) states, 'research is not helped by making it appear value free' instead 'it is better to give the reader a good look at the researcher'. According to Holloway and Biley (2011 in Lichtman, 2014:32), qualitative research is one of the most subjective and 'person-centred' ways of determining and exploring the thoughts and actions of human participants. In the present research, I started from the important position of understanding every researcher to be different. As a consequence, I firmly believe that each researcher must work out the best methodologies and methods to produce an effective understanding and accurate portrayal of the case being researched (Stake, 1995). The process of designing the present research has been constructed and reconstructed through various overlapping interests, namely my interests as a researcher, the interests of the group under research and the individuals that are part of it, and the interests of organisations and political structures or funding organisations (Mayall et al, 1999). Clarke (2005)

proposes that researchers become more visible and accountable in the process of research without hiding behind a method and this is a position that I will follow. In the present enquiry, I understood that my role in interviewing was twofold – from one side I had to ask personal questions of the participants so that they could articulate their thoughts on their professional identity and professional learning and development, on the other I could not reciprocate this exchange by telling them my own ideas and feelings because I was conscious of not wanting to lead their answers in particular ways. I also adopted the role of a listener during both the interviews and the focus groups and provoked participants' interactions and reactions through interview questions and prompts and designed activities for the focus group. I decided to leave the participants to discuss and interact with me if they felt the need to – I have never forced my presence upon them, especially during the focus groups, choosing to be an available listener when needed but also choosing not to direct discussions and interactions too much. Due to the methods of data collection, which will be fully discussed in section 3.8 of this chapter, I carefully considered my experiences and expectations for the research and the perceptions that the participants held of my role, while making sure to maintain the project's focus (Aubrey et al., 2000).

Quite early in the process of designing this research, it became clear that choosing only one role and applying it through the whole investigation was not possible. By the same token, participants in this research also needed to work through various shifts and renegotiations of my role in their eyes (Walford, 2001). I consider myself to be 'tied to all aspects of [this] research' (Lichtman, 2014:32) due to my professional and personal identity. I am connected to this project as an emerging

academic, an Early Childhood professional, and, last but not least, an Italian living in London. I had to constantly renegotiate my position in this research using reflexivity and reflection to ensure that it was appropriately conducted with suitable consideration to ethical reflections (Aubrey et al., 2000). I used three different types of reflexivity in the present research. They were:

1. Personal reflexivity, to understand and be aware of my own potential influence on the research process as a result of my own viewpoints and assumptions resulting from the multiple research identities I assumed during it (Aubrey et al., 2000; Lichtman, 2014).
2. Epistemological reflexivity, to understand my view of how I see the world and context.
3. Ethical reflexivity, when thinking about matters connected with the correctness of research with my selected participants and issues related to informed consent (Lichtman, 2014).

According to classic Glaserian Grounded Theory, I should have been invisible during the research process (Clarke, 2005). However, according to the Situational Analysis method, researchers cannot help but come into the field as already 'knowing' and 'already inflected, already affected, already infected' (Clarke, 2005:17). Clarke's (2005) position described above is much closer to my own position. I came to this enquiry as an Early Childhood educator first and foremost, who has experienced professional learning and development initiatives in the past, and who has decided to explore educators' experiences further, in light of my additional identity as an

emerging academic. I have, in other words, infected and affected the field already – I cannot be an invisible entity.

The concept of recognising that there are preconceived notions in research has been important to me. As I have explained above, it was impossible for me to start with no preconceptions about the topic. However, I consider my preconceptions to be precisely what was needed to frame the issue being studied, exploring structures and processes worthy of research (Gibson & Hartman, 2014). It is, after all, through the researcher's personal lens, that participants for the study have been selected, interviews and focus groups have been conducted, and data has been analysed. I am the one who is asking the questions and listening to the answers (Lichtman, 2014). As a result of the positioning of my role, I recognise that interpretation of the phenomena being studied is closely dependent and shaped by my experiences and intentions for the present research (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, I have carefully considered the possibility that my role as a researcher could be fully dependent on the role that the study participants recognise and find acceptable (Walford, 2001). Initially, the participants automatically assigned a role to me according to their previous knowledge and expectations of who a researcher might be or do. As my fieldwork progressed and relations with the participants became friendlier and more trustworthy, so did my role. As a result of this process, some of the roles I adopted were not always freely chosen but relied more on the expectations of others (Walford, 2001).

I firmly believe that a completely unbiased view of the research design, methods and data is not practical when talking about qualitative research – the simple action of

deciding on a research topic shows bias in itself. I agree with Norris's (1997:173) statement that, 'research whether quantitative or qualitative, experimental or naturalistic, is a human activity subject to the same kinds of failings as other human activities. Researchers are fallible.'

The notion of researchers being fallible is by no means a concept used to eliminate research integrity or to make sure that the research is as unbiased as possible. It is a deeper and more important reflection on the concept of integrity in qualitative research and the role of the researcher in this particular study. My subjectivity is not seen as a failure or an error to be eliminated but as an essential component of understanding (Stake, 1995). As Norris (1997) highlights, there is no paradigm that will completely eliminate bias and errors from research, as different kinds of research produce different kinds of errors. None is immune. I have tried to be open-minded about this research, so as to be alert to forms of potential errors, and tried to look at the research from the outside as much as was permitted by the many identities I brought (Norris, 1997). Having said this, I have also tried not to completely eliminate subjectivity from my research – I have acknowledged it and moved with it throughout (Lichtman, 2014). I have also sought a degree of constructive criticism, both towards the study and towards myself, and I have done my best to experience and portray the participants' cultures and beliefs with integrity (Aubrey et al., 2000). Finally, I have taken some of the presuppositions that could be considered as biased in the research as being paradigmatic. In other words, I have interpreted the specific kinds of researcher bias I encountered in the present study as being my preferred way to solve research problems (Norris, 1997). Having said this,

I have also acknowledged that certain preferences can be challenged and that the limitations of a particular research design must be acknowledged (Norris, 1997).

3.6.4 *Power issues*

An important issue to consider is the balance of power between the researcher and the researched (Flewitt, 2005). According to Mayall et al. (1999), the researched are disadvantaged by the very act of research, since, mostly, the power lies with the researcher. As a result of my position, I fully understand that the power relations in this research cannot be erased, therefore a process of reflexivity was used to take my advantages over the participants into account, and my pre-existing experiences, while remaining alert to potential sources of bias (Aubrey et al., 2000).

As Todres (2005) illustrates, empowerment develops in a process of movement and change, from the person who holds the power to those who are being empowered. For this to happen, both parties must work towards a shared goal and equally participate in the process. During the investigation I made sure that I considered issues around power relationships between myself and the participants. For example, the participants' perceptions of the role of an external researcher entering their reality, and the possibility of the research to empower the participants by showing an interest in the system they are part of, are just a couple of the issues around power relationships in research. Whilst I have tried to minimise power relationships. I have, at the same time, recognised that eliminating them is not only impossible, but risked taking away from the authenticity of the case studies developed.

3.6.5 *Case study design*

The case study design for this enquiry is intended to show the detail of the participants' interactions with the specific context they are in (Stake, 1995). Yin (2018) sees case studies as using theory to generalise from the results – he sees the role of the researcher as being able to predict any contrasting results to increase the possibility of replication for the study. On the other hand, Stake (1995) does not pay attention to identifying case study design as making a series of measurements that produce more descriptive variables. As a qualitative researcher I agree with Stake (1995) in seeing case study design as being able to emphasise the uniqueness of the case and the wholeness of the single individuals in the study. On one hand, Yin (2018:10) sees research questions as being concerned with 'tracing of operational processes'. In contrast, Stake (1995:16) sees research questions as having to direct attention to 'complexity and contextuality'. Qualitative case studies strive to determine and depict the multiple views of the case (Stake, 1995).

Another specific characteristic of a case study design is the possibility of directly observing the relevant behaviours that are the subject of the research, with interviews being one of the prevalent methods (Yin, 2018). I was particularly drawn to choose a case study design that has a unique ability and strength to deal with a variety of evidence, such as documents and interview data coming from one-to-one interviews and from activity-based focus groups (Yin, 2018). The methods briefly outlined above will be fully discussed and presented later in this chapter in section 3.8. Case study design must strive to represent the people involved as complex creatures, recognising the case's uniqueness and problems (Stake, 1995).

As discussed in section 3.2, Theoretical Perspective, I will be using a qualitative constructive methodology. This kind of methodology, according to Yin (2018), suits a case study design very well. A case study designed with a constructivist methodology will aim to capture the perspectives of a range of participants, focusing on how their different opinions will illuminate the topic (Yin, 2018).

3.6.6 *Not a comparative study*

This research is organised as a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in London and Tuscany, aimed at understanding the complex interrelationships between the cases selected (Stake, 1995). The case studies have not been compared – instead they have been treated as independent units with a 'story to tell', as my interest is to explore how each case functions in its ordinary pursuits (Stake, 1995:1). I have used the Italian case study to enlighten the English case study – in this way I aim to shine a light on each case to illuminate specific features of professional learning and development practices that are relevant and interesting, without necessarily stating how one case is better than the other, or how one case is worthier than the other. I am concerned with understanding and highlighting the complexity and unique nature of each case in question using an idiographic approach to show its unique features (Bryman, 2012). Cases do represent social constructions and understandings and to learn from them they need to be contextualised and localised. Any research in highly complex systems aiming at developing an understanding of what is going on, and why, for whom, needs to embrace rather than avoid the messiness of its subject and reflect the spatialised nature of knowledge in this field (Jones et al, 2014). Furthermore, another reason why I chose not to compare the two cases is that I wanted to listen to what was happening in other

cultures, thus learning from others and appreciating what makes the two cases and the participants different. Looking at other contexts and interrogating them about the same issues helps to revisit old concepts from a different angle that might help to develop an alternative understanding of a phenomena and of the participants.

3.7 The research site and research participants

3.7.1 *Selection of participants*

Walford (2001) criticises the tendency in qualitative research to settle for research sites that are easily accessible, rather than carefully consider the implications of choosing a specific sample for a research. Often, the researcher is enticed to accept a site that appears more easily accessible, rather than work harder to gain access to the most appropriate site for the research (Walford, 2001). Whilst I don't deny that the occurrences detailed by Walford (2001) might be the case in some qualitative research, I don't fully agree with his argument. In this research, for example, although a convenient method of sampling was used, the specific settings to include were carefully considered in light of the research topic. I selected both cases for this research in the full knowledge that they are not and could not be representative of a broader population of nursery settings. However, I also chose the two included settings because the cases selected are, in my view, important to understand in light of their existing practices around professional learning and development. Therefore, the cases were selected through a careful and purposeful process of initial investigation, coupled with my extensive contacts in the field of Early childhood education and care both in Tuscany and London. Generalisation, whether empirical or theoretical, is not the goal of this investigation (Walford, 2001).

The sampling strategy for this study targeted two specific cases in the full knowledge that these do not represent the wider population but are representative only of themselves (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). I had no intention of looking at a typical Early childhood education and care setting, but I specifically chose two cases that are important for understanding professional learning and development in the different geographical contexts (Walford, 2001). This choice is consistent with a Grounded Theory methodology, as sampling was focused on constructing theory rather than aiming to represent the wider population (Charmaz, 2006). According to Walford (2001), choosing a research site that is significant and thought-provoking in itself is the only way for qualitative research to produce meaningful results. As Glaser and Strauss (1967:30) highlight, the aim is not for the researcher to 'know the whole field', or to provide an extremely accurate description of a specific area, but to aim at producing a theory that carefully represents much of the relevant behaviour that is true to the context taken into consideration.

The collected data provided me with important insights into the two specific realities selected without aiming to generalise my findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2012). The main aim behind my sampling strategy was to better understand the present reality through the views of the selected expert participants, in order to 'yield important data on the topic' under scrutiny (Rolfe & MacNaughton, 2001:25).

3.7.2 *Locality and demographics*

As discussed in section 3.5.4, this study is organised as a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in Haringey, London, and the municipality of San

Miniato, Tuscany. The respondents included ten participants in the English context and ten participants in the Italian context, with a total of 20 participants for the interview phase. The total number of participants for the focus group phase was 13, seven for the Italian context and six for the English context.

The Italian case is an example of a competent system (Urban et al. 2011; Urban 2012; Cameron & Moss 2007; Miller 2008). The municipality of San Miniato is important in the Tuscan system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, being the leader of the Valdarno Inferiore Area and taking responsibility for legislation in the area on ECEC services. It is also responsible for the quality of training provided to educators, authorisation and accreditation procedures of both individual professionals and services, monitoring of the ECEC services network and more general training of the workforce (Fortunati, 2014). In this way the municipality of San Miniato has become a hub for new practice and understanding of how ECEC services must work, and a driver for change in the whole sector. This small municipality's impressive achievements in the development of services for young children and their families, thanks to sustained financial commitment at local level, demonstrates a commitment not only to the development of services for

Participant	**Role**	**Years of Experience**	**Qualification**
Bridget	Key person 0-3	13 years	NVQ 2 and 3
Lara	Key person 0-3	11 years	NVQ
Imogen	Assistant Headteacher	4 years (30 years total experience)	Teaching BA and MA in early education
Violet	Early Years Intervention Outreach practitioner	1 year in this role (12 years total experience)	Junior School Teacher
Caroline	Part-time centre assistant/ lunchtime cover	5 and a half	Studying for a BA in Early Years
Megan	School business manager	8 years	Certificate of school business management ICSBN

Isla	Senior nursery teacher (3-4 years old)	2 years	NNEB, YTS, qualified teacher
Olivia	SEN support assistant	4 years	Diploma in Health and Social Care
Elena	Children centre manager	9 years (22 years total experience)	NNEB, BA Early Childhood Studies
Liam	Site manager	9 years	Electrician
Giulia	Educatrice professionale	20 years	BA Scienze dell'Educazione
Chiara	Coordinatore pedagogico/ responsabile per la formazione in house centro di ricerca Bottega di Geppetto	9 years	BA philosophy, qualified Early Years teacher
Ilaria	Educatrice di infanzia	10 years	BA psychology, specialised in psychotherapy
Sofia	Educatrice di infanzia e coordinamento pedagogico	30 years	Istituto Magistrale (Diploma)
Emma	Educatrice di infanzia	10 years	BA psychology
Livia	Coordinatore interno	10 years	Professional qualification in Early Years education
Giorgia	Educatrice di infanzia	18 years	BA Scienze dell'Educazione
Martina	Educatrice di infanzia	38 years	BA pedagogy specialising in psychology
Alice	Educatrice di infanzia e coordinatore pedagógico	18 years	Professional qualification in Early Years education
Romina	Manager di amministrazione	5 years	PhD Sociology

Figure 3.1 - Participants in the study

children, but also to the development and competences of a workforce that is grounded in academic research, with pre-established compulsory hours dedicated to development (Bloomer & Cohen, 2008).

One of the fundamental values that nurseries adopt in San Miniato is that children's education must be a community project (Fortunati, 2014). The practice developed in San Miniato is focused on documenting the children's learning with methods that see them as active participants. This has led to the birth of a Centre for Research and Documentation for Childhood based on educators' research experiences in the

municipality's nurseries (Fortunati, 2014). The services in San Miniato also see the practice of working with children and families as leading to a regeneration of social representations of the way that children and their needs are viewed by society. Educators' continuing professional development is seen as contributing to the competence of services for young children and their families (Fortunati, 2014). The role of adults in the nursery that participated in the present study is geared towards their capacities to recognise and expand children's abilities and interests, being aware of the ever-changing arena of young children's education through meaningful ways of continuing professional learning and development (Fortunati, 2014). In the Italian context, the main qualified group working in the *nidi* (birth to three Early childhood education and care settings) are known as *educatori* (educators). Their role is similar to Early Childhood educators working in other European countries (Bloomer & Cohen, 2008). All new *educatori* coming into the profession must now have a degree as a basic qualification. Each new applicant for a post of *educatore* must also sit an additional exam devised by the San Miniato training centre, *La Bottega di Geppetto*. Once accepted, all Early Childhood educators undergo focused professional learning and development and, as part of their contract, all must have at least 40 working hours a year assigned to this (Bloomer & Cohen, 2008).

The UK setting I chose for this study is an integrated nursery and children's centre in the borough of Haringey, North London. This is a highly diverse area, with 38% of residents from black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups and more than 180 languages spoken (Haringey Borough, 2018). It also has one of the highest percentages of residents who do not speak English as their main language (Haringey Borough, 2018). Children between the ages of 0 and 17 make up 22% of the

borough’s total population. Although improvements are being made, Haringey still ranks among the most deprived boroughs in the capital, with a high rate of children considered to be obese by the time they enter reception classes (Haringey Borough, 2018). The nursery school in the present study is based on a New Zealand curriculum philosophy, focusing on outdoor and inclusive learning for children (Warmington, 2012). The nursery and children’s centre are well integrated within the local community and has become a point of reference for local families who use its services.

One of the key features of this setting is the integration of children with special educational needs – one of its values is to promote democracy, individual liberty and mutual respect through practice. The setting believes in several rather Froebelian principles and this is also one of the reasons why I chose it – it aims to highlight each person’s unique qualities for learning, promoting the employment of qualified staff and committing to disseminating practice through in-house training of staff, action research, and attendance at local events and conferences. Reflections on educators’ professionalism and professional learning and development have been given considerable attention – in 2011 the setting became part of a training consortium with other two nursery schools in the borough. The training consortium aims to focus on practice and its offering of professional learning and development by planning collaborative projects on pre-identified subjects and expanding partnerships, also with international collaborations. Through a close strategic partnership with the local authority and a range of other partners, the training consortium offers a range of professional learning and development opportunities for those in the Early childhood education and care workforce, which includes staff in primary schools, nursery

schools, private, voluntary and independent Early childhood education and care settings, and childminders. Together with the Haringey Early Years Quality and Improvement Team, they also offer an annual Early Years conference. The participants included in this study all work in the nursery or children's centre but perform different roles; this has been done in order to gain different perspectives on the issues I have explored. The setting welcomes various visitors who come to witness its innovative practice and provision and the Early Childhood educators are used to being asked to explain certain parts of their practice.

3.8 Research questions

In a qualitative study, research questions are typically positioned, according to Stake (1995), towards cases or singularities, in search of patterns of both unanticipated and expected relationships, with dependent variables experientially rather than operationally defined. The formulated questions for the present study guided the way in which I searched for and interpreted the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, the decisions over the research design for the project, and the kind of data I wanted to collect (Bryman, 2012). The research questions not only guided the initial steps of the research but reached as far as its analysis and writing up (Bryman, 2012). At the beginning of this research, broad research questions were used to set the general intellectual motive for the study in order to start defining its empirical and theoretical rationale (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Quantitative studies are characterised by research questions which mainly seek out a relationship between a small number of variables, while qualitative study research questions are largely oriented towards the specific case in question, seeking different patterns of relationships (Stake, 1995).

3.8.1 *Formulation of the research questions*

After an intensive revision process, which will be described later in this section, the principal research question for 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 practices in Tuscany and London?*

In addition to the principal research questions, the following sub-questions will also be included:

1. *What are the key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian Early Childhood education systems?*
2. *What is the current picture of professional learning and development in Tuscany and London?*
3. *What are the features of professional learning and development in professional contexts?*
4. *How do participants define, perceive and make sense of their professional identities?*

For this project, I started with a very general idea of what I was looking for, producing a general and open primary research question: *'How can a Froebelian approach to professional learning and development be conceptualised for Early Childhood Education and Care educators in England, in the light of contemporary PLD practices in Tuscany?'*. I then developed sub-questions as a more specific guide but still concerning a broad interest. I wanted to know how the system of professional development was organised in both contexts, so one of the initial sub-

questions was, '*What are the key conceptualisations, strategies and practices of professional learning and development among Early Childhood Education and Care educators in Tuscany and England?'.* I also wanted to know about the experiences of Early Childhood educators within the context of professional learning and development, so I planned as additional sub-questions, '*What are the key challenges facing Early Childhood educators in both professional contexts'* and *'How are they addressed in professional learning and development contexts?'* Finally, I was interested to know about educators' professional identities, so I devised the following sub-question: '*What are the implications for the formation of individual and collective professional identities?'*. At such an early stage I found it helpful to generate so many research questions, because, as Mason (2018) points out, this will help to define a general interest and make the process of refining and focusing the following research questions more meaningful and practical.

The initial research questions were reviewed to allow me to move from a broad research interest to the specific focus under investigation (Mason, 2018). The principal research question changed to, *'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?'*. This was because I felt that the concept of a Froebelian lens approach was much more suited to research that looks to co-construct knowledge with the participants. Furthermore, the concept of a Frobelian 'approach' is too limiting, because that implies that Froebelian teachings and values can be restricted to definite steps which can be repeated unchanged in any setting, when it is actually a philosophy that must be understood and permeate the whole life of the setting. The contexts of this

research are very specific, and the results cannot be generalised beyond the contexts taken into consideration. According to Stake (1995), generalisation is of no interest in case study designs such as the present enquiry, as the abiding interest is in the specific cases under exploration, aiming to understand the unique characteristics of each. In addition, I also wanted to make it clear that I did not intend to use the English context to compare it to the Italian context or vice versa – instead I wanted the two case studies to be related but also completely independent so as to avoid comparisons.

3.9 Selecting methods of data collection

3.9.1 *Documents as provocations*

The documents collected for this study assisted in framing the contexts and issues to research, exploring the regulations, and the day-to-day practice around requesting training and feeding back on training received for educators. The current provision for educators' PLD was explored in the context of recent and longer-term trends (Cohen et al., 2011). The documents were used as provocations during the focus groups as well as ways for me to learn more about the practice in the settings included around PLD, enabling an investigation into the social and organisational reality of PLD for Early Childhood educators in London and in Tuscany. As Atkinson and Coffey (2001 in Bryman, 2012) point out, documents should be recognised for what they are, namely as having a specific purpose according to their intended audience. They should not be taken as reflecting reality but as referring to a separate documentary reality.

My extensive contacts in the field in both Tuscany and London supported me in identifying pertinent documents to be included. These included documents specific to each setting that set out the principles of professional learning and development and the procedures for identifying and monitoring the PLD offer for educators. The documents served as an auxiliary for records of activity that I could not observe directly (Stake, 1995). Furthermore, each time a participant mentioned a specific document during the interviews, I asked the manager of the settings to provide said document for me to study and to add to the pool of documents collected for the study and were used to better contextualise and understand the interviews, as well as being used as provocations and discussion starters for the activity-based focus groups.

The collected documents mentioned above, also supported the construction of the interview schedule and fed into the organisation of the focus group activities. Parts of the documents that I identified as being relevant to discussion were selected and included in the interview questions for Early Childhood educators to talk about and were also used as critical prompts for the different focus group activities.

3.9.2 *Semi-structured interviews*

Interviews, according to Stake (1995:64), are 'the main road to multiple realities'. I chose this method because of its power to display each interviewee's unique experiences and special stories which have helped to construct knowledge with the participants on PLD and professional identity. Interviewing is one of the most powerful methods of allowing me to understand fellow professionals (Fontana et al., 2000 in Clough & Nutbrown, 2012) by creating an exchange of opinions on a topic of mutual interest (Cohen et al., 2011). It is important to acknowledge that the issues covered in the interviews are decided and influenced by my epistemological and

ontological positions in the present research (Stake, 1995). As stated by Kvale (1996 in Cohen at al., 2011), interviews are an exchange of opinions on a topic of mutual interest between individuals, therefore it is evident that human interaction is an important tool to produce knowledge. This is a statement that I consider to be extremely important and that has guided me through the design of this study. Walford (2001:87) shares an interesting and pertinent definition of interviews as 'an unusual affair' where 'the socially accepted rules of conversations and reciprocity between people are suspended'. In interviews the interviewer takes the lead and asks several questions but does not reciprocate the offering of information, as you would in a normal conversation. As also discussed in section 3.5.2, I have taken this definition as a way for me to reflect upon my role and to understand the different implications of my chosen research methods.

The advantage of using semi-structured interviews was that they allowed me to modify the questions asked depending on the need for clarification of answers given, or to ask for additional information that could be needed during the interview (Lodico et al., 2010; Bryman, 2012). Interviews were chosen because of their flexibility, giving me the space to pursue topics of particular interest to me and participants (Bryman, 2012). I chose this specific method because I expected each participant to have unique experiences and special stories to tell on the topic being studied (Stake, 1995). One of the strengths of semi-structured interviews is that they allow researchers and participants to co-construct the interview schedule according to the answers given, as the prepared interview questions are a guide for the researcher to follow but not to adhere to too strictly (Walford, 2001). For the most part of the interviews, the purpose was not to get a simple yes or no answer, but to

describe and explain certain topics in detail. This belief is in contrast to quantitative interviewing where the main aim is to aggregate the perceptions and knowledge of different participants according to previously specified controlled variables (Stake, 1995). I was aware of some specific issues that semi-structured interviews carry when designing the schedule (please see examples in Appendices) – because of the nature of this method, the topics to be covered were controlled by me and the interviewee is expected to have opinions and information on each without gaining any additional information on my views, as participants are not able to return the question during a semi-structured interview (Walford, 2001). In addition, every person that is participating in an interview carries his or her own ideas of what an interview should be like. I had to try to reconcile these with the pre-constructed interview schedule, while always being mindful of ethics and flexibility (Walford, 2001).

My role when interviewing was mostly of a listener encouraging reflection on the answers given. Using the questions and the probes I designed, I helped the participants to explore their views about educators' professional identities and continuing professional learning and development. Stake (1995) says that it is not important to get the exact words of the respondent when interviewing – what is important is to understand what the participants mean with their responses. Stake (1995) wishes for case studies to capture data by only using observation as the preferred method. However, I don't agree with this view. Walford (2001) states that interviewing allows the participants to discuss and reflect on a range of issues, but this level of discussion and reflection wouldn't be possible if I had only used the observation method for this study. Furthermore, some information that was central to

this study might not have occurred naturally, no matter how long I observed the participants. Interviews gave me the chance to ask questions that wouldn't have been possible to answer in any other situation (Walford, 2001). Observation alone would not have been enough for this research. For analysis purposes, one-to-one interviews were transcribed into written form.

3.9.3 *Focus group*

From the themes I identified during the semi-structured interviews and from the documentary research, I developed a schedule for a focus group containing documents to discuss and different activities for the Early Childhood educators to participate in. This further explores the features of PLD in professional contexts and was also used to facilitate the participants to co-construct a new understanding of PLD interpreted through a Froebelian lens. This method focuses on the ways in which participants discuss the issues of identity and PLD and how their interactions as a group helped them to build a view about specific themes identified during the semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012). A focus group traditionally features language in action and sees talk as a form and a vehicle for social action (Wooffitt, 1993 in Cohen et al., 2011). Although this method recognises that we all see the same reality in different ways, it also recognises that the way in which we speak about shared experiences with others is important (Cohen et al., 2011). Focus groups are considered helpful in eliciting a wide variety of different views on an issue from the participants. This method has been used to bring to the fore issues that the participants and I deem to be important and significant (Bryman, 2012). With this method, I aim to collaboratively construct a possible framework of professional

training and development for Early Childhood educators using participants' views and ideas.

The focus groups were designed as a collaborative effort, to make sense of the existing strategies of professional learning and development, and as a space to put forward suggestions for change. The participants included seven Early Childhood educators from a variety of roles in the Early Childhood settings who were previously involved in the one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The participants were not selected by me but were those who agreed to take part in phase two of the data collection after completing the one-to-one interviews. I designed the focus groups so that participants discussed anonymised elements which originated from the interviews in the other context – in this way, participants in the Italian setting discussed selected elements from the English interviews, and vice versa. This decision was made to show participants in each context a perspective that wasn't theirs in order to shake their understandings and to help them to see things from another point of view. Considering different realities and opinions in the same sector provided them with freedom to examine their views more deeply and to see how a different context experiences the same reality in ways that they might not have before. Another reason for doing this was that I didn't want anyone in the group to recognise their words and feel uncomfortable during the discussion, as this might present some ethical issues for safety and anonymity.

Focus groups lasted no more than two hours and were designed more as a group interview with activities for the participants to complete. I decided not to leave the conversation completely open but to examine in more depth some of the answers I

received during the one-to-one interviews and plan some activities around the issues that arose. The Early Childhood educators were welcomed initially by reminding them that anything they said during the activities would be kept confidential and anonymised during the final report. I then presented the activities and let the Early Childhood educators organise themselves into groups. Three Early Childhood educators were to work in a group with a human silhouette on a board and some Post-it notes describing several qualities that the Early Childhood educators in the other context had mentioned as being important for people working with children (see Appendices). The aim was to discuss the words in the Post-it notes and arrange them in the human silhouette according to what the Early Childhood educators believed to be the most important, starting from the person's head as the most important and finishing at the feet with the least important. At the same time, the remaining Early Childhood educators organised themselves into a group and discussed documents from the other context to do with continuing professional learning and development. The participants in Italy looked at a form used by the English Early Childhood educators to request training from their setting and the Early Childhood educators in the English context discussed a satisfaction survey that the Italian Early Childhood educators had to fill out at the end of every training session (both documents presented in Appendices). These activities lasted for the first 30 minutes of the focus group. After the Early Childhood educators decided that their discussions could be shared with the rest of the group, we had a group conversation about their responses and impressions of the documents and activities presented. During this phase my role was that of a listener provoking interaction between the Early Childhood educators by asking them to clarify or further discuss some of their impressions. After this phase, all the participants sat around a table and

were presented with five direct quotes anonymised and selected by me from one-to-one interviews in the other setting that I deemed worthy of further discussion because of their interesting or controversial nature (see Appendices). I placed the direct quotes one by one on the table and asked the participants to decide which they would like to discuss first. My role was that of an observer after the discussion started. I watched and listened to their discussion, only occasionally prompting them with questions to help them reflect on or discuss the issues arising in more depth. Once all the quotes were discussed in depth, I asked the Early Childhood educators to pass onto our final activity. I provided them with a big piece of paper covering the table, some coloured pens, and asked them to write or draw a manifesto for their professional development. Here they could put anything they wished to have, anything they would do differently, and anything they would keep the same. I asked them to exercise their fantasy with purpose and construct a model of professional learning and development that began with the fundamental Froebelian principle of starting from where the learner is. In this activity my role was that of a co-constructor and a provocateur. I helped them to think about further aspects of their manifesto that needed to be defined and questioned some of their choices by asking them to discuss their decisions further. This was done as a group activity, so that the whole group had to agree on a decision before it could be included in the manifesto. This prompted the Early Childhood educators to discuss and argue for their ideas further, creating a vibrant community of practice that was focused on developing new knowledge based on their experiences with professional learning and development. These last two activities were planned to last for no more than one hour, bringing the total duration of the focus groups to the planned two hours maximum.

For analysis purposes, the focus group was not transcribed in its entirety – only the final table discussion looking at the educators' impressions of the selected quotes from the English context was transcribed in its entirety. I watched the rest of the focus groups and took notes whenever something worthy of further analysis happened and cross-referenced this with the documents created during the activities.

3.10 Data analysis

When analysing the collected data, my aim was to read it 'from different perspectives and for different purposes' (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015:126). For this research, coding together with Clarke's Situational Analysis method was used. Coding began immediately after the data was transcribed, allowing a provisional theorisation of what was collected (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). The codes generated were derived from the data itself rather than being decided a priori (Cohen et al., 2011). Different readings of the data were treated as temporary and partial and especially as historically and geographically situated (Clarke, 2005).

3.11 Preliminary and advanced coding

The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA and analysed using a coding strategy. Open coding was initially used as a 'process of breaking down, examining, comparing, and categorising data' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:61). In this phase of data analysis, the transcripts were closely examined and initial conceptualisations were formed. This coding strategy allowed me to identify some initial specific issues related to identity construction for Early Childhood educators linked to the current offer of professional learning and development (PLD) in both contexts.

Writing memos was a continuous process and helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the data collected, together with helping me to organise and focus the ideas arising from its analysis. The memos were treated as a 'work in progress', capturing my ideas as they formed. In addition, memos were produced to facilitate what Holton and Walsh (2017) call theoretical sorting, in order to better define the following themes that I have developed for this chapter.

3.12 Articulating the 'sites of silence' in the data

I employed Situational Analysis because it enabled me to represent the *messiness* in the field of study, opening the possibility to ask critical questions and to generate partial answers for particular situations (Mathar, 2008). Moreover, Situational Analysis allowed me to draw together different kinds of data and analyse them in order to enable an overview of the relations between the data collected so that 'the situation per se becomes the ultimate unit of analysis' (Clarke, 2005:4). This specific methodological approach allowed me to 'address and elucidate the complexities of 'specific situations making the usually invisible (…) social features of a situation more visible' (Clarke, 2005:21). For this study I specifically used two types of maps as designed by Clarke (2005):

> **Situational maps** laying out the major human, non-human, discursive, and other elements in the research and provoking analysis of relations among them.
>
> **Social world/arena maps** presenting the collective actors, key non-human elements, and the arena(s) of commitment and discourse within which they

are engaged in ongoing negotiations (Clarke, 2005:86; Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015:99).

I used these maps to help me elucidate some key elements in the contexts researched, bringing to the fore specific discourses around PLD that characterise the situation of enquiry. I used this specific method of analysis because of its power to ground the theory generated from the data, instead of treating the data as dependent on the method used (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015).

The data was coded using the MAXQDA programme through a process of open coding. This was used to keep the data open to multiple readings and codes (Clarke, 2005), producing an initial analysis generating some temporary codes to particular parts of the transcriptions (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). Two types of codes were developed, preliminary coding and advanced coding. Preliminary coding was used to explore the data initially and develop some more robust categories. Coding was used as a process of breaking the data down into smaller units which were then examined and compared to produce several conceptualisations and categorisations. Once the initial coding was deemed exhaustive, the codes were grouped into categories (Cohen et al., 2011).

Memos were also used during the data analysis process as an additional way to generate concepts and further categories (Bryman, 2012). Once I was familiar with the transcribed data, I used the memos to begin the analysis and as a way of creating notes and reminders for myself about the meaning of specific segments of data, providing 'the building blocks' for my reflections (Bryman, 2012:573). I produced

some critical memos asking questions to myself to be explored further – some have been used to remember different issues for analysis and others to reveal some issues to me. Through the memos I explored what a specific theme or code meant, what the instances of it were through the data and what was missing (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). Finally, memos have been used as a way to develop my initial ideas and not lose track of my thinking over the topic of the study (Bryman, 2012).

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the initial findings for the research, derived from the coding of data obtained through interviews and focus groups with the participants. As detailed in the previous chapter, I also used several documents as critical prompts during the activity based focus group. The documents obtained, used as provocations during the focus groups as detailed in chapter 3, were a satisfaction survey that Early Childhood educators in San Miniato complete after each training session; an application form that the Early Childhood educators in London are required to complete to request training; and a development plan for the setting in London that the head teacher and the leadership team produce to identify setting priorities, including professional learning and development. These documents were used as part of the focus group activities for the Early Childhood educators in each context to discuss how PLD is organised in other settings and to provoke a rich discussion of the issues identified. These documents have helped to paint a current picture of the systems of PLD taken into consideration for this research and have illuminated ways in which educators are listened to. These documents are referred to in the themes presented below and copies of the documents are provided in Appendices.

In this chapter I will show the initial method of data analysis through a process of preliminary open coding (4.2) and advanced coding (4.3). Section 4.4 shows the participants' backgrounds. In the subsequent sections I present the findings for this research, each being grouped under a Froebelian principle used as a lens through which to interpret the themes identified. Section 4.4 presents the professional

identities defined and Section 4.6 highlights the key characteristics of professional learning and development by individual case study. In Section 4.7 I discuss professional identity development through time and in Section 4.8 the personal ideals which drive the practice of the Early Childhood educators are illustrated. Section 4.9 considers discussions around emotions in work with young children while Section 4.10 presents the reader with a consideration of whose need it is when caring for children. I then consider the struggle the participants feel to be recognised as professionals in Section 4.11 and look at discussions around nursery education as the driver for social change in Section 4.12. Section 4.13 presents the participants' suggestions for change and, to conclude, Section 4.14 presents a summary of the findings divided between the identities of educators (4.14.1), values of the profession (4.14.2) and a picture of the current PLD offering (4.14.3).

4.2 A Froebelian lens to filter and analyse the findings

In this chapter, the Froebelian principles mentioned in Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology, were adopted with the aim of producing 'theory' through interpretations of the socially and culturally constructed reality explored, the Froebelian lens were used as a way to group the analysed data. After the initial development of the themes for the data from the primary and advanced coding, the three Froebelian principles selected forming the lens for this research, have been used to group and further organise the data. In this case, the Froebelian lenses have acted as a filter to further organise and categorise the data and providing an additional layer of conceptualisation and understanding of the findings for the research in relation to a Froebelian understanding of the educators' identities, highlighting the links between the principles and the data and the many practical

implications of the Froebelian lens. The selected Froebelian principles have been used to provide a heading for the themes developed, as shown below:

1. A holistic pedagogy requires holistically educated educators – their training is seen as a tool to enable them to construct their own individual identities (Froebel, 1906)

Themes associated:

Theme 1: Professional identities defined.

Theme 2: Key characteristics of professional learning and development

2. All knowledge is made from experience and we cannot develop knowledge of things that we cannot experience with our senses (MacVannel, 1906)

Themes associated:

Theme 3: Professional identity development

Theme 4: Personal ideals driving practice

Theme 5: Emotions in work with young children

Theme 6: Whose need it is?

3. Like-mindedness and autonomy fosters companionship (Froebel, 1906)

Themes associated:

Theme 7: The struggle to be recognised as professionals

Sub-theme: Nursery education as the driver for social change

Theme 8: Suggestions for change

This study relies on a holistic philosophy that takes into consideration both current understandings of the social world and traditional Froebelian philosophy and principles. Thus, the Froebelian lens have been used in this chapter to reconceptualise the current offering of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the

selected political, geographical and social contexts and to understand the participants' experiences of PLD in their specific contexts. This strategy has allowed for a look at the collected data using multiple perspectives (Newby, 2014), I have systematically interrogated the principles to highlight the ways in which the data collected and the memos collected could link to the principles and make their meaning come to life for the lives of the educators who participated, to highlight the ways in which the principles could enrich the practice of the educator in the study.

4.3 Preliminary open coding

Audio recordings from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed in their original language. I decided not to translate the material gathered in Italian in its entirety as I did not want to risk any resulting change of meaning. Instead, I chose only to translate some of the material, which is presented in this chapter to aid the reader in constructing an understanding of the data collected in both contexts. Examples from the preliminary open coding are provided in Appendices.

4.4 Advanced coding

Taking into consideration the labels developed during initial open coding, I started to group and categorise the concepts. This second phase of data analysis had a twofold aim – to decrease the number of units to work with and to build an analysis of the data on concepts that seemed important to discuss according to the participants' responses. In this way, concepts that were irrelevant or not discussed in depth by the participants were dropped, shifting this phase of coding from open to advanced (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This process of advanced coding was used to look for themes that could emerge. Further examples of advanced coding are provided in

Appendices. In this phase I produced several memos in order to further interrogate the data and my understanding of it.

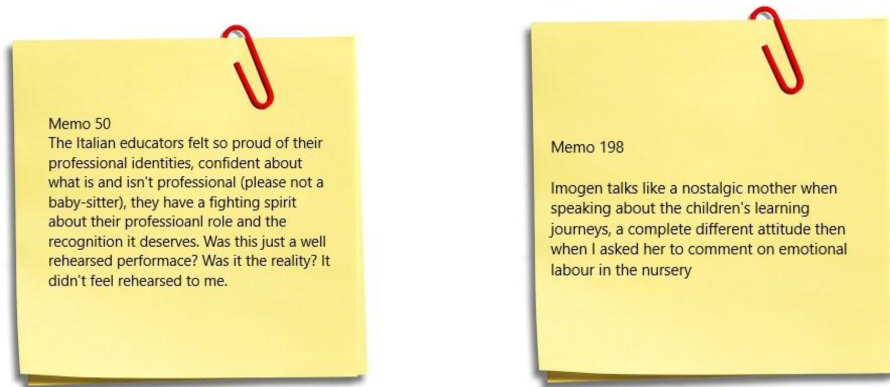


Figure 4.1 - Examples of memos collected

Open Code	**Extract**	**Theme**
Exploration of Professional Identity	'I believe that as educators we are like the Cinderella of the sector, in the sense that we are not recognised as professionals from the state, or at least recognised enough according to our professional dignity…we are often considered babysitters…like fluffy grandmothers…and I believe that there are not enough laws protecting and recognising our professionalism' (Emma)	The struggle to be recognised as professionals

Figure 4.2 - Development of themes from open codes

The advanced coding of the data summarised above allowed me to produce specific categories which I organised as themes and sub-themes regarding the participants' opinions of current PLD on offer, together with their understanding and discussion of how professional identities are formed and maintained. These formed a current picture of how PLD is organised in both settings and advanced suggestions for change that have been interpreted and conceptualised through a Froebelian lens in order to provide a thorough discussion of the data in the next chapter. The table below presents the developed themes, together with a short summary explaining the significance of each.

Theme	**Summary**
Professional identities defined Professional identity development through time Sub-theme: Nursery education as the driver for social change	Participants' perceptions of their professional identities, expressing their definitions of their professional roles.
The struggle to be recognised as professionals	Challenges faced by Early Childhood educators contributing to the current picture of PLD in both contexts.
Key characteristics of professional learning and development Ways of monitoring educators' needs for professional learning and development Suggestions for change	Participants' discussions around the current offer of professional courses highlighting specific key features of PLD in both contexts and suggestions for change.

Personal ideals driving practice	The ethos behind the participants' choices for practice and personal values when working with young children and families.
Emotions in work with young children Whose need is it?	Emotions in work with young children are expressed, together with a discussion of who emotions of love and tenderness are serving.

Figure 4.1 - Themes and sub-themes emerging from advanced coding

4.5 Participants' backgrounds

Twenty participants working in the Early childhood education and care sector were included in this study, ten in Italy and ten in London, all with varying degrees of experience, length of service, qualifications and roles. The majority were Early Childhood educators working with children aged between 0-3 years. The Italian participants had been working in the field for between five and 38 years, with the majority having around ten years of experience. They were all women and had varying qualifications, ranging from a high school diploma to a doctorate in sociology. The English participants had between one and 30 years of experience with the majority having less than ten years. There were nine women and one man and all had various qualifications, ranging from professional diplomas to an MA in education. The table below shows background details of the London participants, together with one quote from their interviews that I believe is important to describe the kind of practitioner they are.

Participant	Role	Years of Experience	Qualification	Who am I?
Bridget	Key person 0-3	13 years	NVQ 2 and 3	'You know with working with the under-twos is, it's amazing because they've just come out of babyhood and they are going through all these different stages. Sometimes they are strong, and sometimes they are too small, and they need a little hug and reassurance'
Lara	Key person 0-3	11 years	NVQ	'I chose, uh, to work with children especially when I had my little girl, my last born'
Imogen	Assistant head teacher	Four years (30 years total experience)	Teaching BA and MA in Early Education	'I suppose I was quite clear from school. Um, when they asked me in school, what I wanted to do, I said I wanted to be a teacher. I just suppose once I started doing the teacher practice, I just thought I'd found my vocation'
Violet	Early Years intervention outreach practitioner	One year in this role (12 years total experience)	Junior school teacher	'The only way a child can develop properly is if there is a stable... if parents are equipped, resourced and supported'
Caroline	Part-time centre assistant/ lunchtime cover	Five and a half years	Studying for a BA in Early Years	'Because I've got children of my own. I've got three children of my own, so I've got a lot of experience'

Megan	School business manager	Eight years	Certificate of School Business Management ICSBN	'I didn't plan it. I just ended up having... coming in for supply for just for few weeks. And then I just managed to get, carry on, carry on. And then I just found I loved it'
Isla	Senior nursery teacher (3-4 years old)	Two years	NNEB, YTS, qualified teacher	'My teachers at school said, well, why don't you do the NNEB? And that's what I did. So, then I was a nursery nurse in a primary school for about seven years. And then I was persuaded to go and train to be a teacher'
Olivia	SEN support assistant	Four years	Diploma in Health and Social Care	'When I started, I was in college and I was studying and working with, you know, children, it seemed like, you know, I was drawn to spend time with children'
Elena	Children centre manager	Nine years (22 years total experience)	NNEB, BA Early Childhood Studies	'It's always been between that (Early Years) and cooking, when I left school, wasn't sure if I was going to go to look at doing something to do with a chef sort of role or childcare and decided to do my NNEB at the time. So I did that straight from school and then I went on to do my Early Childhood Studies degree while I was working full time'
Liam	Site manager	Nine years	Electrician	'I don't think it was, it wasn't to work with children, it was just a job to be honest. Um, uh, I just applied for this job

				and I'm working with the children. Came hand in hand with the job basically. The children love me'
Giulia	Educatrice professionale	20 years	BA Scienze dell'Educazione	'In a period of personal crisis at university, I asked myself what I would like to really do, and so I came back to my love for children and enrolled again for a BA in Education'
Chiara	Coordinatore pedagogico/ responsabile per la formazione in house centro di ricercar Bottega di Geppetto	Nine years	BA Philosophy, qualified Early Years teacher	'As I finished university, I thought about what I wanted to do, and I thought that I would have liked to try and work with children. I had a romantic idea (of working with children), the job wasn't as it turned out to be in reality, but you never know until you are in it'
Ilaria	Educatrice di infanzia	Ten years	BA psychology, specialised in psychotherapy	'I started studying in the field of Early Childhood but then I set it aside because I started to work in hospitals. When my bursary ended, I looked around and there was a vacancy for an educator in the asilo nido (nursery)'
Sofia	Educatrice di infanzia e coordinamento pedagogico	30 years	Istituto Magistrale (Diploma)	'I always felt it as a natural disposition, all my schoolmates always said that I wanted to work with children from a young age. I always had this disposition for young children'

Emma	Educatrice di infanzia	Ten years	BA Psychology	'I studied psychology at university then I did an internship always for the university, but I wanted to come closer to home for personal reasons'
Alice	Educatrice e coordinatore tecnico per la pedagogia	18 years	Diploma in educatore d'infanzia (equivalent to NVQ)	'I made the choice after my daughter was born, before I couldn't stand children especially the young ones, but after my daughter was born, I discovered a new world and I started to do some self-reflection'
Romina	Organizzazione del servizio	5 years	PhD in Sociology	'A national trend (at the time) was to diminish regional expenditure and I was worried to be transferred far away. So, I looked for job vacancies and I started to work in the school office, then after my children were born I tried to get a job into this specific school because I knew that they were well regarded'
Martina	Educatrice di infanzia	38 years	BA in Pedagogy and MA in Pedagogical Coordination	'In the 80s I was the cook for this school while I was studying at university for a BA in pedagogy. After my BA I got a job as an educator'
Giorgia	Educatrice di infanzia	18 years	BA Scienze dell'Educazione	'I think that an educator has to have a broad range of experiences, in my previous experience I felt stale and static, so I decided to be transferred

				to this service and reinvent myself’

Figure 4.2 - Participants' backgrounds

Most of the participants emphasise that their decision to work with children is something that comes from within, ‘a vocation’ (Imogen, Olivia). This decision is often linked to becoming a mother (Lara, Caroline, Alice, Romina), as a result of deep self-reflection (Giorgia, Chiara, Giulia) or as a decision that was taken early in life, specifically from school (Sofia, Ilaria). These initial reflections by the participants show how diverse the Early Childhood workforce is. Not only are the initial qualifications very different, but the pathways which led to them choosing to work with young children form a complex and varied mosaic.

4.6 Theme 1: Professional identities defined

A holistic pedagogy requires holistically educated educators – their training is seen as a tool to enable them to construct their own individual identities (Froebel, 1906)

In this theme I have grouped together educators’ discussions which define the most important characteristics that an Early Childhood educator must have. Following the tenets of Froebelian philosophy that have supported this research, the Spherical law has been especially useful when forming this theme and connecting it to the Froebelian principle above. Froebel’s Spherical law has supported the analysis showing the need to move from the act of knowledge acquisition for educators, to considering their holistic development which also supports a strong identity development process, so seeing the self in relation to others and nature. As Froebel’s

spherical law takes its starting point in the self, a unique self, made of morality, intellect, emotions and thinking, the development of which is influenced by practical actions, strictly linked to the environment in which the self exists and within nature, it has been used in this analysis to understand the process of education for the participants in the study in order to clarify the implications of these processes on their everyday practice and understand the place that PLD had in the development of their professional identities (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020). A further important tenet of Froebelian philosophy used in this thesis is the concept of starting from where the learner is (Bruce, 1997), to analyse the existing offer of PLD for educators and understanding its aims. The starting points and principles from which the PLD offer is designed are as fundamental as the end results that the PLD offer is trying to achieve. A fundamental consideration made through the analysis of the data has been to understand whether the current offer allows educators to think for themselves, giving them opportunities to make choices and pursue their own interests while developing their practice further (Tovey, 2020) or whether it hinders these important processes. Education, according to Froebel (1906), should be a means to stimulate freedom and self-determination in the learner producing a sense of empowerment.

According to the participants, an Early Childhood educator must possess a variety of characteristics, ranging from being able to understand and foster children's abilities, to being aware and well versed in the different policies and theories underpinning practice in Early childhood education and care settings. The need to be respectful was also deemed essential in order to create and maintain appropriate professional boundaries between children and families and the educator. The Early Childhood educators also expressed that, even though people who have an initial disposition can

learn the job, not just anyone can do it – being an Early Childhood educator is a demanding role and passion alone is not enough. Appropriate and consistent training must also be in place to support practice and knowledge development. Emma says:

> *'This is not something that you improvise, professionalism comes from the capacities of the individual, it needs to be formed and shared but the most important thing is to be properly instructed to be an educator.'*

An additional issue was important for the participants in order to understand their professional identity, that of parenthood. Some participants highlighted that motherhood can give Early Childhood educators another way of seeing things and perhaps give them more credibility in front of parents than just having the right kind of qualification, because it helps them to tune in to the parents they work with and helps them to develop empathy and have knowledge of strategies that can be adapted for nursery use.

During one of the focus group activities which was designed to help participants discuss the most important characteristics that an educator should possess, some interesting findings arose. The English participants constructed their order of importance in a pyramid shape (see Appendices). Terms such as 'passion', 'patience' and 'respect' were of the utmost importance, 'professional', 'teamwork' and 'creativity' were in the middle of the pyramid, while 'courage', being 'welcoming' and being able to 'sing' were the characteristics deemed least important. The Italian Early Childhood educators chose to organise the characteristics in a reverse pyramid shape (see Appendices). Some of the most important characteristics were 'listening', 'being positive', 'trust in the children' and 'good communication' while 'passion', 'patience', 'energy' and 'teamwork' were of mid importance followed by 'having a

good sense of humour', 'being motherly' and 'being kind and caring' as having the least importance. This suggests that the order in which the Early Childhood educators decided to place the characteristics mostly reflected their personal work ethic and the setting's ethos.

During the one-to-one interviews, further definitions of who an educator is varied. Martina says that an educator is,

> *'…a scientist …like a farmer …who constructs the right soil for the plants to grow, he puts them next to each other because it is appropriate, but he doesn't start pulling leaves out to make the plants grow faster'* .

It is also important for children and adults to be co-operators of experiences in the setting, having equal power to create a stimulating environment and be part of it. Additionally, conduct, and knowing what is appropriate, was an important part of the way in which Early Childhood educators defined who a professional is. Creating boundaries with children and families and respecting those seemed to be extremely important to most of the participants. Here Livia explains what it means to her to set appropriate boundaries:

> *'Being fair with children and their families. Being available to them but this doesn't mean developing a friendship, especially with the families. Professionalism means that if you need to talk to me you can call the number of the school and I can tell you whatever you want to know, you certainly wouldn't call my mobile phone to ask these things. Apart from these things I am a professional when I know what to offer to the children, I know how to observe children to understand them.'*

The discussions with the participants also suggested that, as professionals, they must strive to keep their emotions under control. When trying to define their professional identity, some Early Childhood educators expressed feelings of pressure as a result

of temporary contracts being offered to some staff. Not being a permanent member of staff made them feel in need of a more definite job role, thus having an impact on their feelings of professionalism. Most deemed the act of kissing a child as unprofessional and some participants were absolutely against the use of emotions to define a professional. For example, Chiara says:

> *'I am very pugnacious on this…I am very angry because I think that this element risks completely devaluing the professionalism of educators. I am convinced that in every job where you have to relate yourself to others, of course you must use emotions.'*

4.7 **Theme 2: Key characteristics of professional learning and development**

The current professional learning and development being offered in both contexts is seen as a way in which Early Childhood educators can learn and have an opportunity to reflect on pedagogy and practice. All of the participants saw PLD as a fundamental part of their role. Martina attaches a great importance to it, saying,

> *'…the highest education I had was from our internal offer of courses, definitely not from my university degree'.*

Most Early Childhood educators agreed with these views, recognising that such a demanding job requires adequate PLD to discuss their professional practice and compare it to the practice of others. Ilaria perfectly describes the nature of working with young children:

> *'…in our work we can never say to know everything. This job is a job that always evolves, that is made of relationships with other educators, we really need this with others. If not we risk of...giving children*

> *standardised answers for behaviours that have been catalogued and standardised, taking away from the spontaneity of childhood'.*

I believe that this statement is especially important to understand the respect for childhood that this educator expresses and her view of the need for a holistic and personalised learning experience for Early Childhood educators in order to provide the same for the children.

4.7.1 *London*

Professional learning and development in the London setting can be summarised as being comprised either of in-house or outside courses. The in-house courses are organised and delivered during inset days and early closure days, which are planned in the school academic calendar in advance. There is some statutory training that nursery Early Childhood educators must complete every year but, in general, PLD is not regulated in the UK. The London setting involved in this research is part of a consortium made up of three nursery schools. Training is shared between the nurseries and the setting participating in this research acts as a hub for the other nurseries. In order to plan for and decide which courses to provide, the leadership team relies on interpreting data from children's admissions to understand the cohort that they will be working with. They also rely on Ofsted reports to understand where to improve staff knowledge and skills. Early Childhood educators in this setting apply for training through a form provided on the school intranet. They give details about the course, the cost implications for other staff to cover their shift as these courses are mainly during working hours, and the form is then considered and approved by the head teacher. A copy of this form is presented in Appendices. Because of reduced funding for training, the setting has to be careful to measure the

impact that it has had. Training is seen as an important investment that must be translated into a change of practice and, therefore, improved experiences for children and families using the service.

4.7.2 *San Miniato*

The offer for professional learning and development in San Miniato can be summarised as being comprised of different courses divided between in-house courses, itinerant workshops in other local settings, and monthly pedagogical coordination meetings where issues strictly related to theory and practice are discussed according to specific thematic paths. PLD in the region is regulated by law and Early Childhood educators must complete a minimum of 20 hours in order to be allowed to practise. The courses are done mainly at weekends or after nursery hours. San Miniato is the lead for these services in the Valdarno Inferiore Area, taking responsibility for the legislation in the area on ECEC services, the quality of training offered to educators, authorisation and accreditation procedures for both individual professionals and services, monitoring of the ECEC services network, and more general training of the workforce (Fortunati, 2014). In this way, PLD includes the whole geographical area, which is comprised of four municipalities who come together to train in groups of 40-50 educators.

PLD is also organised in different paths depending on the years of experience that Early Childhood educators have. The basic PLD offered for the area is generally made up of five or six paths with a duration of 16, 20 or 24 hours each, which the Early Childhood educators can choose between. The principle in this context is not to have a traditional offering with a teacher fronting the class, but to use the educators'

experience in order to promote a process of reflexivity in their practice. An alternative to traditional courses are itinerant workshops in other local settings, comprised of four meetings a year. Each meeting is held in a different area setting, where the hosts give a brief outline of their service. They then present on a theme where they feel they have strength and good practice or they can choose to present on an aspect of practice where they feel weaker and would benefit from the input of other educators. At the end of every training session the Early Childhood educators fill out a satisfaction survey to say how the course went, to inform new training for the next year. A copy of the satisfaction survey is presented in Appendices.

4.8 Theme 3: Professional identity development through time

All knowledge is made from experience and we cannot develop knowledge of things that we cannot experience with our senses (MacVannel, 1906)

Froebel's Forms of Life have used in this section together with the Froebelian principle above to consider the importance of meaningful everyday experiences for the lives of educators connected to their learning. The Forms of Knowledge have supported an examination of the knowledge that educators acquire through the professional learning and development courses connecting to their everyday practice aiming to make visible the links with the educators' realities. As Bruce (2021) reminds us, Froebelian education requires professionals who are committed and well educated, with intellectual lives that are well fed and developed through being with children and observing their lives. According to Froebel it is not correct to think of the educators' capacities for learning as intensifying as the years of training increase, therefore education should not repeat itself unchanged through the life of the educator, making the Forms of Knowledge an ever-evolving characteristic (Lilley,

1967). The tenet of interconnectivity has also been used in this section to highlight the importance of supplementing theoretical knowledge of educators with first-hand experiences, these are far more powerful, according to Bruce (2021:43) than 'an explanation in words'. As Froebel describes the only way that we can give meaning to theoretical knowledge, is by connecting first-hand experiences to the theory to supplement our observations of the world and stimulate creativity (Froebel in Lilley, 1967).

Professional identity is seen by the participants as something that matures through time – it is never static and it grows with the educator. Contributing factors to this growth are, according to some of the participants, experiences gained through teaching and PLD opportunities, as well as further training. The ways in which the participants' professional identities have changed through time have been deeply felt, as Giorgia explains:

> *'I was like a sparkling water bottle, I had so many little bubbles of air, I was full and ready to burst but without a purpose. Now I am less explosive but there is more substance to my practice'.*

Livia highlights how she had to,

> *'...find the right distance with the families and with the children, I needed to understand where I fit in. I went by trial and error at the beginning and this helped to mature my professional identity'.*

Some of the participants specifically mention PLD as a contributing factor behind the maturing of their professional identities. For example, Elena says:

> *'I think I have a lot more knowledge and things that, you know, even thinking about that conversation we've had around professional boundaries, I think you don't know what you don't know until, you know*

it, if that makes sense. So, you learn so much as you go along that you, you know, when I think back to when I first came here when I was, I think 19 or something like that, um, yeah, that there would maybe be some things that I might not have thought so clearly about or might not have seen that something wasn't professional, for example.'

4.9 Theme 4: Personal ideals driving practice

During the interviews and focus groups, the participants intertwined their discussions about professional learning and development and their professional identities with their personal ideas behind their practice. Sometimes these reflected the ethos of the setting they were part of, and sometimes these were a result of years of experience and self-reflection. During the interviews, the participants expressed how they find it difficult to link the demands of the curriculum and the professional role that such demands entail, and their personal ethics at work. Comments were made such as: *'I don't think we generally kiss'* (Imogen); *'Because we do safeguarding'* (Isla); and *'A cuddle and having them on your lap sometimes is fine'* (Caroline).

We can see here how the act of kissing children was firstly deemed as something that doesn't happen, because children need to be safeguarded. However, Caroline recognises that a cuddle is OK, but no kissing. Personal close contact appears to be something that is sometimes done but not really articulated upon, as if it is something that Early Childhood educators do but can't recognise as being part of professional behaviour. In discussing the personal ideals that guide her practice, Emma says:

> *'Children are active and according to the contexts they live in they develop certain skills, so if people consider children as only needing care, the child will develop accordingly, while if the child is considered competent and a protagonist of the action capable of taking decisions with autonomy, then other skills will be stimulated'.*

Giorgia sees working with children like a *'ball of yarn of relationships',* conveying the idea that all the relationships formed are interlinked and equally important for the development of the child.

During collection of the data, the Early Childhood educators used practical examples to illustrate their personal rationales, showing the importance of working hand in hand with families to provide stimulating experiences for the children. The Early Childhood educators explained that their efforts in documenting the child's development and experiences in the setting are a way to construct an image of the child to build a bridge with the families. Several examples showed how the educators' personal values influenced their everyday practice.

4.10 Theme 5: Emotions in work with young children

The Early Childhood educators said that it would be impossible to work in an emotionless environment where young children are involved. They often perceived their professional identities as being closely tied to emotions – these played an important role in their discussions and are an important part of their professional identities. Some Early Childhood educators described the job as being emotionally draining, to highlight just how much emotions are central to the way that Early Childhood educators relate to children in their care. When asked if she thought that emotions devalued the profession, Imogen was very strong in stating:

> *'It depends who it is really, you've got to know the children. If that child needs you to say (I love you), what are you going to do?'*

Several participants also said that children need this kind of personal and emotional support and that it would be inappropriate to deny them. Most Early Childhood

educators felt that a degree of emotion and being in touch with their own emotions at work was fundamental. Ilaria further elaborates on this train of thought by saying:

> *'We can't successfully relate to another person without emotions. Emotions are firmly there in our work, they are inside us, inside everything we do. I believe that me fully living my emotions in front of the children also allows them to understand them and fully live them'*

In this sense, the role of the educator is to be a model in enabling children to express and be comfortable with their emotions. Sometimes the arms of the educator are considered a safe harbour for children. Close relationships can develop with children in their care, as Giulia demonstrates:

> *'There was a child in my care, well, when she started talking she called me mum. Part of me was so proud of this, but then when she left the nursery, I cried and cried, I was so desperate, it was like a bit of my heart went away with her.'*

In the same way, an equal number of Early Childhood educators were not so sure that this had to be part of an educator's professional identity. Chiara was very invested when talking about this issue. She was almost angry, expressing her feelings by saying:

> *'What I think needs to be highlighted is the professionality of the educator, because I will never be able to understand why we are constantly asked to understand our emotions in work with young children while a doctor working in oncology, who sees children die every day and has to speak to families is never asked this. In the field of Early Childhood there is still this cultural idea that we are not real professionals, that we are just people who like children'.*

Liam adds another layer to the discussion by expressing what it means to be the only male working in the setting. He says:

'Um, because I'm that male, I'm the site manager, so you don't… it might be seen in someone's eyes as, why is he hugging that child? So, if you come here you've got to be a bit... safeguarding basically... guard yourself. Because kids can say things and they don't... it'd be interpreted the wrong way.'

Liam expressed these kinds of thoughts often during our interview, showing how much pressure there is, especially for men in the field, to have exemplary behaviour at all times.

4.11 **Theme 6: Whose need is it?**

During several conversations about the role of emotions when working with young children, many of the Early Childhood educators expressed the idea that strength lies in understanding who needs the tender and close contact. But is this because children need it or because the educator takes pleasure in such close relationships? Elena believes that,

'…it depends whose need it is for, if it is for the child because they need the comfort of that kind of contact, then I think yes. It's inappropriate if it is because it's more of the adults' needs'.

Alice concludes by saying:

'I think emotions are important …but also in this, don't fall into the trap …so the educator should always ask, whose need is it? Because most of the time it's us that need a cuddle, not the child, we are merely attaching our need to the child.'

4.12 Theme 7: The struggle to be recognised as professionals

Like-mindedness and autonomy fosters companionship (Froebel, 1906)

In this section the Froebelian ideas around interconnectivity, have been used to highlight that just as the needs of educators are connected to the wellbeing of children, so family and educational life are connected (Bruce 2021), children and educators should recognise their place and connectedness with the family and the life of the community around them (Werth, 2019). This section shows that through important connections in the lives of educators, knowledge is formed allowing educators to understand how others work and feel about their work and how these feelings are helped and enhanced, expanded and better used by knowing what is important for educators in their specific work contexts (Hargreaves et al., 2014 in Smith, 2018). Froebel's Forms of Beauty (Tovey, 2020) have been used in this section to provide a link with the educators' relationships with others, as the forms of beauty concern a sense of harmony, this concept has been linked with the educators' working and living in harmony with others, when adults can see and appreciate their own knowledge, this results in a harmonious relationship with the child, where the beauty of play is appreciated with a deep understanding of just how much what educators observe every day matters for the wellbeing of children and their families. Self-awareness, relationships with others and a fundamental relationship with the universe to explain the law of the sphere, knowing oneself in all relationships is at the heart of the Froebelian lens for this research because this is the fundamental characteristic of becoming educated according to Froebel (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020). Furthermore, Considering the principle of like-mindedness fostering companionship (Froebel, 1906) has been important to reflect on the ways in

which the findings presented in this chapter, exemplify the importance of regular and meaningful physical and emotional connections between educators, children, and families. The importance of critically reflective practice in professional development is a principle at the forefront of this research, used to emphasise the latent power of the individual's capacity for learning, together with understanding PLD as being 'sustained by a culture of mutual learning based on participation and shared understandings' (Lazzari et al., 2013:136). Participation in social practice is a crucial element that has the power to promote a view of knowledge acquisition as being highly linked to the social world and the specific context under investigation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Within the theme of the various struggles that Early Childhood educators face in their everyday practice, not being recognised as professionals because they work with young children is an especially evident feature. Emma says:

> *'I believe that our profiles as educators, we are a bit like the Cinderella of the field in the sense that there is no recognition from the state that is, in my opinion, adequate to the dignity of our roles. Often, we are considered merely babysitters, like if we were grandmothers, the laws that are in force don't protect us enough, they don't recognise our professional status but also…the financial compensation for this job is not that great'.*

Martina also agrees with this view, saying:

> *'The thing I found more negative is that it is not adequately recognised, not even our role as researchers…even though there are entire books saying that 0-3 is one of the most important periods of a child's life, that it is important to have competent educators, sadly from theory to practice, and I mean the perception that society has of our role ...it takes forever'.*

The Early Childhood educators see an imbalance of public recognition for the role in the way that they are initially trained. In Italy, Early Childhood educators working with children aged between 0-3 years have a shorter degree path than those working with older children. This, according to the participants, shows how little Early Childhood educators working with young children are considered. Low recognition of the role sometimes starts in school when students decide their career paths for the future. Some Early Childhood educators reported noticing that it is usually those who are not considered to have much academic ability that are advised to work with children. The job is presented as an easy path to take, supporting the stereotype that anyone can work with children if they want. The Early Childhood educators also inferred that this kind of antiquated view is often perpetuated by those Early Childhood educators who do have less education and don’t do as much initial and continuous professional development. Public opinion is also seen as not being geared towards regarding Early Childhood educators Early Childhood educators as professionals. Even the laws that govern the profession and the Early childhood education and care sector are not specifically tailored to it.

4.13 **Sub-theme: Nursery education as a driver for social change**

Some of the participants said that nursery education has an important role for families and children. Sometimes going to nursery is seen as an escape for families from the reality of home, a way to have a break from whatever happens in the house. The Early Childhood educators see their jobs as making a difference to families and that nursery education is an important service available to citizens. The notion of citizenship is also discussed by Romina, who says:

> *‘Knowing that you are doing something for ordinary citizens is important. Especially for such important citizens as young children and,*

> *in even more specific terms, for children aged between 0-3, because they are the youngest.'*

Giorgia continues this theme by saying that this is a very special and important job, because 'you have the understanding that you are working with people that represent the future of our world'. These reflections show a shared belief that nursery education is a way to prepare children for their future in terms of their place in society as contributing citizens. These beliefs highlight the need to shift the paradigm from seeing children as being important for what they can become, and therefore of nursery education as serving the purpose of preparing a future society, to considering education and children as important in their own right, not just to sustain the current class system in which society is currently organised.

4.14 Theme 8: Suggestions for change

The Early Childhood educators in San Miniato felt that the satisfaction survey they must complete after each training session is a successful strategy because it makes them feel listened to, by centring on issues such as times of training, content, and how the course is taught. Once completed the surveys are used by the coordinating and organising teams to decide what to propose for the next year, so that Early Childhood educators feel their needs have been taken into account. Even though the majority of participants were extremely positive about and satisfied with the current PLD offering, some Early Childhood educators also suggested changes. Time for one-to-one supervision was seen as being hard to find as everyone's needs are different and sometimes the Early Childhood educators felt that they were being treated with a one-size-fits-all mentality. The offer for training also depends on the school's financial circumstances. Some of those less fortunate can only send five or

six teachers a year for training and there is usually not much of the budget left for Early Years. Giorgia also recognises that sometimes it is hard to agree with some of the ways in which trainers teach:

> *'It's been like finding a wall in front of me, when they are convinced that there is only one way to do the right thing'.*

During the activity-based focus group, I provided the participants at both settings with paper and pens and asked them to draw a manifesto for their professional development and their suggestions for change. When discussing their suggestions, the participants in London expressed a need for more time to meet for appraisals away from the children. This was also discussed as a problematic issue in the interviews. The participants in London also wished to visit more settings, as they believed that seeing good practice mostly works better than hearing about it in theory. The Early Childhood educators wanted more practical courses and workshops but also the opportunity to have more peer-to-peer mentoring. They also felt strongly about the availability of more funding for staff to go on courses, together with more academic resources to consult in their training room. Finally, the Early Childhood educators believed that having a compulsory training schedule like the Italian Early Childhood educators would add more value and professional recognition to their roles.

The Italian Early Childhood educators similarly focused their manifesto on having more practical workshop visits to other settings. They were interested in having small work groups with ten people or less, as they felt that sometimes groups were too large for everyone to participate equally. They also wanted tutors with specific competences which matched the theme of the course, independent from experience

of working with children, as they felt that an outsider's view can often be very stimulating. Since their training periods are very rigid during the school year, the Early Childhood educators expressed the need to have more flexible offers for courses, so that some of them could be done during school holidays. Instead of having their courses mainly at weekends, the Early Childhood educators believed that it would be more beneficial to have PLD during work hours, much like the London setting. Both settings expressed the need to have more away days or full-immersion training, so that they could concentrate and reflect on the course issues, rather than their reflections being interrupted by going back to work.

Imogen believes that regulating professional learning and development hours by law would be useful to retain staff, and adds:

> *'There's a big struggle to retain staff in Early Years in private nurseries as well as schools. And that reason is that there's lots about their emotional wellbeing (in their day-to-day practice) and people feeling stressed and they can't cope with the job.'*

Isla also presents a similar opinion, saying:

> *'There's nothing set in stone to say that teachers or educators have to have any training at all. You know? I mean we have our five inset days,*

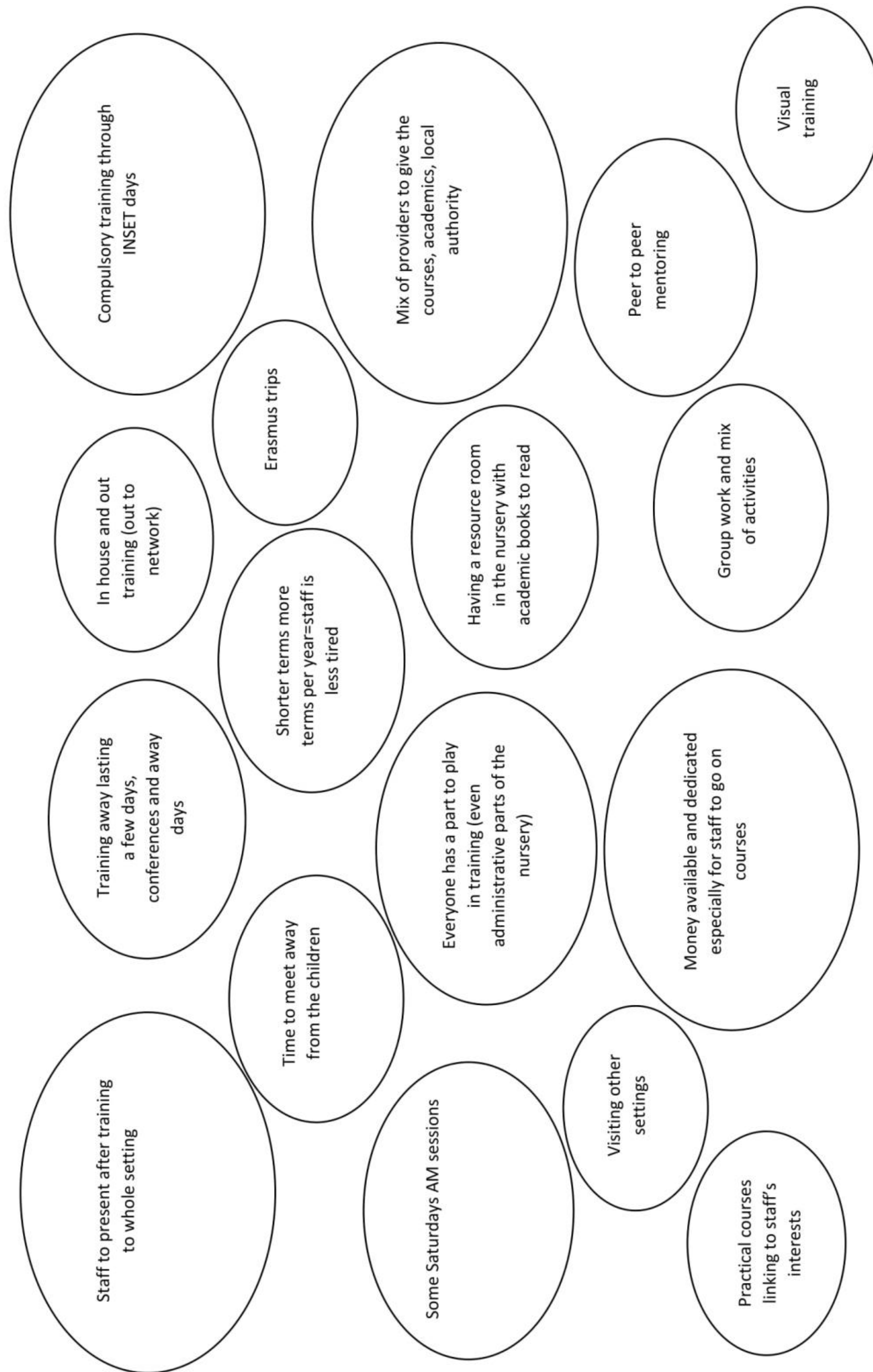


Figure 4.3 - Focus group manifesto, London

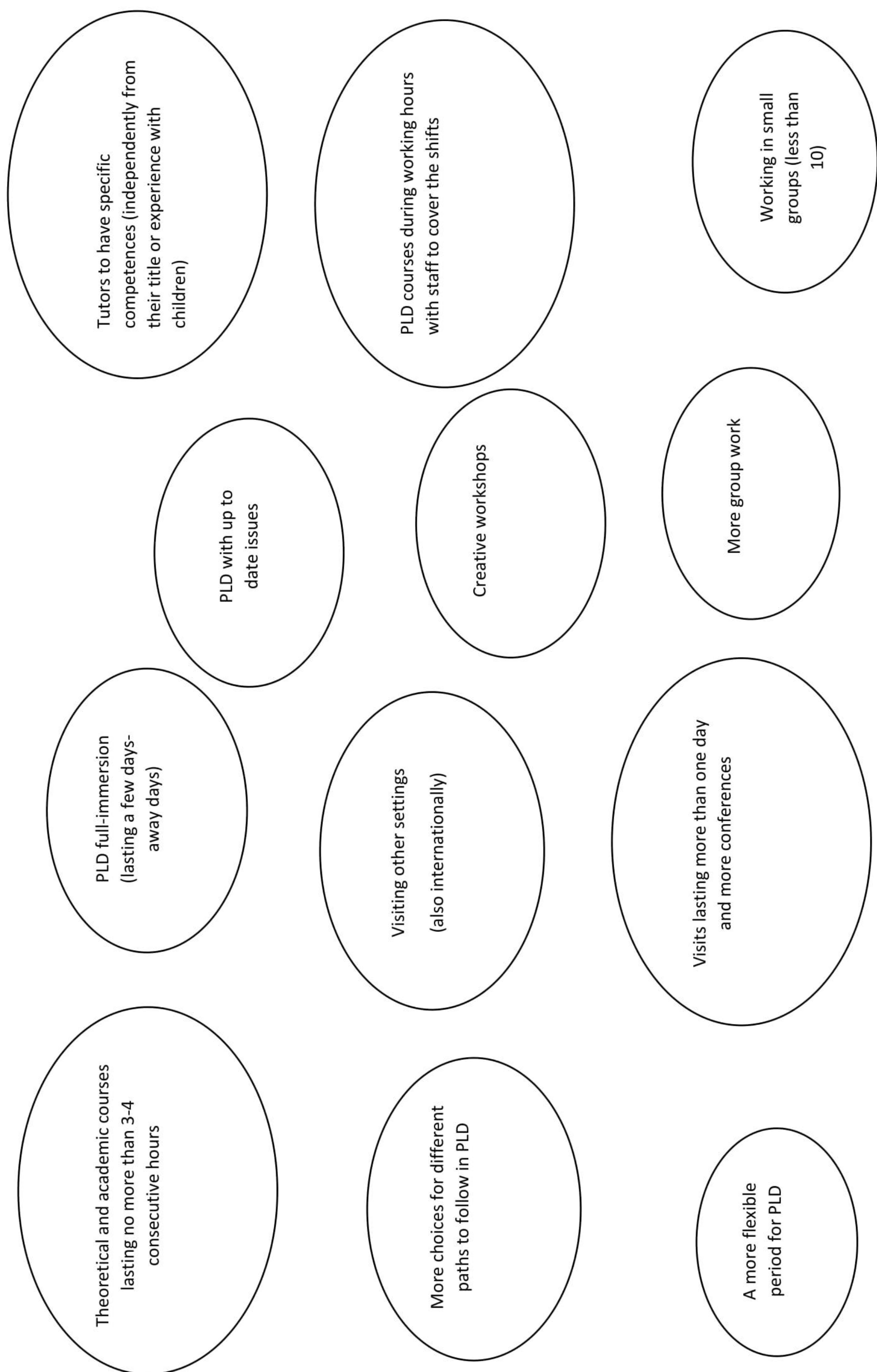


Figure 4.4 - Focus group manifesto, San Miniato

which is... so, we get that everybody gets that. But it's the school that determines which two inset days we get'.

Violet says:

'I think I'd like more to come from me (...) I'd like to sort of have more control over what I wanted to do really, and it to be as the year goes on, 'cause sometimes I think that your appraisal or you don't always have a… you're just thinking in the here and now (...) Whereas I think as you're progressing through your jobs for the year you think, you know, I'd really like some training on that or I'd really like it as things pop up, as things or difficulties arise, and you see where your weaknesses are. Um, I think I'd like to have training in response to that'.

4.15 **Summary**

4.15.1 *Identities of educators*

Overall, the participants said that Early Childhood educators must possess a variety of characteristics to be considered capable of the job, such as being able to understand and support children's growing abilities and interests, being aware of different policies and theories underpinning practice, being respectful of children and their families, and comfortable in creating appropriate professional boundaries. Furthermore, educators' professional identities were discussed as being closely linked with emotions – the job can be seen as emotionally draining because of the need to provide personalised care to all children and showing affection in order to satisfy the children's need for emotional care while in the setting. However, some Early Childhood educators participating in this research felt that they should keep their emotions under control, so that they could be seen as being more professional.

Also mentioned as being important was that being more detached can help the educator to see the whole child and assess his or her needs in an objective way to plan for the next steps. In the same way that many participants supported and felt comfortable with the use of tender emotions when working with children, several were also not so sure that this had to be part of an educator's professional identity. This proved to be a contested and sensitive issue for all Early Childhood educators included in this research.

4.15.2 *Values of the profession*

The educators' ethos of practice seems to be formed both by following the ethos of the setting and through personal experiences gained in everyday practice. Professionality was defined as something that matures through time with the help of PLD and experience with children, but it is also made of many different facets and this is why an educator needs a varied experience. Training and PLD were regarded as fundamental for Early Childhood educators to develop their innate drive towards the job. However, policy initiatives and directives were seen as not being adequately tailored to the Early childhood education and care sector.

Early Childhood educators also described a struggle to link curriculum demands with their professional role and the way that they feel in their everyday practice, creating a mismatch between what is asked of Early Childhood educators by central policies and curriculum demands and what the Early Childhood educators deem to be the children's needs in everyday practice. Early Childhood educators felt that their professionality and the importance of their roles is not recognised appropriately in policy guidance and public opinion and that the profession is often seen as something

women do when they are not succeeding academically, supporting the stereotype that working with young children is an easy job.

4.15.3 *A picture of the current PLD offering*

Professional learning and development was described by the Early Childhood educators as a fundamental part of their job, as a way to allow them to develop and reflect on their practice and to compare it with neighbouring settings. Overall, the participants expressed the need to be provided with more full-immersion training, have more control over the PLD courses available, and to be free to request training at any point. They also felt that the timing of training was essential, for example, provided without delay when policies and laws concerning Early childhood education and care are released. The financial stability of settings was also seen as a determining factor in the amount and quality of training that they could access.

The need has now arisen to look at the situation – the mosaic of environments under scrutiny in Situational Analysis – as a whole and expand my lens of focus. Doing this has helped me to concentrate on other aspects that the collected data has highlighted. A different way to analyse the situation is needed at this point, which is why I have used Clarke's Situational Analysis approach (Clarke, 2003, 2005; Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). For this research, and as discussed in Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology, my aim is to read the data 'from different perspectives and for different purposes' (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015:126). This approach has allowed me to take the entire situation as a unit of analysis, permitting the simultaneous exploration of structures and discourses, and the connection of the macro and micro levels of the collected data. To create a 'textual geography'

(Salazar Pérez & Cannella, 2013), I have used the data collected through documentary research, semi-structured interviews and focus groups and examined their reciprocal relationships and influences. I have used Situational Analysis because it enables me to represent the *messiness* in the field of study, opening the possibility to ask critical questions and to generate partial answers for particular situations (Mathar, 2008). Moreover, Situational Analysis has allowed me to draw together different kinds of data to enable an analysis of the relations between its parts, so that 'the situation per se becomes the ultimate unit of analysis' (Clarke, 2005:4). This specific methodological approach has also allowed me to 'address and elucidate the complexities of specific situations making the usually invisible (…) social features of a situation more visible' (Clarke, 2005:21).

The next section advances a deeper analysis of the coded data presented up to this point. The implications of the findings concerning a reconceptualisation of professional learning and development through a Froebelian lens and Early Childhood educators' perspectives on professional identities in the UK and Italy have undergone an even deeper level of analysis, in order to gain profound insights into the situation under research and the participants' views.

Chapter 5: Expanding the Focus, Considering Contexts of Practice and Sites of Silence in the Data

5.1 Introduction

During the data analysis, I wanted to look at the data collected from a different angle and expand the focus of attention by considering the contexts of practice in which the participants are situated. An additional and important aim of this exercise is to articulate the ‘sites of silence’ in the data (Clarke, 2005:85), using two connected mapping techniques, situational maps (5.1) and social worlds/arena maps aimed at understanding the collective sites of social action (5.3). A relational analysis of the case studies (5.2) was applied to the situational maps, which produced several intersections (5.4). Power relationships in the data are also analysed in this chapter (5.5) together with the implications arising from the relations identified (5.6).

5.2 Situational maps

The main goal when producing situational maps is to lay out ‘all the most important human and non-human elements’ in the situation by asking the following questions: ‘Who and what are in this situation? Who and what matters in this situation? What elements “make a difference” in this situation?’ (Clarke, 2005:87). As Clarke, Friese & Washburn (2015) explain, it is the very action of drawing the maps that provokes thinking and stimulates a deeper analysis of the coded data representing a specific context. The messy situational map below (Figure 5.1) has been created by putting together the maps representing each context which can be found in Appendices. These maps have been produced by using coded data and not raw – in this way multiple readings of the data were possible and situated in a specific historical and

geographical context (Clarke, 2005). In the initial messy maps that I developed I started to include everything that I deemed to be worth looking into in terms of data collection. Subsequently, I modified and focused the maps as the coding progressed and the specific direction of the collected data became clearer. These maps have acted as a general guide to understand how the collected data changed and shifted my interpretations of the issues under research (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015). The map below and the maps in Appendices are the final versions of the many produced during the analysis.

Using the messy maps, I identified the human and non-human actors in the situation. According to the map produced, the role of 'Nursery Nurse' came out strongly as being a central human actor. This first look at the map prompted me to write a memo while the coding was ongoing. In it I noted how the English Early Childhood educators appeared tentative when defining what it means to be a nursery nurse and this reflection applied to the team as a whole. However, especially with the young educators, I got the feeling that they were not used to thinking about and deconstructing what their role meant – it almost felt that the interviews and focus groups with me may have been one of the only times that they had done this exercise in personal reflection.

I also noted the non-human actors as being the 'Children's Centre', the 'school' and 'professional learning and development'. These elements were also inevitably linked to discourses around the ethos both of the setting and of the educators, and around the wellbeing of educators. The Early Childhood educators in the English context

described the PLD offer as being ‘important’ – another of my early memos focused on this. I felt that

Figure 5.1 - Global messy map

their words were quite unassertive, as if they didn't feel much ownership over the process of PLD and were resigned to defining the process this way, mostly because they were conditioned to believe in the importance of PLD as a top-down process in which they had to passively participate. Once satisfied with the messy map and that its depth comprehensively encapsulated the different discourses from the collected data, I produced an Ordered Situational Map for the London case study (Figure 5.2).

Ordered Situational Map, London

COLLECTIVE HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS
Junior schoolteacher
Lunchtime assistant
SEN support assistant
Assistant Head teacher
Nursery nurse
Children's centre manager
Teaching assistant
SENCO
Senior nursery teacher
School business manager
Centre assistant
Site manager

NONHUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS
Council
Local Authority
PLD provision
PLD
School Development and Centre Plan
Training course request form
Supervision/ appraisal
In-house training
Performance management

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND/OR COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS
Making a difference
Rules of the profession
Teamwork
Leadership
Trust
Improve the staff
Determination
Respect
Inclusion
Emotion/ Empathy
Patience
Expectations
Clear vision
Passionate
Home visits
Nurture groups

IMPLICATED SILENT ACTORS/ACTANTS
Children
Families

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS
Training budget
Investment
Reduced funding
Cost implications
Invest in the staff
Pay Development
Ofsted
Council
Local Authority
Setting policies
Bachelor of Education

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF NONHUMAN ACTANTS
Autonomy
Who is a professional?
Constructions around who is a child understood to be
Educate
Ethos
Impact

Staff Retention
Legal requirements

MAJOR ISSUES/DEBATES (USUALLY CONTESTED)
Mother
Protect yourself/guard yourself
Be recognised
Professional boundaries
Not being able to cope with the demands
Feeling stressed
Boundaries with children and families
Not easy/tough job
Emotionally draining
Being a professional
Don't compete with families

SOCIOCULTURAL/SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS
No set hours for training
Teacher terms and conditions
Statutory obligations
Curriculum
NVQ
NNEB
Diploma
Being Male
British values
Inset Days
Early closures
Professional backgrounds
Safeguarding
Health and Safety

OTHER KEY ELEMENTS
Love of the job
Confidentiality
Staff retention
Emotional wellbeing of the educators
Feeling secure
Open discussion
Visits to other settings

SPATIAL ELEMENTS
School
Borough
Training room
Children's centre
Training Consortium

RELATED DISCURSES (HISTORICAL, NARRATIVE, AND/OR VISUAL)
Kind and caring (educator)
Warm and friendly (educator)

Figure 5.2 - Ordered Situational Map, London

From a first look at this map, I can see how the human actors were in fact further specifying the role of a nursery nurse, breaking down the job into many other roles such as 'junior schoolteacher', 'lunchtime assistant', 'SEN support assistant', 'Children Centre Manager', 'SENCO'. Furthermore, this map identified other key human actors as 'Site Manager' and 'School Business Manager'. This made me realise how the central actant of 'Nursery Nurse' is in reality made up of many different roles all contributing to the varied Early childhood education and care workforce. I also noted the collective human actors as 'home visits', 'nurture groups' and 'rules of the profession'. The concepts of 'teamwork' and 'leadership' were also grouped under this heading. In the same category, I also noticed how many discourses originated from the collective human actors, such as the idea of 'making a

difference' through work with children, together with the concepts of 'trust', 'determination', 'respect', 'inclusion', 'emotion/empathy' and 'clear vision'. Next, I identified non-human actors as 'council', 'local authority', 'PLD provider', 'school development and centre plan', 'training course request form' and 'performance management'. Moreover, two practices performed in the setting were also noted in this category, namely 'supervision/appraisal' and 'in-house training'. Earlier in this chapter I noted how human actors also produced several discursive constructions – in the same way, non-human actors also produced several discourses. I identified these as regarding the specific 'ethos' of the setting, closely linked to its 'autonomy' to make decisions regarding its running and organisation, and the 'impact' of training. These discursive constructions were also complemented by the discourse around 'Who is a professional' and the several constructions around 'Who is the child understood to be'.

Several political/economic elements were also recognised in 'setting policies' and 'reduced funding'. This issue was closely linked to other elements in this category such as 'staff retention', 'cost implications' and 'investment'. The last key element of investment was also linked closely with the idea that it is necessary to 'invest in the staff' and therefore support them with adequate 'pay development'. Other elements such as 'legal requirements', 'setting policies', 'Bachelor of Education' and 'Ofsted' were also included, together with 'council' and 'local authority'. I am aware that these last elements were also included in the previous category of non-human actors – however, I felt it was necessary to include them here as well, as I felt they presented some important political and economic factors to the London case study.

In the Italian case study, an initial reading of the map revealed the key human actors as the *'professionista'* and the *'educatrice'*. These two terms could both refer to the same actor, however, I believe it is important to present them together as the terms are not interchangeable. *'Professionista'* can be better translated as a professional of some kind. This label can be attached to the figure of the *'educatrice'* (educator), however, the two concepts are not mutually exclusive of each other, explaining why I believe it to be important for them to be mentioned separately as key actants. One initial memo regarding the articulation of the human actors by the participants centred around a significant difference I found after several readings of the coding. I reflected on how the Italian Early Childhood educators seemed proud of who an educator is and, at the same time, militant about saying who an educator definitely is not. They were confident in articulating these concepts with me, a different level of confidence compared to the participants from London. They seemed to have developed a fighting spirit about defending their professionalism and felt recognised as professionals. These exchanges left me feeling convinced that they spent more time discussing issues around professional identity than their English counterparts.

The initial key human actors identified were linked to initial non-human actors by the *'territorio',* which means both the geographical sense and the environment in which the workforce is situated. The main discourses identified during initial analysis of the messy map were related to *'identità'* and *'protagonismo dei bambini'* namely, identity of the Early Childhood educators and the discourse that children are at the forefront of the experience. As a second step in the analysis, I created an ordered map (Figure 5.3) to reflect the situation following a list of human and non-human elements as suggested by Clarke, Friese & Washburn (2015).

Ordered Situational Map, Italy

COLLECTIVE HUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS
Educatrice
Collettivo di servizio
Coordinamento pedagogico
Amministrazione comunale

NONHUMAN ELEMENTS/ACTORS
Ente formativo
Tirocinio
Regolamento/protocollo
Organizzazione del servizio
Questionario di gradimento
Eventi formativi
Formazione in aula
Percorsi di formazione
Seminari
Formazione annuale
Tematiche di formazione
Formazione continua

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL AND/OR COLLECTIVE HUMAN ACTORS
Competenza
Impegno
Disponibilità
Criticità
Energia
Pazienza
Fiducia
Gruppo nazionale

IMPLICATED SILENT ACTORS/ACTANTS
Bambini
Famiglie

POLITICAL/ECONOMIC ELEMENTS
Contributo pubblico finanziario
Amministrazione comunale
Formazione Gratuita
Concorso di entrata
Laurea

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF NONHUMAN ACTANTS
Chi e' un professionista?
Costruzioni intorno all'idea del bambino

MAJOR ISSUES/DEBATES (USUALLY CONTESTED)
Bambino non bisognoso solo di cure
Distacco
Combattere per I propri diritti
Resistenza per proteggere I propri diritti
Professionalità
Mantenere la riflessione accesa
Identita' degli educatori
Badante/baby sitter

SOCIOCULTURAL/SYMBOLIC ELEMENTS
Co-gestione
Collegialità
Osservazione
Obbligo di formazione (20 ore annuali)
Documentazione pedagogica
Formazione itinerante nei servizi

Mantenere la riflessione accesa
Identita' degli educatori
Badante/baby sitter
Emotività mostrarla o no?
Fragilità dell'infanzia
Preparazione dell'educatore

Formazione itinerante nei servizi

OTHER KEY ELEMENTS
Ricerca interiore
Benessere dell'educatore

SPATIAL ELEMENTS
Universita'
Asili privati
Asili pubblici
Convegni
Territorio
Cooperativa
Liceo

RELATED DISCURSES (HISTORICAL, NARRATIVE, AND/OR VISUAL)
Bambino competente
Bambino attivo
Doveri e diritti degli educatori
Protagonismo dei bambini

Figure 5.3 - Ordered situational map, San Miniato

Both contexts revealed similar human actors. Again, the key actor of *'educatrice'* has been broken down into several different roles that Early Childhood educators in this context perform. This first broad element has been represented in the ordered map in different shades to represent the facets of this role. Human actors in the ordered map were identified as the *'collettivo di servizio'* (collective union), *'coordinamento pedagogico'* (pedagogical coordination) and *'amministrazione comunale'* (local administration). In the same way, I have highlighted the collective human actor as the *'gruppo nazionale',* a national group under which all Early Childhood educators are united as professionals. In this category many discourses originated from the collective human actors were present. These were noted as *'competenza'* (being competent), *'disponibilitá'* (being available), *'criticitá'* (being critical), *'pazienza'* (being patient) and *'fiducia'* (trust). The discourse of trust was also identified in the London case study under the same category, showing that this discourse is of central importance for both cases. The non-human actors were mainly concerned with PLD and organisation of its provision. For example, I noted elements such as *'ente formativo'* (PLD provider) – this was also identified in the English case study, highlighting the central importance of this element. Other elements acknowledged were *'formazione continua'* (continuous PLD), *'tirocinio'* (internship), *'formazione annuale'* (annual PLD offer), *'regolamento/protocollo'* (rules/protocol), *'organizzazione del servizio'* (organisation of the service), *'questionario di gradimento'* (satisfaction survey), and *'percorsi di formazione'* (PLD paths), showing the large presence of elements regarding PLD in this category. Also, discourses related to the non-human actors identified centred around *'chi é un professionista'* (who is a professional) and, similar to the London case study, *'construzioni intorno all'idea del bambino'* (constructions around who the child is

understood to be). This important similarity shows how this discourse heavily influences the opinions of the participants in both settings and, therefore, the data collected. The political/economic elements in this case were identified as being the *'contributo pubblico finanziario'* (the public financial contribution to the settings), *'formazione gratutita'* (free PLD), *'concorso di entrata'* (the academic initial exams all aspiring Early Childhood educators have to successfully complete before being allowed to have an interview for the role), *'laurea'* (bachelor's degree) and *'amministrazione comunale'*. This last element was also included in the human actors, but I believe that it is important to add it to this category as well. The type of municipal administration heavily influences the funding that settings receive and the level of political discussion and attention – or lack of thereof – around issues concerning the workforce. It is important to note that with every change of local administration, the municipal administration changes as well to reflect local election results. This can spell either fortune or ruin for the local settings depending on the priorities of the winning party. The complete ordered map showing the elements presented in this section can be found in Figure 11.

I believe it to be just as important to show who is not represented or silenced in the data. Articulating these 'sites of silence' (Clarke, 2005:85) was also an aim of this analysis. In both case studies, the same implicated silent actors were identified – children and families. Taking that into consideration, I decided not to recruit children and parents as participants for this study and they both appear in the category of silenced actors. However, bearing in mind that children and parents are key stakeholders whose experiences and perspectives contribute to educators' experiences of PLD, I found it interesting that they weren't included or more taken

into consideration when discussing educators' identities and opportunities for training. Froebel says that we should 'live for our children' (Froebel, 1861 in Lilley, 1967:92), therefore the educators' first and foremost aim must be with the child and their family in mind, so that the community as a whole benefits from the development of the child. This line of analysis will be fully discussed in the next chapter.

5.3 Relational analysis of the case studies

Once both the messy map and Ordered Situational Map were completed, I proceeded with a process of relational analysis. As Clarke (2005) explains, developing relations between elements identified in the maps is key as what is unveiled can be extremely revealing. In order to analyse the relations between each element in the map, I started to 'specify the nature of the relationship' that each has to others (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015:107). I carried out this action systematically and created several memos in the process. I centred on certain significant elements in the messy maps and drew a line connecting them to others, specifying the particular relation between them by 'describing the nature of that line' (Clarke, 2005:102). Figure 5.4 shows an example of the relational analysis for the London case study while Figure 5.5 shows an example of the relational analysis for the case study in San Miniato.

In the London case study, I noted a high discursive construction around the key human actor of the 'Nursery Nurse' and the myriad of characteristics a nursery nurse must possess, characterised by both positive and negative feelings about the role and revealing many dichotomies as felt by the participants. The spatial elements of the 'Children's Centre' and 'School' were also found to be central to the relational

Figure 5.4 - Relational maps, London

Tematiche
Badante
Emotività
Cooperativa
Professionista
Esperienza
Condivisione
Tenacia
Potenzialità
Lavoro di piccolo gruppo
Formazione itinerante nei servizi
Accompagnare
Coordinamento
Finanziamento
Mediare
Liceo
Benessere
Collettivo di servizio
Fragilità dell'infanzia
Gruppo nazionale
Esigenze delle famiglie
Connessione
Territorio
Cura
Coltivare
Formazione continua
Asili pubblici
Proporre
Gratuito
Preparazione
Cognizione
Laurea
Ricerca interiore
Teoria
Protagonismo dei bambini
Identità
Accudito
Amministrazione comunale
Documentazione pedagogica
Sostenere
Creatività
Obiettivi chiari
Psicologia
Obbligo di formazione
Formazione annuale
Percorsi di formazione
Riflessione
Ente formativo
Seminari
Gioia
Coordinamento pedagogico
Distacco
Forte
Bambino attivo
Obiettivo di lavoro
Collegialità
Formazione in aula
Doveri e diritti
Osservazione
Competenza
Cogestire
Asili privati
Regolamento
Disponibilità
Professionalità
Bambino competente
Stupore
Protocollo
Gruppo di lavoro
Eventi formativi
Concorso
Amministrazione
Università
Creare
Tirocinio
Combattere
Organizzazione del servizio
Aiutare
Etica Questionario di gradimento
Mantenere la riflessione accesa
Convegni
Resistenza
Formazione specifica
Impegno
Educatrice
Non bisognoso solo di cure
Criticità
Energia
Proposte pratiche
Contributo pubblico finanziario
Qualità
Pazienza
Fiducia
Rapporti di lavoro

Figure 5.5 - Relational maps, San Miniato

analysis, together with non-human actors such as 'professional learning and development', 'PLD provider' and collective discursive constructions such as 'ethos' of the setting and 'emotional wellbeing' of the educators. Similarly, in the Italian case study, a central human actor was identified as the *'Educatrice'*. Here also this element was linked with the varied characteristics that a competent educator should have. These mainly saw the educator in a powerful light and also tried to define who the educator is not. The spatial element of the *'Territorio'* seemed to be the starting point to start defining the complex web of linkages between the services offered and the geographical area under investigation. Another point of contact with the English reality were the rich discursive relationships highlighted in the *'Ente Formativo',* determining the type of PLD offered to local educators. In this case, I identified a central discourse regarding the educators' *'professionalitá'* and the ideals around the *'protagonismo dei bambini',* but also a string web of discourses concerning the educators' *'identità',* showing the centrality of this discourse in the Italian educators' lives.

The multitude of relations in the data steered me towards considering the participants' sites of 'social action' (Clarke, 2005:110) as a way for them to exhibit their personal and professional ideals over and over again, showing their physical and mental participation in different activities established through discourses. In this way, I strived to 'see the collective action directly' in order to investigate the ways in which the participants acted 'both as individuals and as members of (their) social worlds' (Clarke, 2005:110).

5.4 Understanding the collective sites of social action

The second type of map used, the social worlds/arena maps, further specified and framed the different social worlds that came together in this research. I used these maps to consider and explore the different relationships between the social worlds identified (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015), with the focus here on 'collective social action' (Clarke, 2005:114). In these kinds of maps, attention is on the differing levels of social action, focusing on the arenas where the participants become social beings through their actions and participation in several social worlds creating discourses (Clarke, 2005). Within the map I have visually demonstrated how different social worlds interact and intersect. Some overlap, indicating how some of the participants take part in more than one social arena at the same time (Clarke, 2005).

In the London case study, represented in Figure 5.6, I identified four different social arenas in which spatial elements and main human, non-human and discursive actors, as identified in earlier messy and ordered maps, interact and overlap. Firstly, an all-encompassing spatial element identified as the 'Local Borough Arena' acts as a first level of social arena in which all the other spatial elements are contained, and which interacts with all the other spatial elements. In this specific arena I situated the non-human actor of professional learning and development. I identified the 'Local Borough Arena' as being the most powerful and influential social dimension in the London case study, as it is responsible for the funding available to all other social arenas in this map. It therefore has an important influence on all other layers and actors, such as the 'Emotional Wellbeing of Educators', the 'PLD provision' available and the role of the 'Nursery Nurse'.

Within the more general layer of the 'Local Borough Arena' in Figure 5.6, I added another layer, a social dimension called the 'School Arena', where the discursive construction of the 'Ethos' of the school is situated. In this social arena I have also situated the collective human actor of the 'Nursery Nurse', together with the non-human actor of 'PLD provision', which is also interwoven with the additional social dimension of the 'Children's Centre Arena'. The 'School Arena' has been visually represented as the second most prominent social dimension in this case study, as all other arenas depend upon the 'School Arena' for their organisation and collaborative activities.

Another dimension is the 'Training Room Arena' where I have represented several interconnections with the human actor of the 'Nursery Nurse', the non-human actor of 'PLD provision' and the key element of 'Emotional Wellbeing of Educators'. This element is also represented as having an influence on all other social dimensions of the 'School Arena', the 'Training Consortium Arena' and the 'Children's Centre Arena'. In a less direct way this key element is also important for the 'Local Borough Arena'. The dimension of the 'Training Room Arena' has been visually represented as having the same power as the next social arena, the 'Training Consortium Arena'.

The 'Training Consortium Arena' is represented as having interconnections with the human actor of the 'Nursery Nurse' and also of influencing the key element of the 'Emotional Wellbeing of Educators'. This specific 'universe of discourse' (Clarke, Friese & Washburn, 2015:230) represents an important spatial element for the

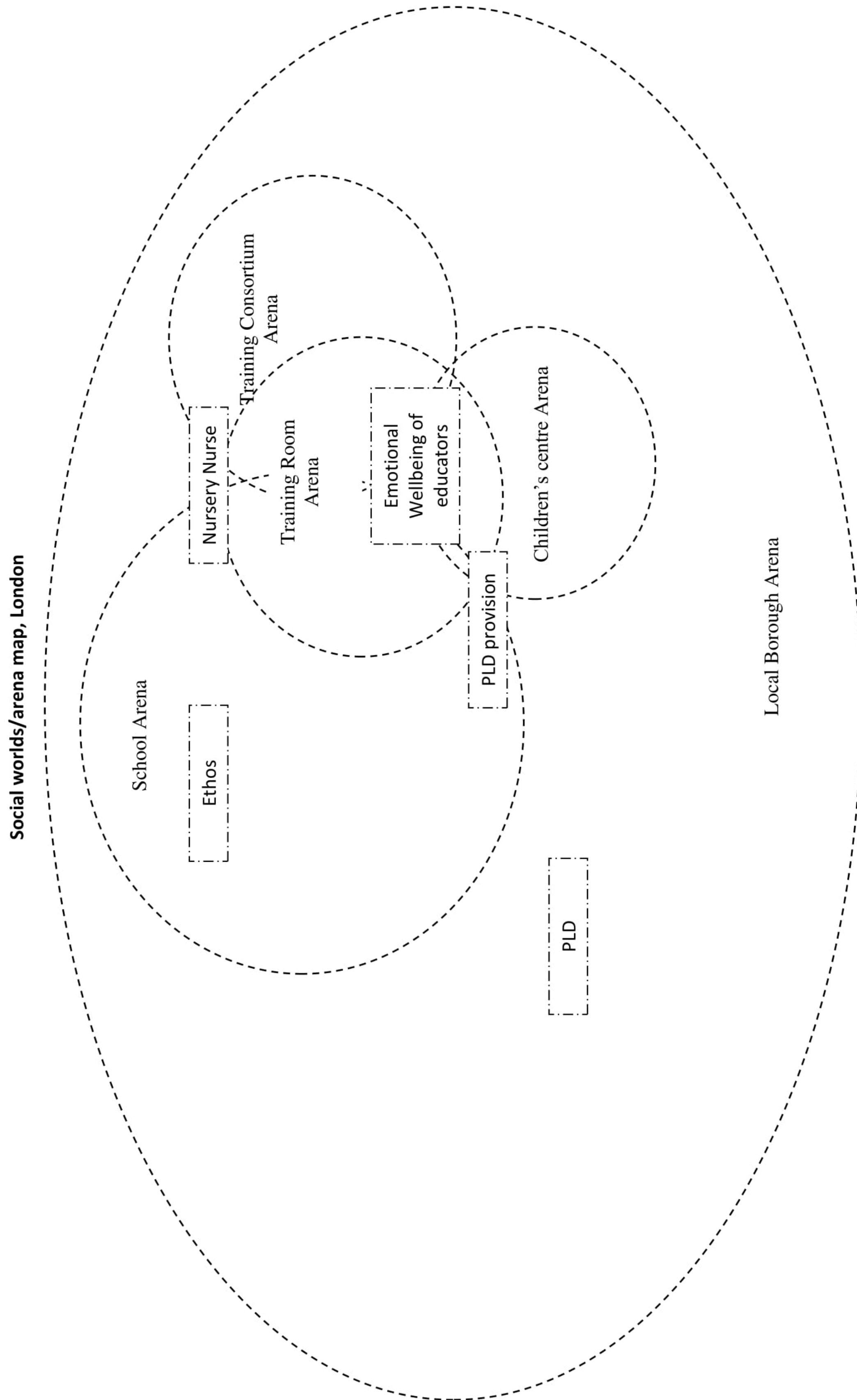


Figure 5.6 - Social worlds/arena map, London

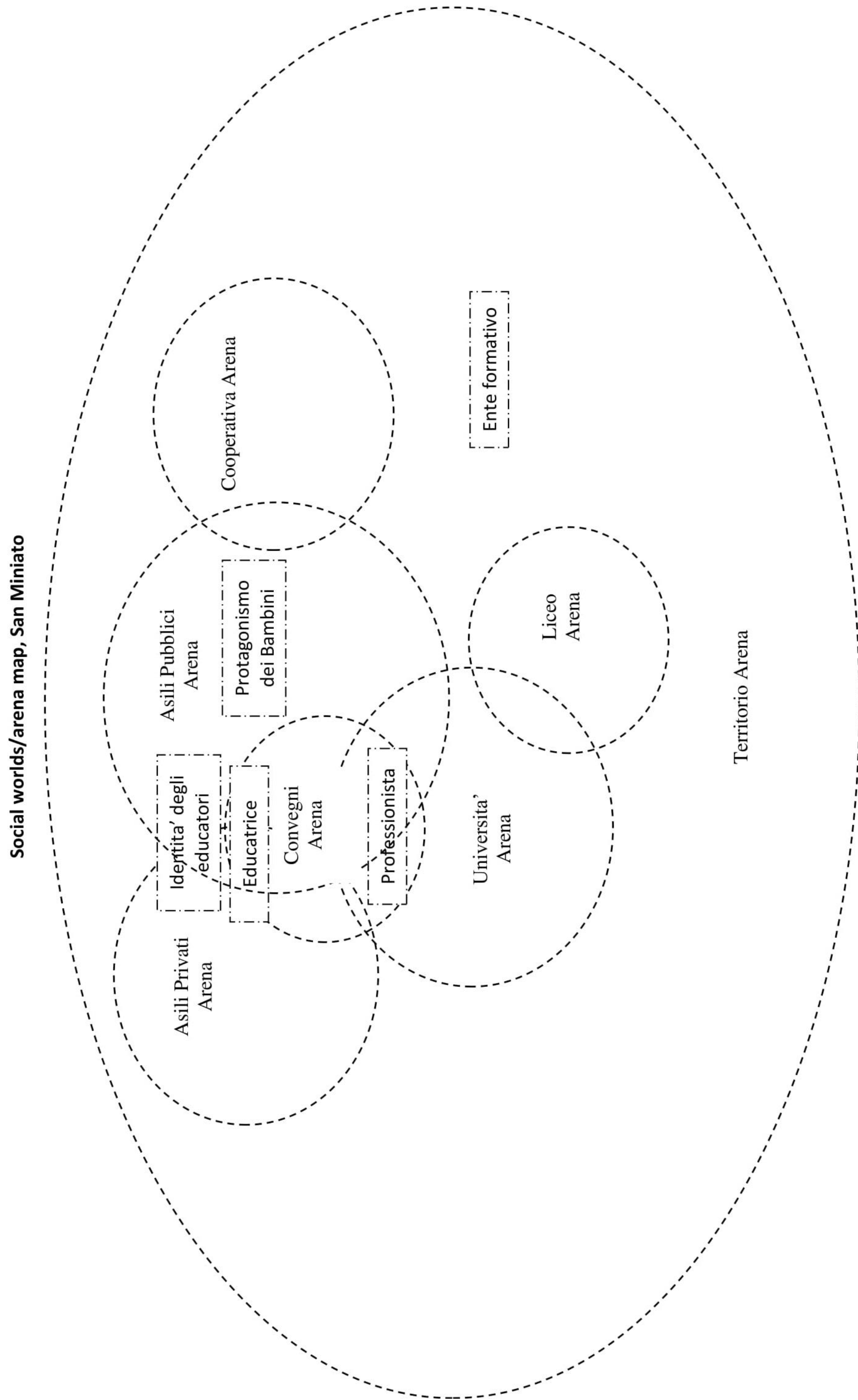


Figure 5.7 - Social worlds/arena map, San Miniato

organisation of the PLD offering in the London case study, a space where participants' professional identities can be constructed and discussed.

The final social dimension identified is the 'Children's Centre Arena'. This social arena shares the same PLD provision with the 'School Arena' and is influenced by the pedagogical priorities highlighted by the 'Training Consortium Arena'. It has been represented as the least powerful arena, as the data shows that it very much depends on other arenas without having much autonomy or dedicated funding.

In the San Miniato case study, represented in Figure 5.7, I have represented the more general layer of '*Territorio Arena'*, which literally means the geographical territory, within the general social dimension in which the non-human actor of '*Ente Formativo'* (PLD provider) is situated. Within the '*Territorio Arena'*, I have represented the '*Asili Pubblici Arena'* (State Funded Settings) as the second biggest social dimension, with the most power and influence after the '*Territorio Arena'.* Within this arena I have included interconnections between the related discourse of the '*Protagonismo dei Bambini'* (the idea that children are protagonists).

The third most prominent social site represented is the '*Università Arena'* (the university arena), where the discursive element of the '*Professionista'* is created and supported. This arena interweaves with several others such as the '*Asili Pubblici Arena'*, the '*Asili Privati Arena'* (privately-funded settings), the '*Convegni Arena'* (sites for conferences and day training) and the '*Liceo Arena'* (the High School arena). This last connection is important because the choice of different study paths in the '*Liceo Arena'* will determine the chosen courses for the '*Università Arena'*,

therefore determining the background knowledge of future Early Childhood educators.

Following on, the '*Asili Privati Arena'* shares the major debate around the '*Identità degli Educatori'* (educators' identities) and the human actor of the '*Educatrice'* (educator) with the '*Asili Pubblici Arena'*. Even though the organisation and funding of the public and state funded settings is different, also including different narratives about families and children, the two social dimensions seem to share these central discourses.

The '*Cooperativa'* (cooperative) social space is represented as being connected to the '*Asili Pubblici Arena'*. This is because the state-funded settings considered in San Miniato were also linked to a cooperative providing services, staff and resources to the settings that participated in the research. The cooperative also provided some of the pedagogical coordination for all the settings in the area.

Finally, the '*Convegni Arena'* (the sites for conferences and day training) is represented as the least powerful. In the '*Convegni Arena'* I have represented the human actor of the '*Educatrice'* as having an influence, and the discursive construction of the '*Professionista'* as being central. This social dimension is strictly dependent on the state and private provision arena, as it is the pedagogical coordination team and the Early Childhood educators who create the demand for certain conferences and day training. This arena doesn't seem to be independent from the other arenas, therefore having less power and influence on what happens in the state-funded and private Early childhood education and care settings.

5.5 How relations and intersections are represented in the collective sites of social action

For the London case study, in the 'School Arena' and 'Children's Centre Arena', support by appropriate and sensitive performance management strategies to promote the most appropriate training according to the educator's skills and needs is of the utmost importance. Having a caring leadership team that believes in and fully subscribes to the fundamental place of PLD for educators' personal and professional development and its links to everyday practice is one of the most important issues that I have found in these arenas. The importance of training for Early Childhood educators is made evident by Caroline:

> *'You need to gain further insight. It's not just about working with children or working, just doing that. You need to know what underpins it all (...) you won't be able to go further (...) So you need to know what you're looking for and what you can do to push them forward.'*

Reduced funding from central government for Early childhood education and care also has an impact on these contexts of practice – the data shows that tensions have started to arise between the leadership team and the educators, resulting in leaders limited to measuring the educators' existing skills empirically without considering their needs for further development of reflective and critical skills. These will be beneficial in their everyday practice but not measurable against a checklist. Because of the reduced funding, settings feel that they can't cater for everyone's needs because there is simply not enough money, so the training offered needs to be targeted and focused on having an impact in the classroom. The following extracts show the dichotomy between the educators' needs and significantly reduced funding. Isla recounts that it,

> *'…depends on the financial circumstances of the school you know, I've been in another school where, um, like they, you know, could only send, they used to send like maybe Year Five and Year Six teachers on training and there wasn't any money left for us in the Early Years. So it all depends on each school's budget really'*

Imogen from the leadership team also perfectly explains the link between training and effect:

> '*It's got to have impact. Otherwise you can't just have training. And everybody just wants to go and do training and then you don't see any impact. In the past the head teacher has funded things and people have come back and we've not seen any change in practice, or even any initiative. So you think, well what's it worth? Was that worth the investment? Every penny counts. So, it's about measuring the impact of this training.'*

In the 'Training Room Arena', investing in staff to educate and form the new professional is seen as fundamental, so that Early Childhood educators grow into their roles and develop direct experience of practice and theories studied during training. Here it is also important to notice the weight that meeting with other Early Childhood educators is given in order to maximise the impact of what is learned in the classroom. Caroline highlights the power of sharing with other educators:

> *'We do get together occasionally to have these big training workshops. Those are really good because you get to talk to other professionals and other educators. I think when I had those kind of days, they made me feel more secure because I knew that someone else was doing what I was doing, so I must be right.'*

The 'Local Borough Arena' shows many interconnections with the development of training budgets for Early childhood education and care settings and it is where both the local council and the local authority concentrate on the impact that the Early

childhood education and care workforce can have on local communities. However, this is the arena that seems to be furthest from Early Childhood educators working in settings. Even in the interviews and focus groups, the participants did not know how this arena had an impact on their work directly, apart from being the one responsible for austerity measures in settings which impacted on training. The Early Childhood educators in this arena suffer the austerity measures without much say in the policy developed, intensifying the disconnection described above.

In San Miniato, the '*Asili Pubblici Arena'* is seen as a hub for other services to support educators' development and resilience, building on their educators' professionality and understanding of their professional identities to better respond to the needs of families attending the setting. The data shows a real interconnection between the different services, geared towards the benefit and schooling of educators. Early Childhood educators in this setting appeared to prefer initiatives that facilitated meeting other Early Childhood educators to share examples of practice and challenges. Several relationships connect to the idea that Early Childhood educators have both rights and duties. This is a concept on which the Italian civic system is built – individuals are understood as being deserving of assistance but must also participate in and support the community at the same time. The power of state-funded settings to encourage deeply important practices such as self-discovery and reflection among the educators, developed with PLD initiatives, is directly linked to being able to deal with the needs of children and families in the community. This is an important link between PLD and, ultimately, children's and families' experiences in state-funded settings. The issues represented above can also provide some answers as to how the PLD offering is organised in the two case studies constructed for this research.

The '*Cooperativa Arena'* acts as an additional support for Early Childhood educators in the territory, showing how in San Miniato there is a whole web of support for educators' needs that extends far beyond the individual setting. The development of educators' professional identity is also supported within the territory, helping to construct a clear picture of who a professional is in the Italian reality.

The '*Università Arena'* and '*Liceo Arena'* are seen to support young future educators' early considerations around professional identity and their experiences of practice gained through mandatory internships that students must complete as part of their university experience Through these, future Early Childhood educators start to engage with concepts of sharing and self-discovery which will be instrumental in cementing their professional identity once they have finished their studies.

In the '*Territorio Arena',* there appears to be an atmosphere of cooperation between all the different social arenas and the educators. This could be due to the fact that PLD is compulsory in Italy and a minimum of 20 hours a year must be completed by law in order to be allowed to practise in Early Years. The region I chose to include in this research, however, is relatively wealthy compared to others and the dedication to Early childhood education and care is often an example to other areas of Italy.

5.6 **Power relations in the data**

An interesting issue of power relations, which was identified through the mapping of the situation under investigation, concerns the implicated silent actors in the Ordered Situational Maps for both San Miniato and London. In both contexts I identified the

same silent actors – children and families. I would have expected to see more involvement of children and families, especially when discussing the PLD offered to the settings. However, it is clear that children and families do not have an influence on the construction of the PLD system. This is at odds with a system that is so closely connected to children and families in other ways. Surely the planning and design of PLD should also consider children and families' needs in order to be relevant to the territory? Instead, possibly due to what Urban (2008) calls a relatively recent trend where modern societies increasingly rely on public institutions for the upbringing of young children, children and families are increasingly being seen as merely consumers of a service. They are not included in the running of it or the preparation of educators. ECEC is seen here as a service that is provided to children and families without needing their intervention or collaboration. These issues present a dilemma, brought about by the commercialisation of the Early childhood education and care system, between the everyday care of young children and heightened sociocultural and socioeconomic pressures on the Early Childhood educators linked to generating predetermined outcomes, which can be used as a selling point for the service (Urban, 2008).

In the 'Social Arena' map for the London case study, the power of the 'Local Borough' over all the other social arenas is evident as it determines the funding available to each setting in the territory to provide PLD. It also influences staff recruitment and the qualifications Early Childhood educators need to work in the sector, through centrally-developed policies that settings must adhere to in order to comply with the law and retain their registered status. Because the 'Local Borough'

arena has such a wide-ranging influence on different areas, the wellbeing of Early Childhood educators is also affected by the policies it promotes.

Similarly, looking at the 'Social Arena' map for San Miniato, the '*Territiorio Arena*' has power over all other social arenas. In the '*Territorio Arena*', funding levels for state settings are decided and released, influencing staff levels and funding for PLD activities. In this social arena, laws have been made which make a BA in Science of Education compulsory for all new staff entering the workforce, determining the intake of students in the '*Università Arena'*. It is in the *'Territorio Arena'* that the '*Ente Formativo*' (PLD provider) operates and cascades PLD initiatives to all settings in the region, therefore influencing educators' opportunities to discuss their constructions of professional identity and issues around the professionalisation of the workforce. In this case study, the *Territorio* has an enormous power to also set the ethos that all settings in the region must follow, therefore determining the education offered and provided, since Italy doesn't have a state compulsory curriculum for children under six years of age.

5.7 Implications arising from the relations identified: A summary

To determine the interconnections and implications arising from this research, I organised the connections identified in an additional map provided in Appendices according to the concepts behind my research questions, so that I could understand how the identified implications could aid me in answering them. I have presented the implications arising from the relations identified, grouped under the broad concepts relating to each of the research questions, below.

5.7.1 *Educators' identities*

- Adjectives linked to the key human actor of 'Nursery Nurse' highlighted the idea that work with young children makes Early Childhood educators feel like they are making a difference. But there were also more negative descriptions, such as the feeling of being emotionally drained at the end of the working day and not being able to cope with the extreme demands of the job. The concept of professionality was central for the educators. Some defined the process of identity formation as an inner and personal search which the educator undergoes periodically, as identity matures and shifts in time.
- The Early Childhood educators identified themselves as being responsible for the education and growth of the children in their care. When their work has an impact in the community this, in turn, determines their feelings about being a professional, which builds their resilience and skills as educators. According to some educators, some detachment is necessary in order to fully understand the needs of children and families.

5.7.2 *Values of the profession*

- Being an ECEC educator brings with it both rights and a duty of care for the children and families attending the setting. The Early Childhood educators in this research felt strongly about following the rules of the profession. These rules are both written laws and policies governing their practice and unwritten rules that determine how an educator must conduct herself when building relationships with children and families. The Early Childhood educators felt that they must fully understand the aim of their practice in order to share

good practice with other colleagues during professional conversations or training days, where Early Childhood educators from other settings might be present. A professional educator, according to the participants, puts themselves in a more or less neutral position when working and does not seek to compete with families for the affections of the children in their care.

- ECEC leaders are expected to use PLD to improve the skills and knowledge of staff through training, demonstrating to families that they positively invest time and resources in supporting the staff's development. Leaders are seen by Early Childhood educators as mentors who care for the staff, making sure that their interests are supported with appropriate PLD opportunities. In this way, the leadership team is seen as an example to follow, fully understanding the values of the setting and upholding their importance by inspiring Early Childhood educators to fully subscribe to them too.

5.7.3 *A picture of the current PLD offering*

- The current offer of PLD in London is built on strict legal requirements that settings are expected to fulfil. Training such as safeguarding, health and safety and pediatric first aid are all compulsory and staff must renew their training regularly. All training in the settings must fit into a pre-planned training budget, which includes compulsory training as well as other PLD not required by law, that Early Childhood educators must complete in order to be aware of current trends and practice. Non-compulsory training includes work around new and existing policies, so that all Early Childhood educators are aware of both setting-specific policies and government-wide requirements in ECEC.

- The current PLD offering in Italy is governed by a law set by the state and implemented by the municipalities. The law covers all training for ECEC educators, and adherence to it is a condition for being allowed to practise as an educator. PLD in Italy is organised annually in settings and is planned by both the Early Childhood educators who voice their needs to the leadership team, but also by the pedagogical coordination group, made up of Early Childhood educators and leaders who determine the needs of the territory in regular meetings. Setting Early Childhood educators take it in turns to sit on this committee so that everyone has the chance to speak up. Annual PLD is divided into general training, refreshing the educators' general knowledge of practice, and specialised training, targeted at addressing the specific needs of Early Childhood educators working with different ages and abilities. The specialised PLD also takes into account the educators' wishes and interests. Different kinds of PLD are presented to Early Childhood educators as an alternative to the classic courses which still form some of the provision. The Early Childhood educators also appreciate training that takes place in different settings in the same region. This specific kind of PLD gives the Early Childhood educators the chance to share good practice between settings, but also to voice concerns with other Early Childhood educators about areas that they might not feel so strong in.

In the next chapter I will draw together the key findings from the study and discuss their relevance and practical applications in light of recent research and literature, while raising some important critical questions to guide the reader's thinking through the chapter and highlight my considerations.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

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? Based on my investigation and its presentation in the previous chapters, I now move to a discussion of the findings and how they illuminate the main research questions. The chapter is organised in several strands that follow the specific sub-questions which oriented the research. Through the use of several critical questions, I have constructed a dialogue between the data and the existing research reviewed for this study, taking into consideration different aspects on PLD identified in the constructed case studies, but also the struggles felt by Early Childhood educators embedded in the complexity of relations and intersections represented in the collective sites. I have also turned my attention to considering several important issues in this chapter.

The ways in which the concept of identity is defined and perceived by the participating Early Childhood educators are extremely varied. These focus both on a vocational discourse, where a natural disposition for the job is essential to be an effective Early Childhood educator, and on a professional discourse, where training, both in terms of initial qualifications and PLD opportunities, is deemed essential for Early Childhood educators to construct an understanding of their identities. The extreme everyday demands of the job, both emotional and physical, can result in heightened stress and Early Childhood educators feeling that they are unable to cope, unsupported by the system. Another main strand considered is around the

participants’ views of the place that emotions should have when they construct professional identities. Are these a fundamental component of the educators’ identities, or might some detachment be necessary in order to assess each situation with a certain objectivity, fully understanding their place in relation to children’s families? PLD is seen in this case as a way to enhance a feeling of professionalism and to allow the Early Childhood educators to develop their initial innate drives towards the job. The Early Childhood educators in this study seem to struggle with a role whose importance is not professionally recognised by policy makers or by the general public. Finally, lack of funding is also a major influence on the educators’ opportunities for development and a feeling of being valued in the educational field.

I will start by presenting a current picture of professional learning and development in Tuscany and London (6.1.1), drawing on the findings of this study and summarising the reality of practice for the Early Childhood educators who participated. I will then pose the first critical question – *What is the reality of practice?* In this thesis I have become aware of a lack of connected ideals (6.2) and here I will guide the reader through some deep explorations of the two contexts studied, showing two systems of practice with a fundamental disconnection between the development and implementation of PLD for Early Childhood educators. The next critical question is, *Where are the families?* (6.3). In this section I highlight a lack of involvement by children and families in the process of idealisation and practice of PLD, and I follow this by asking *Who cares for the carer?* (6.4). This important section discusses the educator and the concept of emotional wellbeing, together with less positive connotations about educators’ feelings of struggle and the necessity for protection against the pressures that the job entails. Next, I will move

onto educators' identities, considering whether they are ambivalent or complex (6.5). This will consider recent discourses around educators' identities which suggest a one-size-fits-all model of both PLD and initial qualification. The reality of practice is a varied workforce with varied needs and identities.

I then move onto considering if the perceived low status of the workforce affects educators' professional identity development (6.6) and also think about educators' labour with feelings, with the question *Whose need is it?* (6.7). When considering the educators' labour with feelings, a critical question arose from the data about who was in need of affection in Early childhood education and care settings. Who needs to be emotionally involved in relationships developed in the setting? Is the image of young children as being vulnerable and defenceless impairing our ability to see that Early Childhood educators also need to receive love in an Early childhood education and care setting?

The aim of this study is to provide an exploration of professional learning and development opportunities for Early Childhood educators, considering contemporary practices in Tuscany and London. Through two freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in the English and Tuscan PLD contexts, I have investigated the current offer of PLD for Early Childhood educators in the English and Italian systems with a view to building the necessary knowledge base to reconceptualise PLD through a Froebelian lens using selected Froebelian principles. I have set some Froebelian principles as the core of this study – they have woven a thread throughout and have kept all other elements of the study together, aiding me in understanding

the complexity and intersections in a holistic view of PLD and educators' development of identities.

6.1.1 *A current picture of professional learning and development in Tuscany and London*

I have become more aware that the opportunities available for professional learning and development (PLD) in Tuscany and London, highlighted in the Findings chapter of this thesis, show a system with some definite features focused on providing PLD through an annual offering. This is planned for at local level and put into practice through core training days for Early Childhood educators of differing levels of experience and initial preparation. Through a system of performance management, the educators' needs and wishes are assessed and, in some cases, specific training is assigned to them. The *Training Room* context of practice is seen as a safe space where Early Childhood educators can share good practice with other colleagues and deepen their understanding of what it is. They can also develop a sense of criticality in regard to their practice, the practice of others, and current policies for Early Years, with the aim of modifying their practice in the setting to better reflect their new knowledge. In this way, PLD is seen to encourage the educator's personal growth, building on their existing knowledge and expertise and including space for critical reflection, not just on their role as Early Childhood educators but on the social and political context in which they work (Osgood, 2008; Urban & Dalli, 2012).

In San Miniato, training is regulated by law. Italian Early Childhood educators must complete at least 20 hours of PLD annually in order to have access to the profession. Furthermore, each time that Early Childhood educators apply for a job in Early Childhood they must undergo a state exam focusing on pedagogical and general

knowledge. A successful result in the state exam determines whether the educator will be given the job or not. The figure below shows the two systems of PLD.

PLD in London	PLD in San Miniato
In-house and out-of-house courses delivered during in-set days or early setting closures.	In-house courses, itinerant workshops in other local settings, monthly pedagogical meetings. PLD delivered at weekends.
Some statutory training, however, overall, PLD in the UK is not regulated by law.	PLD regulated by law, 20 hours a year minimum training to be allowed to practice in Early childhood education and care settings.
The Early Childhood educators must apply for training using an application form detailing how the course matches the identified training needs, and the priorities identified for the centre in the Centre Development Plan document.	The Early Childhood educators complete a satisfaction survey after every training course to give their views on strengths and weaknesses of the session, how the session answered their training needs and any improvements for the future.

Figure 6.1- A current picture of PLD in London and San Miniato

This study revealed an extremely varied picture of the current workforce, which is comprised mostly of women (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014; Bove & Cescato, 2017). This study found that Early Childhood educators considered PLD to be a fundamental investment and as a way to develop Early Childhood educators who are ‘democratic and active’ and who practice with an open mind (Dalli et al., 2012:8). Currently PLD is used only as a way to supplement educators’ existing qualities and add to their skills, without supporting them to engage in deeper discussions around their professional identities in relation to their professional experiences and existing training. This promotes a more passive process of PLD and knowledge transmission

(Lazzari et al., 2013). This supports Brock's (2006) view, that teacher education and development programmes see their aims as only developing a set of competences instead of supporting discussions on identity and what it means to be a professional today. In this case, the Froebelian tenet of starting from where the learner is, is not reflected in the ways in which current PLD is designed, at present we can see an offer that is static, offering courses where educators learn in isolation from their everyday practice, where the learning does not grow with the learner as Froebel highlighted (Froebel, 1906). The kind of knowledge acquisition that the educators in the case studies have experienced fails to stimulate freedom and critically reflective practice because it is disconnected from the everyday lives of the educators. Current initiatives are not being designed to support regular theoretical discussions to support the educators' development of their professional identities. They are only focused on helping Early Childhood educators to achieve tangible skills that can be used in everyday practice.

6.2 A Froebelian lens to support the discussion of the findings

The Froebelian framing used for this research is an important starting point through which I have constructed the whole enquiry. The chosen Froebelian principles acted as the core of this study – they have woven a thread throughout and have kept all other elements of the study together. This aided me in understanding the complexity and intersections with a holistic view of PLD and educators' development of identities.

I have used the Froebelian principles as a vantage point from which to explore current PLD provision. I have understood learning as linked to the practice of participation in communities of practice so as to focus on an understanding of the learner and, by the same token, the learning process, as an ever-evolving activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Using a Froebelian understanding of the learner, learning

and the learner have been conceptualised as dynamic parts of a system of education that sees learning as being made of relationships, and intersecting cultures, a process that grows with the learner without repeating itself in circles (Froebel, 1906). The Froebelian framing for this research is set against a current system that often diminishes education as a simple technical process, repeating itself through the individual's career, producing Early Childhood educators who are the 'simulacrum of education and care theory' (Gibbons, 2007:127). Using a constructivist qualitative paradigm supported by semi-structured interviews, activity-based focus groups and documentary research methods, I have used Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis as dynamic ways to interpret the data collected. I have used open coding coupled with Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis because it allowed for a reading of the data 'from different perspectives and for different purposes' (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2015:126).

In this chapter, the Froebelian lens has been used to exemplify and make evident the links between the data collected and the literature previously discussed. Several tenets of Froebelian philosophy have also supported this research and have been used to guide the interpretations of the data and, in this chapter, the discussion of the findings. Froebel's Spherical Law (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020) has been fundamental to frame educators' learning as holistic and contributing to the professional identity development of the participants supported by reflection and a sense of harmony with others, but also to understand the place of emotions in the everyday practice for the educators who participated in this research while seeing their lives and development as strictly linked to the environment in which they exist. Wasmuth (2020) describes Froebel's law of the sphere as supporting individuals to

fulfil their potential through education while, at the same time, framing the individual as being part of important relationships with others.

The principle of interconnectedness is important in conceptualising the self as existing in relationship with others to understand the educators' observations of the children in their care, through harmony and carefully constructed relationships with others, educators are open to understanding their daily observations linking these to their own knowledge acquired through professional learning and development courses connecting to their everyday practice. Educators' capacities for learning do not intensify as the years of training increase, education should not repeat itself unchanged through the life of the educator (Lilley, 1967). The process of education is to be diversified and extended so as to always evolve with the educators' needs at the fore (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). The Froebelian principle of interconnectivity has been fundamental in this chapter to frame educators in a web of connections with others beginning in the family context and continuing to the professional lives of educators, while, at the same time, coming back to the individual unique self, contributing to exploring how others work and feel about their work, and how these feelings are helped and enhanced in order to understand what is important for educators in their everyday contexts (Hargreaves et al., 2014 in Smith, 2018). The principle of interconnectivity has also supported the discussion in this chapter about the importance of supplementing theoretical knowledge of educators with first-hand experiences (Bruce, 2021). Self-awareness and understanding what matters for the self while also being in relationships with others explain the law of the sphere, knowing oneself in all relationships is at the heart of the Froebelian lens for this research because this is the fundamental characteristic of becoming educated according to Froebel (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020). People always form

relationships, these associations are seen to be formative to the identity of the individual, therefore the educator must always be 'conscious of his own intentions and actions and finely sensitive' to the needs of the children, families and the community as a whole and recognise his power of creating and maintaining relationships for the wellbeing of children and families (Froebel in Lilley, 1967:23). This all-unifying theme of the self in relation with others has been linked to other theory such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice, extending the ideas of Froebelian philosophy with a more modern understanding of the learner.

The selected Froebelian principles have been used to help me navigate my way around the research questions, as the research progressed, they became integral to framing the answer to the research questions proposed for this study. As it is discussed in this chapter, while in the process of interrogating the findings, to produce some answers, I have also produced several critical questions that are as important to be considered show how partial answers have been generated for particular situations. I have used the critical questions as a tool to highlight that, in the process of providing some answers to the research questions, more questions arose that are just as important to consider to successfully make sense of the lives that the participating Early Childhood educators were immersed in. The Froebelian lens have guided the explorations and conceptualizations of the data in relation to the literature discussed in chapter 2 Literature Review, shining a light over two complex systems that necessitate a more holistic view of the role of the educator and that could benefit from a Froebelian conceptualization of the function of lifelong education and training for educators working with young children.

6.3 What is the reality of practice? A lack of interconnectedness.

Through the method of Situational Analysis, I have revealed a complex web of local realities which all focus on supporting and helping children and families (Migliorini et al., 2016). However, delving deeper into understanding how the ECEC system works for the Early Childhood educators who are a part of it, I have seen a further fundamental disconnection between setting practice, which is individualised and linked to the needs of the people in it, and a system conceptualised on globalised developmental aims and objectives that is not linked to the local realities in which the settings are situated.

The reality revealed through analysis of the social arena maps shows a lack of connected ideals, representing an example of a system that cannot be defined as competent (Urban et al., 2011), as the different physical arenas in the system fail to communicate on many occasions. Urban et al. (2011:21), through their Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) research, identified that a competent system is characterised by developed relationships between 'individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context'. Another feature of a competent system, according to Urban et al. (2011), is existing support for individuals to develop practices that are responsive and tailored to the needs of children and families. This is not shown in the case studies as in both cases PLD is found on the outer layer of the maps representing the social worlds that Early Childhood educators are immersed in – it is not in contact with all the other contexts determining and influencing practice. Most importantly, PLD seems to be designed outside of educators' everyday practice, with the result that it has little or no relevance to the different local realities in which the Early Childhood educators

operate (Figure 6.2). A competent system is made of a team of Early Childhood educators who actively collaborate on their development as professionals – they are 'internally motivated to develop and improve the quality of ECEC' (Urban et al., 2011:28). When PLD is provided as a top-down prescriptive requirement, the Early Childhood educators are not in charge of developing their own critical reflections and co-construction of the pedagogy in the setting.

The main issue with how PLD is designed and presented to Early Childhood educators in this study is that the courses and formal competences which are developed are still only oriented towards the individual, without addressing how Early Childhood educators can function in a system (Urban et al., 2011), and with a system, as a holistic entity and not as individual parts whose responsibility is to understand how to work in the system, rather than make the system work for them. As a direct result of a top-down approach that is disconnected from the reality of local practice, this study has found that the educators' experiences of love and tenderness with children does not match the professional discourse promoted by general policy guidance. This mainly relies on knowledge and skill acquisition for both children and educators, leading to an implementation of the curriculum through which children's learning can be accurately tracked. This reflects what Urban (2008) and Campbell-Barr (2014) call a modern aim of policy to professionalise the workforce with a view of building a system of Early Childhood educators who are tasked with only implementing certain policy aims. The current paradigm has been found to reflect the concept of education that Gibbons (2007) describes as a simple technical process repeating itself through the career of the educator unchanged, without considering the educator's beliefs, ideologies, feelings and individuality.

This leaves Early Childhood educators having to renegotiate and adapt central guidelines for the professional community that have been developed with a top-down approach (Guevara, 2020).

Environments like the ones considered for this study, where PLD and its effective delivery is defined externally with a top-down approach, and where decisions about what the desirable outcomes to be reached are, can be challenging for educators' development of professional autonomy (Urban, 2008). Additionally, Urban et al. (2011) show that investing in PLD that aims to continuously develop the workforce is cost effective and has a great potential to have a strong impact on the overall quality of the service offered. In this research, available funding for the contexts of practice appears to be heavily dependent on the *Local Borough* in London and the *Territorio* in Italy, even though they have little or no direct involvement with practice in the settings. They are also instrumental in determining the subsidy for PLD initiatives, thereby influencing the offer in terms of the opportunities available. The climate of austerity and intensive audit negatively affecting the PLD on offer, and a steady reduction in central funding for the settings in this study, has had an adverse effect on what settings leaders are able to subsidise for educators. The financial stability of settings determines the amount and quality of training that each can offer. This has had severe implications for the range of experiences provided for educators.

Despite a lack of connected ideals in the outer contexts of practice discussed above, I have also become aware of several important new connections and intersections. These mainly happen in the inner contexts of practice depicted in Figure 6.2, showing that the inner level of the systems seems to communicate more than at the

outer level, and be closer to the local reality of educators. I have started from the social arena maps developed in Chapter 5, expanding the focus, considering contexts of practice and the sites of silence in the data, and have further interrogated the maps presented in Figures 5.6 and 5.7 to understand where and if the connections between the different social arenas were present or not. The expected connections are represented symbolically with double-sided arrows, while the disconnections found are represented by a pictorial symbol.

Starting with the emotional wellbeing of Early Childhood educators and its intersection with many other contexts of practice, I can theorise that this is a fundamental issue that permeates many contexts in which the Early Childhood educators exist. The study participants working in more managerial roles referred to the use of sensitive performance management strategies to promote the most appropriate training according to need. In this case, however, I have found that PLD is mostly used as a tool to generate a measurable impact on practice, without considering opportunities that afford the chance to practice self-reflection on practice or how their professional identities are constructed. Overall, however, the Early Childhood educators considered the leadership team as an example to follow and they were also seen as mentors by less experienced staff.

A further important inter-context connection identified is represented by the figure of the educator. In both case studies, the educator is an ever-present figure who fluidly moves between different contexts of practice, changing function according to the needs of the situation. In the *Training Room* context, the educator becomes a student and is willing to question their practice, showing a certain degree of vulnerability

coupled with a strong intrinsic desire for new knowledge. In the *School* context, the educator becomes the main point of contact for children and families – a reassuring and competent figure where the previously mentioned vulnerabilities seldom appear, and their constructed professional identity is the driving force behind their choices in their everyday practice. Even if the educator is an ever-present figure in the inner layers of the contexts of practice, this figure is still not active in the outer layers of the *Local Borough,* where policies and regulations are made by local and central governments without input from such a fundamental figure to understand the local reality for many children and families using Early childhood education and care services. Such input could be used to inform how sector-wide policies could be adapted and be more responsive to the needs of the local contexts.

This study has also found that the inner contexts of practice identified in the maps representing the social arenas were a vibrant hub – their boundaries were not closed to collaboration and communication with the outer contexts. The participants referred to a yearning to become more involved with the outer contexts and how policies and regulations are developed for local settings. At the same time, it was also acutely evident that the Early Childhood educators did not feel strong enough to demand their inclusion. There could be two possible explanations for this. Since Early childhood education and care roles are increasingly considered by public opinion to be of low status, as will be fully discussed in section 6.4.1 of this chapter, and, therefore – as a sort of societal conditioning – the Early Childhood educators do not believe in themselves as being competent. Another possible explanation is that the current offering of PLD fails to support and develop educators' competences of reflection on practice. This, in turn, fails to support the construction of strong

professional identities, opting instead to develop prescriptive competences targeted at the implementation of a pre-defined ECEC offer. In this case, the Early Childhood educators are simply not strong enough to consider themselves as having a valuable input for the outer contexts of practice. This is especially evident in the case studies presented – the contexts of practice of the *Cooperativa* and *PLD Provider* act as a lens to show the Early Childhood educators how the other contexts of practice are shaped, and to outline the possible support available to them to support their need for knowledge through varied offers of PLD. In this case the two contexts of practice have made the first step for an inter-context connection to happen. However, they do not support the educator to reach out further and they fail to facilitate communication with the outer layers, implying that the place for an educator is in the setting and nothing more.

6.4 Where are the families?

According to Migliorini et al. (2016:168), PLD sessions should be used with the aim of 'forming an educational alliance between practitioners and families', anticipating the importance of the inclusion of families and children within the framework that a setting could follow. Urban et al. (2011:29), also discuss the importance of 'building reciprocal relationships' with families as part of their study on competent systems in Early Childhood education and care, recognising that many 'competence profiles and training profiles' for Early Childhood educators tend to neglect the essential action of building a

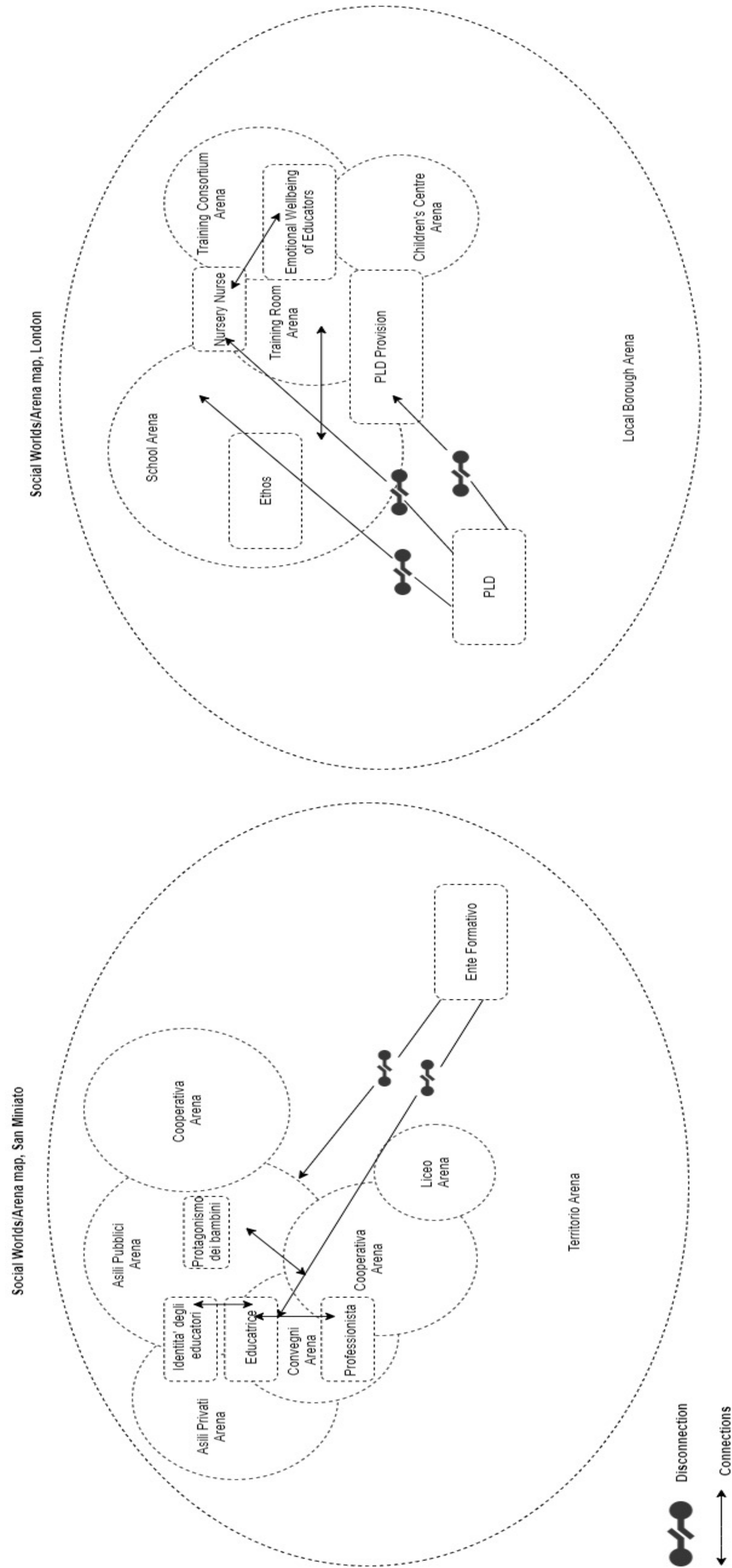


Figure 6.2 - Inter-context connections and disconnections

relationship with families and communities. In a similar vein, one of the Froebelian principles chosen as a lens for this research states that like-mindedness and autonomy fosters companionship (Froebel 1906). This highlights the importance of building significant relationships with families to promote an autonomous community where all the participants hold similar values on the wellbeing of children and educators. Urban et al. (2011) rightly state that what makes a competent system is the realisation that parents and children are important stakeholders, who should be deeply involved in shaping how local systems function and govern themselves. This study has shown a disconnection between families and children and the system of PLD for educators. Through a deep analysis of the maps created to represent the systems of practice in the case studies, I have become aware that families and children do not appear as actors, do not have a voice and are not included in the process of designing the PLD on offer. Taking into consideration that I decided not to recruit children and parents as study participants – as discussed in Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology – this could offer one explanation as to why they both appear in the category of silenced actors. However, bearing in mind that children and families are such important participants in the ECEC system, their lack of inclusion in discussing educators' identities and opportunities for PLD is surprising. The experiences and perspectives of children and families can contribute to specific professional learning and development, seeing the needs of the local community. Froebel stated that we should 'live for our children' (Froebel, 1861 in Lilley, 1967:92) – this shows the fundamental close relationship that should be developed between children, families and Early Childhood educators so that the community as a whole can benefit from services tailored to their needs, not just be presented with a one-size-fits-all approach. It is important to consider here what

Gibbons (2007) articulates as the danger of the professionalisation discourse – silencing the voices of those agents who do not feel comfortable or included in the system, instead of 'co-constructing pedagogical knowledge' with parents to support their role in the community (Urban et al., 2011:37).

The participants in this study understand and value the role that children and families have in the functioning of their settings, often remarking on the fact that work in Early childhood education and care is intricately linked with satisfying and supporting their needs, as Bridget expresses:

> *'We have to work hand in hand with them and we made them know, listen, you're the first teacher, you are your child's first carer. I'm here to support you.'*

In fact, when looking at the PLD offer for both case studies, the silencing of such important actors is not knowingly done by the Early Childhood educators themselves. Children and families seem to be included in other initiatives to do with how the pedagogical offer for children is organised. However, children and families are left out of the planning of the PLD offering and not factored into the core structure of its design. Children and families having an input into the co-construction of the pedagogical offer for PLD initiatives has the power to become the essence of how it is conceptualised and offered in the future (Brock, 2006). In this way, a system of ongoing listening to the voices of the community is created, allowing the development of a more equitable and competent system of ECEC.

6.5 Who cares for the carer?

A further context of practice identified in Situational Analysis, that of the *School*, is directly linked with the educators' day-to-day practice and tasked with utilising the funding made available from the *Local Borough* and *Territorio* to organise PLD provision. In this context of practice we find the educator. As the findings show, intricately linked to the educator is the concept of emotional wellbeing. Even though the participants express their love and passion for the job, they often also express the necessity to protect themselves against the pressures that the job entails and find it difficult to build resilience without appropriate support specifically targeting their mental health. This study shows a profession that is extremely demanding on educators' emotions – coupled with slow pay development for the sector, in some cases this adds financial hardship to the already high demands of the job on mental wellbeing. As a result of the current climate, strong professional identities for educators in this study were also slow and difficult to develop. I have become aware that Early Childhood educators see their jobs as being emotionally draining, feelings of stress and of not being able to cope with its demands were often expressed.

> *'There's a big struggle to retain staff in Early Years in private nurseries as well as schools. And that reason is that there's lots about their emotional wellbeing (in their day-to-day practice) and people feeling stressed and they can't cope with the job'* (Imogen).

This study has found that PLD can be a way to support the educators' mental wellbeing and the *School* context of practice is considered instrumental in this. The educators' emotional and mental wellbeing is in as much need of support as the development of skills to be used in everyday practice with the children. Urban at al. (2012) also recommend the provision of opportunities for Early Childhood educators

to share their in-work reflections within a peer group as part of institutional competence for the system. Furthermore, specific activities designed to release stress and talk about the less positive aspects of the job can act as a buffer against day-to-day stress, helping the Early Childhood educators to feel that this component of the job is as recognised and valued as the acquisition of knowledge and qualifications. Both Louis (2020) and Elfer (2018; 2018b; 2012) have proposed models of discussion and supervision to provide Early Childhood educators with two different ways to discuss their feelings and observations in a safe space with a group of colleagues. Work Discussion (WD) proposed by Elfer (2012; Elfer et al., 2018), which has an underpinning of psychoanalytic theory, aims to provide a structured session with a facilitator where work experiences can be thought about and questioned in a sensitive way to elicit reflection. These discussions are a way to encourage professional reflection to help Early Childhood educators manage the feelings of stress and the conscious and unconscious anxieties brought by everyday work with young children. By allowing Early Childhood educators to talk through, in a safe and non-judgemental environment, the demands of the job or particular situations that have evoked feelings of stress in them, they can be supported to work through negative feelings without being criticised or blamed for not being able to manage them (Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018b). WD can be a useful way of relieving and containing stress and anxiety resulting from social interactions with children and families in everyday practice and can be used as a ‘space for the voices’ of Early Childhood educators to be heard and considered (Elfer, 2012:132). In this way, educators’ mental health can be nourished and supported, reducing feelings highlighted in the findings of not being able to cope with the job (Elfer, 2012). On the other hand, Louis’ Work Group Supervision (2020), underpinned by a Froebelian

observation method, is presented as a way of sharing practice and questioning personal interpretations of any specific observations collected in the workplace. Louis (2020) considers the practices of reflection and discussion as fundamental to educators' professional and personal development. By discussing specific observations with a group of trusted colleagues, led by a facilitator, the educator is helped to expand their perceptions and consider possible assumptions present in observations and the educator's interpretation of them (Louis, 2020). This process aims to help Early Childhood educators to ground their practice, while, at the same time, realising their limitations and feeling free to address potentially negative feelings while being supported by the group, which provides emotional security and a safe space to be vulnerable (Louis, 2020). These two strategies constitute important experiences for Early Childhood educators to learn about each other and the practices they use in their everyday work in a respectful space. That PLD should consider and respect the emotional world of educators, as well as providing them with new and updated knowledge to improve their practice with children and families, is important. Educators' feelings must be allowed to be discussed – if not it could lead to them trying to distance themselves from children and families, employing strategies to avoid forming close relationships with the children in their care, in order to protect themselves and cope with the increased demands of the role. This could also lead to Early Childhood educators feeling emotionally drained (Manning-Morton, 2006), as was often remarked upon by the participants in this study. It is imperative that Early Childhood educators are enabled by PLD opportunities to develop maturity and self-awareness in their roles, so that they can 'become experts in themselves' and understand 'their own darker side' as well as acknowledging their more positive sides (Manning-Morton, 2006:48). It is also essential that any future concepts of

PLD promote and support a professional view of Early Childhood educators as critically reflexive but also consciously vulnerable, able to hear children distressed and angry voices while accepting the 'centrality of their physical processes to their sense of self and learning' (Manning-Morton, 2006:50).

6.6 Are Early Childhood educators' identities ambivalent and complex?

The context in which the educators' identities are formed is an extremely varied one. When discussing the process of identity formation, it is important to consider that different factors or attributes, determined by the individual, contribute to the sense of one's identity. Martina sees the educator as,

> *'…a scientist …like a farmer… who constructs the right soil for the plants to grow, he puts them next to each other because it is appropriate, but he doesn't start pulling leaves out to make the plants grow faster'.*

This is an immensely powerful metaphor – seeing the adult as a gardener is a reminder of the Froebelian understanding of who an educator is, as a gardener who attentively observes children in order to help them develop naturally (Froebel, 1897). This understanding of children and the function of the ECEC system is important, as it shows the level of complexity that Early Childhood educators add to their ideals once they have become experienced in Early Years. In this quote we can see that Martina's beliefs about Early Childhood educators following the children's needs have been constructed through time as a result of a myriad of experiences, both practical and theoretical, over the years. Most importantly, this quote shows the importance of initial training and professional learning and development to start from

practice and focus on its relationship with theory if it wants to consider children's needs fully.

During the analysis of the data for this study, I have become aware that the concept of identity formation is usually accompanied by a process of soul-searching or deep inner exploration, generating several personal reflections which help the educator to construct and articulate what contributes to their own development. After this first process, supported mainly by the educators' initial qualifications and deeply-held beliefs of who an educator should be, the educator's experiences contribute to the construction of clear objectives for their professional identities, together with the training received during their working life which also heavily shapes the beliefs behind the educators' professional identities. PLD and, in effect, any in-work learning opportunity, is seen as allowing the educator to construct many different identities according to the needs of the system in which they practice, thus supporting Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory on learning. Because the participants' understanding of identity development is ever-changing and not fixed, Early Childhood educators see their identity as dependent on their contexts of practice, their level of experience in the field and their personal ethos determining the professional values they apply to their practice, coupled with the ethos promoted by the setting.

> *'In our work we can never say we know everything. This job is a job that always evolves, that is made of relations with other educators, we really need this relation with others, if not we risk giving children standardised answers for behaviours that have been catalogued and standardised, taking away from the spontaneity of childhood'* (Ilaria).

This quote exemplifies the views of Erikson (1968 in Epstein, 1978) and McGillivray (2008), who see the development of identity as continuing through the career of the individual. It also agrees with Sachs (1999 in Brindley, 2015) and Jenkins (2008), stating that considering identity as fixed is erroneous and disadvantageous when trying to get a clear picture of how Early Childhood educators define, perceive, and make sense of their professional identities. This study has found that identity is indeed a negotiated concept whose development is not linear or fixed – it is instead dependent on culturally-influenced meanings developed in different contexts of practice. These produce an understanding of identity development that is utterly sociocultural in its origins (Jenkins, 2008; Burke & Jackson, 2007).

While considering the findings discussed above, the decision was made to further interrogate the way in which Early Childhood educators construct and develop their professional identities. The concept of identity being a constantly negotiated process which develops throughout the educator's working life and is never static is visually represented in Figure 6.3 as a process which flows continuously. The common idea, often present in the data, is that the process of identity almost always starts from deep soul-searching or inner exploration which is then enriched with experiences of practice and reflection. From these initial episodes a temporary professional identity is formed. To this initial identity, PLD and more experience in the field is constantly added, forming a stronger, more complex and varied professional identity every time. This, in turn, is renegotiated every time that more experience, more knowledge and more personal reflections are added. This last identity formation process never leads to a final professional identity, it always evolves and changes during the educators' careers. I believe it to be extremely important that the process of identity formation is

left open at the end of Figure 6.3 below – this led to an awareness that none of the Early Childhood educators believed that they could ever reach the stage of professional identity development where they would not need to consider their understandings and reflections anymore. The Early Childhood educators understood and welcomed ever-flowing, complex and varied professional identities but did not believe in the one-size-fits-all mentality of recent policy advances and felt extremely disconnected from public opinion of the workforce as a result.

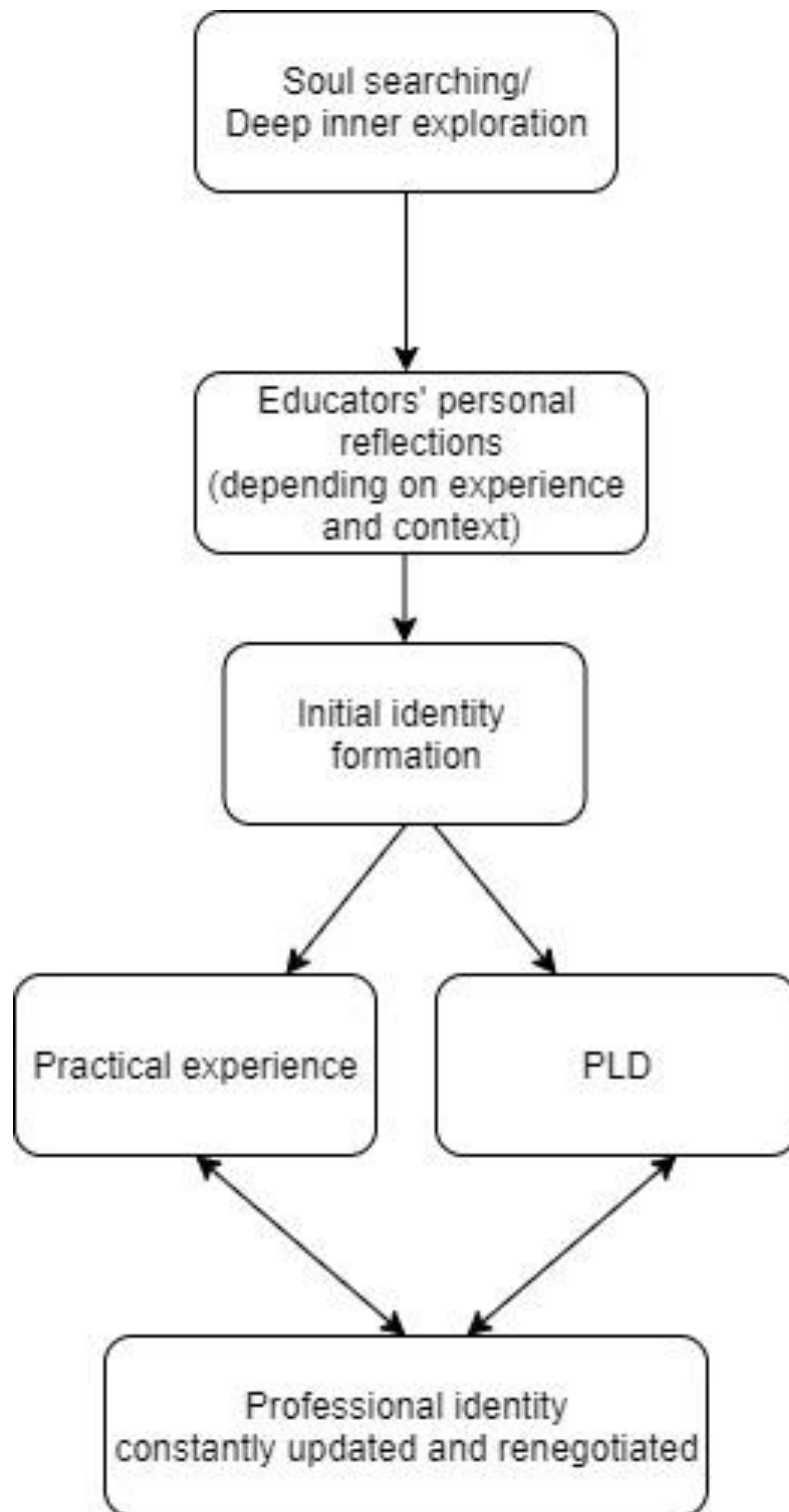


Figure 6.3 - Educators' identity development flow

The concept of professional identity development is linked to a degree of ambivalence, especially when looking at the reasons given by the Early Childhood

educators which helped them decide to enter the profession. In Figure 6.3, the need to love the job was one the first ideals which shaped their decisions – the Early Childhood educators did not enter the job without an initial love for it. This contributed to the educators' warm and friendly attitude to the children and families visiting the setting. At the same time, after the initial period of love for the job, the Early Childhood educators felt the need to be well versed on issues of confidentiality and children's safeguarding, while respecting their own boundaries with the children and families in order to maintain a professional balance and a kind and caring side to their personalities, thus showing empathy. In addition, the ability to be a good listener and respectful of the children's needs was also deemed essential, while simultaneously maintaining a certain detachment. This allows the Early Childhood educators to see the whole situation, without missing the important details that can be essential to better support children and families in the setting. It is interesting that, no matter what the educators' believed their chosen underpinning values to be in forming and developing their professional identity, they all agreed that professionalism in Early childhood education and care is not something that can be improvised. It is, instead, an important skill that must be formed and supported adequately by the workplace through PLD opportunities. This study confirms Urban and Dalli's (2012) perspective that central to how most Early Childhood educators define their professionalism is their role in the setting, their everyday practice, and their official job title. This study shows a series of complex ambivalences suggesting that the most important influence on the educators' professional identities is found both in the immediacy of their roles and the beliefs that led to their entry into the profession – one did not exclude the other, contrary to what Urban and Dalli (2012) concluded. This suggests a view of professional identity for Early Childhood Early

Childhood educators being formed through blending everyday practice and PLD, together with the educators' initial beliefs and qualifications, seeing Early Childhood educators' identities as 'linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical' (Van Manen, 1977 in Urban & Dalli, 2012:160).

A further set of ambivalences identified in the formation of educators' professional identities, which contributed to the complexity of those in this study, has been found – similar to Ailwood's (2008) study – in the duality of aims that the Early Childhood educators cited as reasons to become part of the ECEC workforce. Many Early Childhood educators took pride in their identities as teachers and mothers with a natural calling for the job. For example, Sofia explains:

> *'I always felt it as a natural disposition, all my schoolmates always said that I wanted to work with children from a young age. I always had this disposition for young children.'*

However, just as many Early Childhood educators refuted a vocational discourse, pointing out that their extensive education, qualifications and professionalism must not be undermined by a discourse of maternalism. Those who supported a vocational discourse saw their role as not only a way to earn a living, but as having important and deeply rooted motivations behind it (Liebschner, 2001). However, this understanding of the role of the Early Childhood educator is deemed problematic by Moss (2003 in Miller et al., 2012) because it predisposes the notion that all women are natural mothers and therefore they can all work with young children, leaving the professional preparation of Early Childhood educators on the backburner instead of considering it as a fundamental requirement for the job. On the other hand, Ilaria

shows a different route that took her to work with young children which has influenced the ways in which she has constructed her professional identity:

> *'I started studying in the field of Early Childhood but then I set it aside because I started to work in hospitals. When my bursary ended, I looked around and there was a vacancy for an educator in the Asilo Nido'*

With such a diverse, complex and ambivalent workforce made up of Early Childhood educators who all have different, important and valid reasons for entering and staying in the profession, some tensions arise over status between Early Childhood educators who rely on their caring qualities and those who have aspirations for a career relying on their academic preparation instead (McGillivray, 2008). Guevara's work (2020) shows that Early Childhood educators often refuse a vocational discourse as a way to avoid being seen as nothing more than glorified babysitters, that their work requires little professional preparation, denying the profession's educational function. In this case, refusing a maternalistic discourse with the same fervour that Núñez (2018) and McGillivray (2008), would be denying some of the participants' deeply-rooted beliefs as being unimportant and too simple. Being kind and loving should not be the only desirable traits for someone working with young children. However, we cannot deny the importance of empathy and love, just as we cannot deny the importance of having the required theoretical knowledge to be competent in the job. By the same token, I would not want to support a view that care is a moral obligation in a job where the educator's selflessness and self-sacrifice is necessary (Lynch & Lyons, 2009; Colley, 2006). I would not want to see a future workforce where the more negative aspects of the job, such as low pay and low status, can be glossed over by the use of a maternalistic discourse, at the expense of the vocational discourse. In this case a balanced view is needed – as Urban et al. (2012) show in discussing working

conditions for educators, supporting the importance of pay parity with schoolteachers reduces staff turnover and enhances professional and social status, contributing to the development of a competent system. This is as important as in-work learning opportunities and collaborations with other colleagues. Providing Early Childhood educators with adequate working conditions should not exclude different discourses which support the educators' personal beliefs to enter and remain in the workforce, because this denies the complexities of educators' identities and disregards the ambivalences present in their roles. This contributes to what Ritzer (1993) calls a McDonaldisation of the ECEC workforce, homogenising and globalising the identity of Early Childhood educators in every context of practice everywhere, effectively destroying the possibility for Early Childhood educators to be critical and creative thinkers in constructing their own identities.

6.7 Does the low status of the workforce affect Early Childhood educators' professional identity development?

Caring for young children is often associated with being appropriate for women who have been marginalised during their school experiences. Núñez (2018:2) describes this specific career choice as a 'prevention of slipping downwards', rather than a job leading to public recognition or social mobility. This can result in a discourse which doubts whether the care that happens in Early childhood education and care settings can indeed be considered education (Gibbons, 2007). Zamblyas et al. (2014) argue that such low status for Early childhood education and care reflects the perspective that caregiving is an activity that it is often ignored and poorly rewarded, because it is considered as subordinate to education, which is thought to only happen when children enter compulsory schooling. In this discourse, Early Childhood educators

are not considered as being in need, or even worthy, of education, promoting a pedagogy that fails to see the importance of allowing Early Childhood educators to develop their own identities holistically while being supported by initial training and PLD. The Early Childhood educators often expressed how low public status and recognition is a factor which affects their sense of worth in the profession:

> *'I believe that our profiles as educators, we are a bit like the Cinderella of the field …in the sense that there is no recognition from the state that is, in my opinion, adequate to the dignity of our roles. Often, we are considered merely babysitters, like we were grandmothers! The laws that are in force don't protect us enough, they don't recognise our professional status but also…the financial compensation for this job is not that great'* (Emma).

The current rhetoric around the low status of work in Early childhood education and care relies on a redemptive discourse, that care is presented as a moral obligation – in this way self-sacrifice becomes a fundamental characteristic of the role (Lynch & Lyons, 2009; Colley, 2006) and the perception of a redemptive workforce is promoted. The profession is seen to be only providing children with protection and safety and Early Childhood educators are identified as nice people who like children (McGillivray, 2008; Vincent & Braun, 2010). The above quote, however, supports Guevara's (2020) view, which shows a workforce that is against a definition of their professional profiles as being nothing more than glorified babysitters and fights against a belief that denies their educational function and the respect that they deserve. They struggle against a popular public view that they do what they do because they were born to look after children. Such a discourse diminishes those who worked hard to become Early Childhood educators and uphold the child as deserving of respect and recognition (Vincent & Braun, 2010; Gibson, 2015). According to

Urban et al. (2011), a key factor to developing a competent system is reflected in the working conditions for educators. In this study, the participants often experience the low status that their role has – wages are not adequate, public policies fail to recognise the importance of their roles and staff turnover as a result of burnout and stressful working conditions is high. These characteristics show that, when we explore the employment conditions of the workforce, the systems I have studied cannot yet be regarded as competent. This research study has also shown that continuous discussions during PLD opportunities that focus on supporting the development of strong professional identities can help to resolve the duality mentioned by Vincent and Braun (2010) and Gibson (2015), helping Early Childhood educators not to become victims of a system that only sees ECEC as a mainly custodial service and not as an essential part of young children's lives. Horizontal and vertical mobility is virtually non-existent at the moment. Urban et al. (2011:52) highlight how, without mobility, these jobs essentially become 'dead end' with 'no incentive for individual development'. This trend needs to be reversed in the near future by allowing continuous discussions which centre on supporting the educators' constructions of professional identities to happen. Then we can create a holistic pedagogy supported by holistically educated Early Childhood educators (Froebel, 1906), who are encouraged to move within a competent system that fully supports their needs for growth and development.

6.8 Educators' labour with feelings – whose need is it?

The Early Childhood educators in this study have been positioned at the very centre of the systems of practice identified at the beginning of this chapter but seem to have little influence on the design and delivery of PLD. Furthermore, their emotional

wellbeing was often mentioned as being something that was not cared about enough, with many Early Childhood educators reporting dangerous levels of stress and feelings of not being able to cope with the job's demands. Asked about what role emotions have in their practice, they often used personal experiences to provide clear examples of their beliefs and that emotions were a pillar on which their identities were constructed. It could be argued that experience in practice is often the starting point for Early Childhood educators to understand and assess the value of different initiatives presented in the general PLD offer. I have identified a strong link between practice and theory as being essential for Early Childhood educators in Early Years, supporting the belief that their training should focus not only on the acquisition of theory and practice, but on the relationships between the two (Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014).

Participants' opinions were divided when discussing whether emotions are a fundamental component of educators' identities and what role these play. In some cases, the participants said that some detachment might be necessary in order to assess each family situation with a certain objectivity. This would allow the educator to concentrate on the job ahead, without being swayed by emotions, while fully understanding their place in relation to the routine of children's families. Ideas around the ethos of an Early Childhood educator's role included the need to be professional and have a clear vision of its aims. Success in acting on these can depend on the development of close relationships with children and families, relying on the passion, empathy and resilience of the educator. In order to maintain these, the educator needs to be warm and friendly, but also firm, and seen to be well versed in matters of respecting confidentiality without trying to compete with families for the

love and attention of the children attending the setting. Participants highlighted the caring side of the role as being important, however, they had strong beliefs that a certain detachment from the emotional parts of the job was needed to show the families their competency and to inspire trust in their capabilities. This study has also showed that most of the educators' discussions around professional identity are often conceptualised through the use of emotions.

> *'We can't successfully relate to another person without emotions. Emotions are firmly there in our work, they are inside us, inside everything we do. I believe that me fully living my emotions in front of the children also allows them to understand them and fully live them'* (Ilaria).

The discussions around emotions which developed in this study concur with Núñez (2018), Dalli et al. (2012) and Lynch et al. (2009). Most of the participants see love and compassion as being fundamental characteristics for their role. However, they also mention another important layer in their considerations:

> *'I think emotions are important ...but also in this, don't fall into the trap ...so the educator should always ask, whose need is it? Because most of the times it's us that need a cuddle not the child, we are merely attaching our need to the child'* (Alice).

Even though most of the educators' discussions around emotional labour described emotions as being essential to satisfy children's needs for closeness and affection, at the same time they did not seem to recognise their needs for closeness and tenderness towards the children, dismissing such discourse as being inappropriate and unprofessional. There is an important layer to be discussed here – emotional labour is not only Early Childhood educators providing love but also satisfying their need for close relationships with the children in their care. There is an implication that the

need to give love is equal to the need to receive love. It is, therefore, necessary for the Early Childhood educators to acknowledge their own needs as well when engaging in emotional labour. What Page (2011:313) refers to as ‘pedagogical loving’ is extremely demanding on the educators’ resilience and skills – a deep and reciprocal relationship is required with each child under the educator’s care for it to happen. This study shows the educators’ opinions on emotional labour as being a balancing act of ‘detached attachment, where emotions are required to be authentic but also controlled, carefully warm and restrained at the same time’ (Vincent & Braun, 2010).

As a result of the current ECEC system being conceptualised as an entrepreneurial discourse (Campbell-Barr, 2014), love has become one of the products for sale, part of the childcare package purchased by families when entering the system. However, Lynch and Walsh (2009) argue that love cannot be provided as a purchasable element because it can only be produced over time, when intimacy and engagement develop in the rapport with children and families. Some of the Early Childhood educators in this study were divided over whether it was necessary to think about the role of emotions in relation to educators’ professional identities. Some Early Childhood educators outright refused a discourse that emotions are pivotal to their roles as professionals. These Early Childhood educators effectively reject the current maternalist discourse discussed by Ailwood (2008) and Zembylas et al. (2014) as being the way that women’s place in the labour market is understood. The quote below shows the strength of the emotions that some Early Childhood educators feel over the discourse that all women make natural mothers, therefore all mothers make natural Early Childhood educators (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007 in Elfer, 2012):

> *'I am very pugnacious on this…I am very angry because I think that this element risks completely devaluing the professionalism of educators. I am convinced that in every job where you have to relate yourself to others, of course you must use emotions'* (Chiara).

The above and below quotes show frustration with a system which implies that working with young children is innate (Vincent & Braun, 2010), showing how tensions can arise from the contradictions between a workforce seen as caring, maternal and gendered and one that is seen as professional, highly educated and highly trained (McGillivray, 2008).

> *'What I think needs to be highlighted is the professionality of the educator, because I will never be able to understand why we are constantly asked to understand our emotions in work with young children while a doctor working in oncology, who sees children die every day and has to speak to families is never asked this. In the field of Early Childhood there is still this cultural idea that we are not real professionals, that we are just people who like children'* (Chiara).

The Early Childhood educators in this study recognise the role of emotions, but not as a dimension that is only specific to their work, and they are willing to fight against the stereotype that love and a disposition for caring for others are the only necessary characteristics to work with young children (Ailwood, 2008). This study has confirmed that care by Early Childhood educators in Early childhood education and care settings is a 'social, political, and emotional practice' – its existence is dependent on the specific context of practice (Zembylas et al., 2014:203). In addition, the emotional labour in which educators engage in Early childhood education and care settings must be supported by appropriate training as Froebel (1906) states – to develop a holistic pedagogy we must firstly develop holistically

educated practitioners and see their training as enabling them to construct their own individual identities.

6.9 **Summary**

I have constructed this chapter through the use of several critical questions that originated during the process of data analysis for this study. I have used these to discuss the most important findings for this study and, at the same time, highlight to the reader that, even though the research questions have been considered with the Froebelian principles as navigational tools, providing a definite answer is impossible. The investigations and explorations of the data have revealed several additional questions that need to be considered on the issue of PLD for Early Childhood educators in two contexts of practice. The critical questions shone a light on the principal research question and sub-questions for this study, which then led to an additional layer of exploration exemplified in the critical questions with which I have shaped this chapter. I have raised more questions over the apparent unexpected disconnections of ideals between the design of the PLD offer and the practice that constitutes the daily routine in the settings. I have considered the place of children and families in the systems of practice explored and asked a central question of *Who cares for the carer?* Educators' identities have revealed themselves to be ambivalent and also much more complicated than first envisaged. The low status of the workforce might also be an element that has an effect on educators' professional identity development. The Early Childhood educators do not see public policy giving their role the importance it deserves and they were hesitant in constructing strong professional identities for themselves.

In this way, the first critical question, which asks, *What is the reality of practice?*, has shown a disconnected picture of ideals and aims with a risk that PLD courses could reduce education and training to simple technical processes that are repeated unchanged throughout the professional lives of the educators. In addition to imparting new knowledge and skills, PLD courses should address how Early Childhood educators function as part of a system (Urban et al., 2011). I have found a significant disconnection between the conceptualisation and implementation of the current PLD offer, which justifies the need for its reconceptualisation. There is a need for a more adaptable structure for PLD, changing and evolving as the educators' in-service experience deepens and develops, supporting wider pedagogical discussions around identity development, as well as providing essential skill training for the Early Childhood educators in ways that link to their experiences in practice. Interestingly, this study has also found some important inter-context connections between the inner systems represented in Figure 6.3. I did not expect those connections to be so strong – the inner systems communicated between each other and were conceptualised as vibrant hubs for collaborations between different contexts of practice. The educator is an ever-present figure within the systems, who moves fluidly between the contexts of practice, adapting to their different needs. However, this fluidity is only limited to the inner systems of practice, the educator is not present in the outer systems where policies are made and the PLD offer is conceptualised.

The second critical question asking *Where are the families?* has illuminated an important feature of the field in the local contexts I have included in this study – the fact that families and children are missing from the PLD picture in both contexts

They are silent and not afforded a role in shaping the PLD offer with their experiences of the ECEC system and their individual needs. I have considered the importance of having regard for and supporting educators' emotional wellbeing to buffer the feelings of burnout and stress. I have highlighted a picture of a profession that is extremely demanding on the educators' emotional labour, which can feel emotionally draining. I have proposed appropriate targeted support through PLD courses, using a variety of strategies that have taken centre stage in the literature and current practice, which I believe will positively influence educators' feelings and mental wellbeing.

The third and fourth critical questions respectively, *Does the low status of the workforce affect educators' professional identity development* and *Whose need is it?* when talking about the educators' labour with feelings have helped to paint a picture of how Early Childhood educators define themselves and understand and make sense of their identities. I have discussed the issue of educators' identity formation – the results show an extremely varied and diverse picture of what they do. I have concluded that providing Early Childhood educators with adequate working conditions should not exclude different discourses which support their personal beliefs behind entering and remaining in the workforce. If this had to happen, we would be denying the complexities of educators' identities and disregarding the ambivalences present in their roles, contributing to a McDonaldisation of the ECEC workforce and effectively destroying the possibility of Early Childhood educators being critical and creative thinkers in constructing their own identities (Ritzer, 1993).

The selected Froebelian principles I have used as a lens in this research have highlighted the importance of holistically educating practitioners to provide them with the tools needed to construct their own identities in autonomy (Froebel, 1906). They have also helped me to consider that any knowledge acquired through PLD courses must have a direct link with the educators' everyday practice if it is to be meaningful to their local contexts (MacVannel, 1906). Finally, this study has confirmed the importance of like-mindedness and autonomy in order to foster companionship (Froebel, 1906) in the communities of practice and the need to further reinforce this fundamental principle if we hope to create wide-reaching communities that include children, families and Early Childhood educators as active agents who can implement change according to their needs and on a level playing field with other active agents in the system.

The next chapter will present the conclusions for this study together with suggestions for further research and considerations of the impact of the present study and its findings on the ECEC community.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This chapter will draw together the findings from this study. In the previous chapter, through the use of several critical questions which originated during the process of data analysis, I considered how best to discuss and answer the principal research question and sub-questions. I have used several critical questions as a tool to highlight that, in the process of providing some answers to the research questions, more questions arose that were just as important to consider in order to successfully make sense of the lives that the participating Early Childhood educators were immersed in.

Through a pair of freestanding but related case studies (Stake, 2003) in two local contexts in London and San Miniato, Italy, this study investigated the key characteristics of PLD for Early Childhood educators with a view to highlighting and exploring the complex interrelationships in and among the cases selected. I have developed this qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, activity-based focus groups and documentary research. The main strategies used to analyse the data are a dynamic approach to Grounded Theory supplemented by Clarke's (2005) Situational Analysis, an alternative approach deeply rooted in the constructivist paradigm. The purpose of this study is to explore PLD opportunities and the process of identity development for Early Childhood educators, considering contemporary practices in Tuscany and London in order to contribute to a reconceptualisation of the current PLD offering and create a vision of PLD that is informed and guided by Froebelian philosophy. This research has produced a current picture of professional learning and development initiatives both in London and San Miniato, providing a

new look at what it means to be an Early Childhood educator today. I have also shown the need for a reconceptualisation of the current PLD offering with a new one designed around the needs of Early Childhood educators working with young children, starting from where the learner is and aiming to make a significant difference to the educators' professional lives while staying true to fundamental Froebelian principles and philosophy.

This study looks at two local realities where disconnected aims and ideals to do with the conceptualisation and practice of PLD have encumbered the functioning of the system, reducing the education and training of Early Childhood educators to a technical process repeated unchanged through their professional lives. The educators' experiences of love and tenderness with children did not match the professional discourse promoted by general policy guidance, which relies only on knowledge and skill acquisition for both children and educators, reflecting a professionalisation of the workforce with a view to building a system of Early Childhood educators who are tasked with only implementing certain policy aims (Urban, 2008; Campbell-Barr, 2014). Education, in this case, is seen to be a technical process repeating itself unchanged through the lives of the educators, without considering their beliefs, ideologies, feelings and individuality. This leaves Early Childhood educators having to renegotiate and adapt central guidelines for the professional community that have been designed with a top-down approach (Guevara, 2020; Gibbons, 2007). Some professional contexts, tasked with determining the funding available, are shown to have little or no involvement with the day-to-day life of the settings while also being instrumental in determining the

subsidy to be dedicated to the educators' PLD initiatives, therefore influencing the offer in terms of courses available to educators.

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).

7.2 A Froebelian lens to guide the conclusions and recommendations for the study

The Froebelian lens for this study has made evident a current conceptualization of the educator as having fundamental needs that are not yet being fully met. Froebel himself says that the needs of children, parents and importantly, educators need to be met for the learning taking place for all involved to be meaningful so that adults can share the children's play and observe the children's needs from a position of confident knowledge (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Several tenets of Froebelian philosophy have guided the shaping of the conclusions and recommendations for this study, Froebel's Spherical Law (Liebschner, 2001; Wasmuth, 2020) has been fundamental to the conclusion that being an educator is the result of a continuous holistic learning process, a process in which Early Childhood educators are safe and supported in questioning and reflecting on their practice and beliefs in relation to the changing landscape of ECEC systems (Urban et al., 2011), contributing to the professional identity development of the participants by adding critical reflection and

a sense of harmony with others, understanding the place of emotions in the everyday practice for the educators who participated in this research while seeing their lives and development as strictly linked to the environment in which they exist. Another fundamental feature of Froebelian philosophy, interconnectivity has been used in this chapter to further explore the law of the sphere, highlighting the web of connections surrounding the educators and of which the educators are a part of, and showing how connections and carefully constructed relationships with others are essential, as this is where knowledge is formed (Werth, 2019). The tenet of interconnectivity has been important in this chapter when discussing the place that first-hand experiences should have in supplementing the theoretical knowledge of educators, supplementing this with important observations of the children around them stimulating reflection and creativity (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Another important tenet of Froebelian philosophy that has been used in this chapter is the concept of starting from where the learner is (Bruce, 1997), this concept has been important to understand how the current PLD systems in this thesis could be reconceptualised and to understand what place the figure of the educator had in the current design. Freedom with guidance has been used to explore whether the current offer is in need to let educators think for themselves more, giving them opportunities to make choices and pursue their own interests while developing their practice further, stimulating freedom and self-determination in the educators, producing a sense of empowerment (Froebel, 1906; Tovey, 2020). The possibility of the PLD offer to stimulate critical reflections on practice has been an important consideration that will be fully discussed in section 7.3.2 Who is the educator? Ambivalent and complex identities leading to a fluid understanding of who a professional educator is meant to be.

The recommendations I have developed in this chapter are to be used to stimulate thinking rather than to dictate a modus operandi to be adhered to strictly to assess the professional learning and development offer in a particular area and support the professional identity construction of early years educators in every geographical context without change (Bruce, 2021).

7.3 Recommendations for reconceptualisations of professional learning and development offer

The recommendations detailed in this section are shaped by the understanding that PLD must be 'sustained by a culture of mutual learning based on participation and shared understandings' (Lazzari et al., 2013:136). The findings consider the view that participation in social practice is a crucial element that has the power to promote a view of knowledge acquisition as being highly linked to the social world and the specific context under investigation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The lack of appropriate and varied PLD opportunities for Early Childhood educators can have a substantial influence both on the quality of care and education that children and families have access to, but also on the confidence and morale of the workforce (Louis, 2020).

Considering current trends shown in ECEC systems in Europe, with Italy and other EU member states such as Finland and Germany establishing 'unitary and integrated ECEC' systems for children from birth to six years of age, and a constant increase of the services dedicated to children under three years of age, we must give a greater attention to the training and education of ECEC educators (Silva et al., 2018:243). The aim must be to provide families with quality services run by Early Childhood educators who 'promote social and pedagogical virtuous circles' for the benefit of

the competent system and everyone in it (Silva et al., 2018:243). One of the most important characteristics of a competent system for the recommendations I have developed is the idea that being an educator is the result of a continuous learning process, a process in which Early Childhood educators are safe and supported in questioning and reflecting on their practice and beliefs in relation to the changing landscape of ECEC systems (Urban et al., 2011). As the Tuscan Approach shows, ECEC must always be considered with a flexible approach. It is important that the systems taken into consideration for this study are not intended as 'models to be applied tout court' but rather that their characteristics are meant to be interpreted to diversify the experience of existing ECEC frameworks in other contexts of practice (Silva et al., 2018:244).

7.3.1 *A complex and diverse PLD offer to support the development of complex and diverse professional identities*

The present context of PLD shows a picture of current initiatives not being designed to support regular discussions around the educators' development of their professional identities. As a result, PLD that is only focused on helping Early Childhood educators achieve tangible skills that can be used in everyday practice is common, rather than also focusing on theoretical discussions which support the way that Early Childhood educators think about their professional identities as well as developing practical skills. A Froebelian view, on the other hand, sees the learner as never being static – learning is not only made of transmission and assimilation but of relations and intersections where it grows with the learner without repeating itself unchanged throughout their career (Froebel, 1906; Gibbons, 2007). Here, one of the participants in London tells how she feels about the current PLD offering.

> *‘We could have more of an input I think, to maybe ask once a term or something. Like, there’s a training day coming up in say a month and a half’s time. Two months’ time. Maybe give us a list? What we could, what we would like to do – some of us have more experience than others, like, we're support staff, so we have less experience than the teachers and key persons and they have way more experience and knowledge. So, it'd be nice to keep up with them, you know, it would be really good to keep up with them’* (Caroline).

Giving Early Childhood educators a voice regarding the proposed PLD offering will contribute to a new view of an educator who values dialogue, critical thinking and practising with an open mind (Dalli et al., 2012) and transforms PLD from a passive process imposed on Early Childhood educators to one with active engagement from everyone included. A revised PLD offer must combine a mutual interplay of theory and practice with a focus on sustaining the development of educators’ reflective competences (Urban et al., 2012; Balduzzi & Lazzari, 2014; Peeters, 2012). This will better support educators’ growing capacities and experience and give them occasions to engage in collaborative learning with others with a clear focus on practice, so that relations between Early Childhood educators and different settings can be explored and consolidated. Future PLD provision must be diversified according to the educators’ profiles and competences (Migliorini et al., 2016), to grow with the learner and ensure that no one is left behind by always starting from where the learner is (Bruce, 1997).

I have become aware during this research that there needs to be more emphasis on encouraging learning in collaboration with other educators. The activity of sharing practice with others in the field has the power to give agency to the Early Childhood educators so that they will be better equipped to utilise the PLD offer. As Appleby

and Pilkington (2014) state, learning in isolation is not beneficial and it runs the danger of being considered as an obligation for staff to conform to, rather than an opportunity to advance knowledge. Professionalism and the advancement of knowledge must be linked within a professional community and be strictly dependent upon the relationships between the educators, the professional community and their work environments (Guevara, 2020). Such a reconceptualisation of PLD would facilitate small group work and include opportunities to visit other settings to see practice first hand, as well as including opportunities for Early Childhood educators to share examples of practice using various modes of documentation. This will enhance educators' feeling of belonging to a community of practice with shared aims and values.

Educators' experiences of the reality of practice must be used as a base from which to plan the PLD offer. As a result, it will be fully grounded in practice and Early Childhood educators will be able to see that their everyday realities are valued and considered as a condition for meaningful learning in collaboration with others. As Lave and Wenger (1991:95) explain, participation in collaborative learning allows Early Childhood educators to be 'both absorbing and being absorbed in the culture of practice', thus making the culture of practice theirs. In this way, the learning spaces will be focussed on peer-initiated learning (Appleby & Pilkington, 2014). The Early Childhood educators will then be able to engage in thinking and reflective processes linked to the development of strong and informed professional identities and practical skills for the job. In this way, as Appleby and Pilkington (2014) state, PLD will be more than simple knowledge acquisition or a 'one-off' training approach – it will permeate the working life of the educators, accompanying them and growing

with them throughout their careers. The advancement of knowledge cannot just be based on a narrow discussion of how children develop. Professional learning and development must also include a range of international policies and practices, so that Early Childhood educators can form an understanding of how others develop and articulate similar issues. This will facilitate the development of a critical knowledge and understanding of one's own and others' ways of being a professional in Early Years, understanding the importance of how diverse cultures and families care for their youngest (Goouch & Powell, 2013 in Powell, 2020). In this way, the profession will be shaped into a critical ecology, where belonging to a group of Early Childhood educators who support each other's learning will help the system of ECEC to move from focusing on individual practices to considering the practices of the system as a whole, therefore moving closer to being considered a 'competent system' (Urban & Dalli, 2012). Dahlberg and Moss (2005 in Powell, 2020) propose the creation of discursive spaces where there is room for dialogue, to reflect on differing perspectives, beliefs and values, where confrontation is welcomed and is a means to deliberate on experiences and understandings of practice. This kind of professional learning and development, according to Powell (2020), coupled with a strong knowledge base from research and child development ideas, has a real potential to impact the overall quality of the service to the benefit of children and families.

With this thesis I have shown that, as much as the content of the PLD offer is important, the way in which the system finances itself must also take priority. Financing professional learning and development cannot be an afterthought. It is not acceptable that Early childhood education and care settings are not provided with a specific budget for funding PLD that adapts itself to the needs of the community.

This study shows that financial stability for Early childhood education and care settings determines the amount and quality of training that each can offer. Less fortunate settings can provide training for fewer educators, contributing to a significant disparity of experience. This is a systemic issue that will continue to have a significant bearing on the place that Early childhood education and care services have for different local contexts and for granting access to Early childhood education and care to all children (Pascal et al., 2020). The current financial climate has become dire for Early childhood education and care settings. The private for-profit market favoured for the provision of Early childhood education and care services (Penn, 2014) has meant that settings must move the budget they are given to more 'visible' impact characteristics to encourage the consumer (in this case families) to purchase the service that is offered. Unfortunately, the impact that well-formed Early Childhood educators can have on a child's life is not visible enough – settings prefer to concentrate on more material and evident characteristics of what they offer to encourage families to sign up.

A reconceptualisation of PLD influenced through a Froebelian lens cannot just be the responsibility of the individual educator. Change requires cohesion between different sections of a competent system that values Early childhood education and care as an important field worth investing in by providing support for Early Childhood educators to develop strong professional identities and enhance their learning throughout their professional lives (Balaguer Felip, 2012). In a reconceptualisation of PLD through a Froebelian lens, there must be no place for the historical notion of 'hair or care' – that the choice for young women who don't perform well at school is between being a hairdresser or caring for children (Nutbrown, 2012 in Powell, 2020).

The maintenance of a workforce that has low education and training, contributing to the idea of a profession of lowly status, cannot be acceptable anymore. The relational interdependency between the educator and the community must also be considered. Froebelian education requires professionals who are committed and well educated, with intellectual lives that are well fed and developed through being with children and observing their lives (Bruce, 2021). This will result in seeing learning and thinking as being made of relationships among people and acknowledging that their views arise from a world that is socially and culturally structured (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way, change will affect the whole system of Early Years, not only individual Early Childhood educators and settings. It will also extend to considering the competence of the system as a whole by positively sustaining change both for the setting and for individual Early Childhood educators (Balaguer Felip, 2012).

7.3.2 *Who is the educator? Ambivalent and complex identities leading to a fluid understanding of who a professional educator is meant to be*

In this section I will discuss the understanding of professional identity for early childhood educators that the Froebelian lens and have led me to. I will present some fundamental characteristics that a professional educator should possess as reflected in the data for this research as well as acknowledging the long-standing debates about what this means for the early years field and link my understandings, as supported by the conclusions and recommendations for this study. The ways in which educators conceptualise their professional identities has important implications for how the professional learning and development offer must be constructed to respond to the different professional identities that populate the sector (Lightfoot, 2015). The characteristics of professional identity discussed in this section must be framed and understood as existing within a system of early years

where educators are sometimes disillusioned with their roles, where feelings of inadequacy and loss of control are often reported as part and parcel of being an educator in early years today (Lightfoot, 2015).

A key element of a Froebelian approach is the educator, the adult is the one shaping the ethos and activities of the setting, they form and sustain important relationships and enable children's learning (Tovey, 2017). An important element of the professional identity of the educators in this study was the ability to tune in with the child and a willingness to know more about what underpins their practice, Bruce (1997, in Tovey, 2017: 112) explains that the educator should 'observe, support and extend' children's learning, by the same token, this study has found that professional learning and development must also have the same aims in order to fully support the educators in their lifelong learning journeys. The carer, according to Noddings (2012) is attentive, she needs to hear and understand the needs of the cared for, in the data it was evident that this fundamental skill needs to come from the capabilities within the individual as a starting point, the initial skills need to then be formed in order to be stronger happen in a more purposeful and holistic way. Any construction of professional identity must be framed as unique and personal to the educators' personal situations and culture, and as 'an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences' that is self-constructed and supported by reflexive processes (Lightfoot, 2015:3). Tadeu et al. (2021:2) concluded that professional identity can be described as 'simultaneously stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, a result of the different processes of socialization'.

There are several long-standing debates in the field of early childhood regarding the ways in which educators develop a professional identity. Taggart (2016) highlights a modernist discourse of care focusing on a vulnerable child upholding the idea of a substitute mother as the educator who is freed to enter the labour market by the profession itself or as Campbell-Barr (2014) refers to it, a romantic discourse where ECEC provision is needed to provide safeguarding and protection in a nurturing atmosphere for young children. Seen from this point of view, Early Childhood educators do not rely on their specifically-acquired pedagogical knowledge and skills to consider themselves good educators – rather, they rely on a vocation, which is a gift that cannot be learned or developed. However, this discourse is also coupled with a more recent postmodernist discourse focusing on children as active citizens with rights, promoting an image of a capable child who is a citizen of the world, in this case the system of ECEC seeks to establish early years settings as democratic spaces built on democratic dialogue where the educator is seen as a 'social pedagogue/activist' (Taggart, 2016:173). Goldstein (1998:245) discusses a further conception, seeing care as a personality trait, limiting educators' conceptions of what this means for their professional identities and 'obscuring the complexity and intellectual challenge of work with young children'. Falling back into seeing care as simply a desire to nurture children with smiles and hugs risks perpetuating an erroneous conception of educators as not as professional as teachers of older children; this conception has wide ranging implications for the workforce resulting in less pay and less status coupled with less visibility for the sector and the values it advocates for (Goldstein, 1998). A further discourse is also present in the field, Taggart (2016:173) calls it a '360-degree compassionate pedagogy' built on an idea of compassionate pedagogy aiming to nurture vocal children who are capable

citizens that feel secure and well-adjusted to the life of the setting, with relationships between children and educators built in a more democratic way. Taggart (2016) proposes an epistemology attributing deep significance both to a romantic discourse and to a critical enquiry model with the potential of fuelling an ethical pedagogy highlighting both the emotional qualities of relationships between educators and children and social justice issues. In the same vein, Goldstein (1998:247) advocates for a new take on caring, focusing on well-developed theoretical foundations so that caring is seen as something educators engage in, rather than something they are, the very act of rooting a caring perspective in experience, in the same way that Noddings does, allows educators to 'own caring in a way that makes it a strength rather than a weakness'.

The data for this research have led me to see one of the fundamental characteristics of who a professional educator is, the educator should work to expose the 'original good tendency' in children's actions 'and then to nourish, foster and train it' (Froebel, 1897 in Bruce, 2021: 29). The educators emphasised the importance of being patient with children and trusting the process to understand the ideal conditions for each child to develop in the best way possible. Martina during the interview explains this concept of not forcing development on children with this rather powerful quote when describing who she is as an educator, she sees herself as:

> *'...a scientist ...like a farmer ...who constructs the right soil for the plants to grow, he puts them next to each other because it is appropriate, but he doesn't start pulling leaves out to make the plants grow faster'.*

In order to be receptive of the good intention in children's actions and to be ready to work with the child's abilities and not against it, it is important for the educator to be a good listener and observer and to be able to work in a team to co-operate with other colleagues as well as with children. This important characteristic of professional identity leads to a core value of wanting to make a positive difference to the lives of young children (Lightfoot, 2015). Johnson (2010 in Taggart 2016:177) proposes a fundamental characteristic of an educator who views the child with 'unconditional positive regard', however she also acknowledges that such a characteristic of professional identity is only possible if the educators respect themselves as well as the child, bringing an additional dimension to this idea, which is only possible if the educators' mental wellbeing is adequately supported and formed. The educators in this study, found that creating boundaries between the children, families and themselves was fundamental to their professional identities as this showed respect for the families and a regard for their professional stance while working in the setting. Liebschner (2001) highlights that Froebel emphasised that education needs to be understood as an ongoing process rather than a state to be achieved, according to Froebel educators were a knowledgeable link, education should provoke thought. Similarly, Noddings (2002 in Bergman, 2004:153), explains that 'selves are not born', rather they are under a continuous process of transformation and development brought by everyday practice producing reflective evaluations of the professional identity developed right at that point. If we look at identity development from this lens, we can say that there is not 'one true self, apart from the self that is always under construction through multiple authorship' (Bergman, 2004: 153). The situational maps developed for this study have shown these characteristics of professional identity for educators clearly. The maps revealed just some of the

multitude of attributes that Early Childhood educators must possess in different situations, they change and shift as the situation changes, depending from whom the educators are relating to. The attributes identified ranged from being able to understand and foster children's abilities, to being aware and well versed in the different policies and theories underpinning practice in Early childhood education and care settings. Educators should be loving and caring towards the children but also be firm and set boundaries between the educators and the families. The overall views that the educators participating in this study had of themselves are perfectly summarised in the following quote: 'I am large, I contain multitudes' (Bergman, 2004: 154).

The educators participating in this research showed time and time again that part of their professional identity was knowing that they were never done learning, that there was always something new to learn even after they had been in the profession for several years, so another characteristic that I would like to add to the professional identity of educators is to always be willing and open to learn. Tovey's (2017:4) view of an educator who should always strive to 'develop their understanding through training, observation, research, reflection and discussion' concurs with the results and recommendations of this study and should be included in the fundamental set of characteristics an educator must possess. By the same token, it is important that the environment for professional learning must be conductive to learning, flexible, transformative, and responsive to the changing interests and skills of the workforce stimulating educators to be active and creative (Tovey, 2017).
I have become aware that, in line with Tovey's thinking (2017), the professional identity of an educator should include sensitive interactions geared at supporting and

extending children's play. Many of the educators in this study expressed the idea that strength lies in understanding who needs the tender and close contact, they all recognised that it would be impossible to work in an emotionless environment where young children are involved. Their professional identities were always conceptualised as being closely tied to emotions and these were a fundamental characteristic of their professional identities even if the job was often described as being emotionally draining. According to Noddings (2012) a teacher-pupil relationship is one of the many relationships where we cannot expect mutuality, however even though these relationships cannot be equal both parties can and should contribute to the establishment and maintenance of caring. The participants in this study, often referred to their professional identity as including love and compassion for children as a fundamental characteristic.

Referring to a more practical characteristic of professional identity that is important to define educators' identity is being able to look after other people's children and not being judgemental, inviting questions from the children and engaging them in activities that are meaningful for them, often it was difficult to separate their personal ideas on professional identity from the ethos of the setting showing that the educators completely subscribed to the values that were promoted by the settings they worked for. Being able to appropriately document the children's journeys and learning in the setting seemed to be intricately linked to proving their abilities to look after the children in the setting as well as being attentive to the children's needs for closeness and intimacy. Linking traits such as being nurturing, nice, responsive, and kind to the term caring poses significant problems for the field of ECEC, according to Goldstein (1998). This is because in this case, caring is seen as a personality trait that makes an

individual capable of working with young children, caring is not seen as an intellectual act (Goldstein, 1998). Professional educators must act from an ethic of care instilled deep in their professional identities (Taggart, 2016), care and being able to care are fundamental dispositions for the job as reflected in the results for this study.

Starting from where the learner is and not where the educator thinks that the child should be is a fundamental Froebelian principle (Froebel 1974), in this research this principle is also reflected in the recommendations that the educators participating made when thinking about ways to improve the current offer of professional learning and development. The educators in this study wanted to feel that their opinions matter, they asked for an offer that is more responsive of their individual needs and capabilities rather than an offer that is decided at priori. In this case, also the system of professional learning and development must be more oriented towards having ethics of care at its core, according to Noddings (2012) this has the power to emphasise the fundamental differences between the needs assumed by the carer and the needs expressed by the cared-for, it is important not to confuse and assume what we think the cared-for needs with what the care-for expressed to want. Listening here is important and a system that is more responsive and caring of its workforce is needed to produce an offer of professional learning and development that starts from the learner and not with general learning goals that are applied to specific local situations and educators.

In conclusion, the characteristics of professional identity discussed above, must be included within a system of ECEC that aims to make educators aware of new ways

of working showing them that their thinking is valued and supported without being coaxed into following the ethos of the setting blindly (Bruce, 2021). These characteristics must also be understood as only a small part of the ‘array of experiences, emotions and attitudes’ that educators describe themselves to have, it is important to always look at professional identity as a fluid and ever-changing concept, that develops with the educator and relies on experiential learning (Lightfoot, 2015:4). Professional learning and development should ‘cause thinking rather than endorse conformity to authority’, to help educators linking their learning to the experiences in the settings and adapt this to the children in their care (Bruce, 2021:79). Therefore, it is fundamental for practice to not be separated from training (Bruce, 2021), giving the educators guidance about children’s development without experiential training is ‘no more effective than giving someone a recipe book and expecting them to be a great cook’ (Taggart, 2016:179). Both the educators in San Miniato and London asked for more opportunities to experience other educators’ practice in different settings, they asked for their learning to be more linked to practice so that they could see the ways in which they could apply their learning to their realities more clearly. The systems of ECEC that I have included in this research could benefit from adopting what Taggart (2016) calls, a compassionate pedagogy, this is a way for educators to model to children being vulnerable but also open to others while at the same time, being powerful in their authority to provide meaningful contributions to the field of early years. An environment conductive to caring and caring relationships should be the goal for all teachers and policymakers (Noddings, 2012).

7.3.3 *Caring for the carer by addressing the conscious and unconscious anxieties brought by everyday work with young children*

Identity, and its development, must be understood as a process – something we do, rather than something that we possess, a continuous flow in the life of the individual (Jenkins, 2008; Epstein, 1978). The creation of a specific identity is deeply influenced by the specific context in which it is created. Therefore, it is important to understand identity formation as produced in specific historical and institutional sites, within specific discursive formations and practices. The Early Childhood educators included in this study show varied perceptions and definitions of their professional identities, based mainly on their personal values and the journeys that led them to entering the profession, with a central characteristic of never being static, of always being in development. Therefore, professional learning and development must be designed to support the educators' developing professional identities, as learning is intricately linked to belonging and participation in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In a reconceptualised PLD offer, we must not forget to care for all aspects of the educator. In the previous section, I detailed how the process of knowledge acquisition must be reconceptualised. This section goes a step further by suggesting the adoption of two different strategies to help Early Childhood educators with feelings of stress that result from such a close and personal role with children and families, addressing the conscious and unconscious anxieties it brings (Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018). Both Louis (2020) and Elfer (2018; 2018b; 2012) have proposed models of discussion and supervision to provide Early Childhood educators with different ways of talking about their feelings and observations in a safe space with a group of colleagues and a supervisor or facilitator. When I gave the Early Childhood

educators participating in this study the chance to think about what they thought was missing from the current PLD offering, they strongly urged care for their mental wellbeing. Giving Early Childhood educators opportunities to talk about the emotional complexities tied in with the intimate relationships that are bound to develop in Early childhood education and care settings will build their resilience and create what Page (2017:126) calls a ‘phenomenology of love’.

Throughout this research, the Early Childhood educators always expressed their love and passion for the job. However, they also often voiced the necessity of protecting themselves against the pressures that the job entails. Most importantly, they found it difficult to build resilience without appropriate support specifically targeting mental health. In this thesis I have painted the picture of a profession that is exceptionally reliant on educators’ emotions, coupled with slow pay development for the role, which has an impact on already high demands on the educators’ mental wellbeing. Importantly, the Early Childhood educators have shown that their job is emotionally draining, where feelings of not being able to cope with its emotional and administrative demands have often been expressed. In the current system, Early Childhood educators are supposed to be the guiding light for families and children, without being supported to deal with the inevitable stresses of a role that is so closely intertwined with the wellbeing of those in their care.

Elfer’s (2012) Work Discussion model and Louis’ (2020) Work Group Supervision are valuable strategies that can be added to the current PLD offering, to support educators’ mental and emotional wellbeing. These offer two different ways to relieve the stress and anxiety which results from daily interactions with children and families

and aims to encourage deep discussions around the educators' development of professional identities. These strategies are a way to ensure that educators' development is considered as a holistic entity (Froebel, 1906), where their needs for knowledge are being satisfied and nourished by PLD and their mental and emotional wellbeing needs are also properly supported, so that Early Childhood educators can construct solid professional identities. Early Childhood educators must be allowed to discuss their feelings in a safe and accepting space – if not this could lead to Early Childhood educators trying to distance themselves from children and families and employing strategies of dissociating themselves from forming close relationships with the children in their care, in order to protect themselves and cope with the increased demands of the role. This, in turn, will deprive children of the important role that feeling loved has in enhancing learning and development, emotionally and cognitively (Page, 2017). Educators, together with families, have a fundamental role in nurturing a secure attachment for children by reinforcing relationships both at home and in the setting and using intimacy to 'buttress the familial love provided by the parent', as well as acting as a model for meaningful relations that the child will develop in the present and future (Page, 2017:129). The act of caring has been constantly perpetuated in relation to the work that Early Childhood educators do. As a consequence, Early Childhood educators have to suffer poor pay and conditions of work and poor qualifications and professional learning and development, especially when working with infants and toddlers (Powell & Goouch, 2012; Shin, 2015 in Page, 2017). The current devaluation of Professional Love by policymakers and politicians has meant that individual Early Childhood educators feel encumbered by giving love and find that they are stuck in a dichotomy between loving children and being considered professionals (Page, 2017).

It is essential that the reconceptualisation of PLD for the two case studies presented in this thesis promotes and supports a professional view of Early Childhood educators as critically reflexive but also consciously vulnerable – able to hear children's distressed and angry voices while accepting the 'centrality of their physical processes to their sense of self and learning' (Manning-Morton, 2006:50). Love is a situated entity – it depends on the complexity of the lives, feelings, experiences and histories of every actor participating in the life of the setting (Page, 2017). To support educators' mental wellbeing and allow for Professional Love to be consciously practised in Early childhood education and care settings, PLD must run alongside opportunities for Early Childhood educators to have time to reflect on their practice and their emotional energy (Page, 2017). In this way, I would like to promote a system which supports not only knowledge of skills but also knowledge and support about how to care for educators' mental and emotional wellbeing, resulting in a system that is equipped to care for its carers. Policy intervention must not only be limited to academic conscious learning. If this keeps happening, Early Childhood educators will keep being overburdened by a disproportionate responsibility to fit Professional Love into a 'narrative which implies that caring is easier and requires less intellect that traditional forms of teaching' (Page, 2017:131) and they will continue to feel displaced in their natural and reasonable response that being with children means getting invested in them and forming a loving bond.

7.3.4 *Families and children cannot be silent anymore*

The co-construction of pedagogical knowledge with families, further supporting their parental role, is one of the practices highlighted by Urban et al. (2011) which

identifies a competent system. The experiences and perspectives of children and families and the personal necessities which contribute to the setting's community influence the needs of educators. This, in turn, influences the need for specific kinds of PLD which shape the way in which Early Childhood educators respond to the needs of the local community. In this thesis, I have become aware that children and families are excluded from PLD planning and not factored into the core structure of how it is designed. They were simply absent from this part of community life – not contemplated, silent. Considering the importance of 'forming an educational alliance between practitioners and families' (Migliorini et al., 2016:168) for the optimal functioning of a competent system, I propose a further reconceptualisation.

Input from children and families must be included for co-construction of the pedagogical offer to happen, but this should not be limited to the organisation of workshops or activities in which families can participate. I have shown in the previous chapters that work in Early childhood education and care settings is intricately linked with satisfying and supporting the needs of children and families. A coffee morning once a month will not succeed in giving children and families in these two case studies a voice. The experiences and thoughts of families and children have the power to become the essence of how PLD is conceptualised and offered in the future (Brock, 2006). In this way a system of ongoing listening to the voices of the community will be created, allowing the development of a more equitable and competent system of ECEC. Froebel considers the place of the family in the life of the child as an 'unpieced, unseparated whole', a principal point of reference for the child's development (Froebel, 1974:29). It can be argued that by including parents' representatives in pedagogical meetings aimed at planning professional learning and

development, we can consider their views on where they would like Early Childhood educators to give children more support, inform the settings' decisions on what they will offer, and construct a dialogue between families and educators. Professional learning and development must become a democratic process and its ideation must include different groups of policy makers, educators, families and children who all contribute to the system of Early Childhood education and care. In consultation with these important stakeholders, we must specifically tailor the PLD offering to the local reality in which the stakeholders live. The inclusion of families and children as important actors in a competent system of professional learning and development which is constantly co-constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed according to the needs of the community at a specific moment in time must underpin the transformative connotation of how practitioner education is shaped (Urban et al., 2011). The union proposed between families, Early Childhood educators and policy makers in designing professional learning and development will ensure that a fundamental balance is found between the demands of the labour market, the role that training institutions play in supporting the development of reflective Early Childhood educators with strong professional identities grounded in practice, and the demands of different local realities (Urban et al., 2011).

7.4 Contributions to the field

A reconceptualisation of PLD influenced through a Froebelian lens in the two contexts of practice explored in this thesis, in London and San Miniato, has clear practical implications that Early Childhood educators must consider as growing Early Childhood educators. In this thesis I have painted a picture of complex Early Childhood educators with complex identities and personal beliefs which shaped why

they chose to enter the profession. This thesis has added to the already rich body of research which concludes that identity development is an ever-changing process (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McGillivray, 2008; Erikson, 1968; Brindley, 2015; Jenkins, 2008; Burke & Jackson, 2007). Therefore, the practical recommendations I have developed in this section must not be taken to the letter – instead, in true adherence to a Froebelian philosophy, the suggestions made in this section should be read and adapted to the individual, starting from where the learner is and not from where we think he or she should be (Bruce, 1997). This affords autonomy to the educator in a democratic system of education that values the wellbeing of its workforce above all.

A reconceptualised PLD offer must facilitate small group work with opportunities to visit other Early childhood education and care settings and share examples of practice. Peer-initiated learning done in specifically dedicated learning spaces is important to enhance the self-understanding and self-development of Early Childhood educators and engage in thinking and reflective processes to support critical professional perspectives (Louis, 2020; Appleby & Pilkington, 2014). In these spaces, dialogue, confrontation and critical thinking is not only welcomed but encouraged (Powell, 2020). To be meaningful to the realities of practice, course design must start from the educators' practical experiences and academic knowledge must be imparted in a way that it serves to exemplify and illuminate practice not only as an empty exercise – knowledge for the sake of knowledge does not work for a workforce that it is so heavily situated in everyday practice with young children and families. PLD should not only impart knowledge and 'fill the gaps' in the preparation of educators, it should also be an important resource through which their emotional and mental wellbeing can be supported. This aspect is in as much need of support as

the development of skills that PLD encourages at the moment, PLD can be a medium through which in-work reflections are shared (Urban et al., 2012), and everyday stresses are released, helping Early Childhood educators to feel that their mental health is supported and considered as important as gaining the skills for the job. Both Louis (2020) and Elfer (2018) propose different models of discussion and supervision to help Early Childhood educators discuss their feelings and observations in a safe space. Such opportunities for educators discuss their feelings and observations in a safe space need to be seriously addressed as a fundamental part of PLD and that settings should explore both of them to decide which strategy will appeal more to the needs of the setting workforce.

To develop a competent system which supports educators' learning and self-development, it is important that funding is specifically assigned to it and that settings are given autonomy in designing their own PLD offering, with courses that directly address the local educators' needs. Individual settings must be able to determine their own needs and present those to local borough representatives who, in turn will determine how the offer should be shaped within the territory. Families must not be left out of the PLD design. Children and families in the settings I have explored are already included in other initiatives to do with the organisation of the pedagogical offer for children. I suggest that we must also listen to their voices in terms of the pedagogical offer for educators' learning and development. Input from children and families into a co-construction of the pedagogical offer for PLD initiatives has the power to become the essence of how it is conceptualised and offered in the future (Brock, 2006). In this way a system of ongoing listening to the

voices of the community is created, allowing the development of a more equitable and competent system of ECEC.

7.5 Implications and recommendations for further research

This study has found that being an Early Childhood educator is a result of continuous learning. This learning is best done within a system that supports the questioning of, and reflections on, the educators' practice and beliefs in order to support and encourage the development of strong professional identities. The PLD offering available to Early Childhood educators must be tailored to the needs of the local realities it is trying to reach – a one-size-fits-all approach is not conducive to this. A reconceptualised PLD offering must also actively engage its Early Childhood educators through activities and discussions that are imbued with the educators' practice experiences. A mutual interplay between theory and practice, keeping collaborative learning as its first priority, will help Early Childhood educators consolidate the reflections they develop individually. In a reconceptualisation of PLD through a Froebelian lens, there must be no place for the historical notion of 'hair or care' (Nutbrown, 2021 in Powell, 2020), where the stereotype of a redemptive workforce, offering children no more than protection and safety is reinforced (McGillivray, 2008; Vincent & Braun, 2010). Such a reconceptualised offering of PLD must always look outward to international practice and research so as to keep the discussions fresh and relevant for Early Childhood educators locally, presenting an abundance of perspectives on work with young children and contributing to the ever-changing pedagogy of the setting, which must follow the needs of children and families who are part of it. I have also become aware that PLD must cater for all aspects of the educators' lives, including their mental wellbeing through aptly

developed sessions aimed at reducing stress and addressing the conscious and unconscious anxieties brought about by everyday close work with children and families (Elfer, 2012).

Throughout this study I have demonstrated that Early Childhood educators construct a social identity which derives from their sense of belonging to a specific social group made up of other Early Childhood educators (Lynch et al., 2012). As a result, PLD must be sustained by a culture of mutual learning leading to shared understandings. It must also include opportunities for Early Childhood educators to share their practice and pedagogy with others in different contexts (Lazzari et al., 2013). PLD must permeate the working life of educators, accompanying them through their work journeys and adapting to their shifting understandings around their roles and their identities. I have also demonstrated the need for Early Childhood educators to be provided with ways to discuss their feelings and observations in a safe space during the day with a group of colleagues and a supervisor or facilitator guiding the conversations. Such a reconceptualisation will show an understanding of educators' identities as being made not just of learning goals but which includes their attitudes to the work and their ideologies and passion for the job (Brock, 2006). The models of discussion and supervision proposed by Elfer (2012) and Louis (2020) are a possible way to provide support for educators' mental health that they have so forcefully asked for throughout this study. Care must be seen in ECEC as being about both practice and the individual who is doing the caring (Zemblyas et al., 2014).

Further research could focus on expanding this study to a longitudinal one, following a number of Early Childhood educators throughout their careers to understand how their identities develop through time. This would help to understand how PLD might better support educators' development in local realities of practice. More realities of practice could also be added to a future enquiry so as to contribute to a more complete picture of PLD and the ways in which it can support Early Childhood educators in their development of strong professional identities in different international settings. The aim would be to paint a more complete picture of the workforce and its needs in different geographical and political contexts. More research is also needed to examine how the emotional component of working with young children affects educators' professional identity development and how this dimension could add to the conscious and unconscious anxieties that Early Childhood educators develop during their working life, while concentrating on ways to support educators' mental wellbeing. When examining the discourse of providing love as a purchasable commodity, families and children's views must also be taken into consideration. This will be invaluable to further understand how to better conceptualise the figure of the educator in ECEC systems. Finally, more research is needed to explore the links between professional learning and development initiatives and children's experiences in Early childhood education and care settings.

7.5.1 *How the work builds and adds to existing literature*

In the area of research concerning the building of important relationships between children and adults and on the ethics of care, work by Noddings (2012), Elfer (2012) and Page (2011;2017) has been ground-breaking because they addressed extremely relevant questions for this study also regarding educators' professional identity formation, educators' day-to-day relationships with children and the ways in which they related to the families in the settings. The work by Noddings (2012), Elfer

(2012) and Page (2011;2017), supported me in considering several critical questions through this study such as: who cares for the carer? Where are the families? Whose need, is it? Especially when considering the role and weight that emotions have in the day-to-day life of the educators working in the settings. The work by these scholars has constituted the groundwork for this research, to it I have added the dimension of the systemic aspect shaping professional identities and influencing the design of the professional learning and development offer. Amongst some of the main findings for this research is the notion that while recently there has been a tendency towards providing PLD as a one-size-fits-all approach, we must instead look at the specific realities of educators more, with the result of providing a PLD offer that is tailored to the needs of the educators in specific communities; furthermore, another central finding of this research concerns the importance of respect for the agency of the individual educator. Their identity and professionalism have to grow through this agency we cannot 'create' an educator through ten steps of training. Being a confident educator is also being able to assess and understand the needs of the person leading to being a more confident pedagogue when working with young children, avoiding emotional and physical burn out. A Froebelian approach was important because of its characteristic of being a fluid approach that is highly adaptable, Froebel understood and valued the importance of training educators to think for themselves equipping them with the tools to be independent and see children as active and capable (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). In the same way, I have been careful to portray an image of the educator who is active and has agency, an educator who has rights to a system of professional development that starts with the individual in mind instead of deciding the offer in a vacuum where the local realities

of educators are not considered, promoting instead a globalised offer of further training without clear links to practice.

Froebel recognised the importance of close relations between children and adults, he discussed how the early years are the most important because this is where the first important relations are formed (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). The bonds that children form with the important people in their lives are the most formative according to Froebel and are significant for children's growth and development as they support the sensory development of the child (Froebel in Lilley, 1967). Elfer (2012) also makes similar points and support a view where even though the role of attachment relations in early years settings is contested, they are considered to be of fundamental importance for the child's healthy development of relationships with the people closer to them. Page (2011; 2017), presents love as a non-commodifiable concept which raises the question of how professional love can be instructed and formed if it is non-commodifiable and innate to the educator. With this research, I have provided evidence of the needs of educators to give, as well as to receive love, framing the conversation around care to show that not only children have a desire for love, but educators do too. This study has highlighted the difficulties that educators faced, struggling to love themselves, taking ownership of their successes as well as recognising their failures, seeing these as learning opportunities instead of impossible hurdles to overcome. Furthermore, this research has deepened the discussion on love and emotions to recognise that we must move away from a conception where caring and love are desirable and innate characteristics to have for educators without needing to be properly formed and supported with a system of ongoing discussion that is structured to help educators to explore and question their experiences in the

setting and encourage reflection on the conscious and unconscious anxieties brought by everyday work with young children. The work from Elfer (2012) on Work Discussion has been supplemented in this thesis with the work from Louis (2020) on Work Group Supervision to further highlight how different local settings need to be presented with different ways to support the educators' mental wellbeing as different local realities will have different needs. Work Discussion (Elfer, 2012) has the power of helping educators recognise their needs, confirming their observations of everyday life in the setting thus giving them the power to recognise both their successes and discuss their insecurities, allowing them to be vulnerable in a healthy and safe space. In the Work Discussion model presented by Elfer (2012), the complexity of human agency, especially in the context of early childhood pedagogy is fundamental. This complexity has been presented in the findings for the research by highlighting the ordinary humanity of educators – like anyone, they get on easily with some children and less with others; the same with colleagues and adult family members; they deal with some situations easily whilst finding others difficult, or frightening, or overwhelming. Elfer (2012) understands agency as having the capacity to respond to situations one finds oneself in, rather than being helpless. But we cannot respond to feeling overwhelmed, or uncertain, or incompetent, or frightened, if we do not allow educators to fully identify and be comfortable with some more negative feelings they might be experiencing as a result of their jobs. We can only exercise agency, according to Elfer (2012), when we can acknowledge the difficult feelings and experiences, so that educators can then be fully capable and prepared to think about them. This research has considered educators' agency in the sense that educators are and should be allowed to make a choice, will they pretend that they can manage everything without struggle? Or will they realise that they can manage some things

part of their daily routine very well, but they find others more difficult? Or will they pretend to have no needs (for status, to be liked, for a living wage) so that they could protect themselves from accusations of being greedy, in the job for the wrong reasons, or for being too overconfident? It takes courage to possess the kind of agency that enables educators to be honest about their strengths and difficulties or uncertainties. This is where Work Discussion (Elfer, 2012) relates to this research findings on the importance of agency. Work Discussion is about the facilitators refusing to be the experts with all the answers that they bring to a training day; it is about facilitators who can say to educators that the way they see themselves sin their work might not be accurate and might be diminishing who they actually are, without judgement or criticism supporting the educators' individual agency. The educators do not need the facilitators to give them the answers, rather the facilitators will enter the educators' communities of practice to work with what Elinor Goldschmied used to call our 'internal textbooks', to think about those as a community in the particular context in which the educators are working.

As Bruce (2021:33) rightly points out, educators must be seen as having 'autonomy of thought', some important skills in order to combat feelings of stress and burnout as reported by the educators who participated in this study, are to not only know what they need help with but knowing where to find appropriate help without losing their own self in the process. By supporting difficult discussions about their experiences in the settings we have the potential of creating an 'emotionally safe' space to act as a secure base for educators as well as children so that reflection and democracy are fully supported to emerge (Taggart, 2016:181). This study has made a contribution to the existing body of literature on the topic by presenting a fluid view

of educators' professional identity development, highlighting the needs to help educators to be more engaged in their own growth, while at the same time, calling for a fluid and flexible offer of PLD that can adapt to different contexts and different needs of the profession.

7.6 Limitations of this study

Qualitative research is subjective and can incur substantial ethical risks due to the researcher's closeness with the participants. These issues, even though they have been acknowledged in the present research, are part of the limitations for this study (Stake, 1995). One of the limitations of this study concerns issues of transferability in qualitative research. However, as Walford (2001) suggests, I have addressed this issue by engaging in a thick description of the data and the context studied, so as to leave the reader the opportunity to make an informed decision about the applicability of the findings to their own contexts of practice. I also agree with Bhattacharya (2017), when she states that the subjective nature of qualitative research allows us to situate the findings and the entirety of the research within the perceptions of the observer. I consider this aspect extremely valuable, because some ideas can only take place and be shaped in human consciousness, which is not possible to capture with a positivist approach. I firmly believe that 'nothing exists without being processed by human consciousness' (Bhattacharya, 2017:2). Understanding the concept of truth in this case is to understand people's reflections on their experiences, situated within specific contexts of practice and cultures.

Focus groups, according to Bryman (2012), present some limitations that I find important to note in this section. There is a delicate balance to be found between the moderator and the participants, both in the way that the moderators should influence

the discussion taking place and the level of power that a moderator exercises. To what extent should the moderator give the participants free rein, which could result in the focus group going completely off topic?

Regarding these limitations, I made sure to tailor my involvement according to the dynamics of the group I had in front of me. I used the first five minutes to gauge the needs of the group and applied more or less pressure to follow the pre-determined activities as I saw fit. This meant that each focus group was not run in exactly the same manner. I made a conscious decision to forfeit this necessity in order to provide a more favourable environment for participants to feel free to express their needs – I did not want them to feel as if their needs were subordinate to my schedule. In this case, I considered that it might have been more effective to conduct a third focus group by placing Early Childhood educators from both settings together to see how they interacted and co-constructed a unitary reconceptualisation that would be meaningful to both realities of practice. I decided against this as I believed that the language barriers would be too great for the participants to feel completely comfortable. In addition, the logistics of flying some of the Early Childhood educators either to Italy or the UK would have not been feasible as the school year had started and I did not want to deprive the children of key persons during such an important time when new children are settling into the new environment. Finally, I believed it to be important for the Early Childhood educators to consider their reality of practice only, so that they could make reconceptualisations specific to their contexts.

I have also considered whether it might have been beneficial to attend one professional learning and development session to explore two observations – to capture what the Early Childhood educators experience during these sessions and to try to make connections between the narratives of change Early Childhood educators expressed during the interviews and focus groups and the realities they experience as interpreted in my observations. However, I decided against this strategy as I did not want to enter such an important and private space for the educators. I considered that the views expressed during professional learning and development days should remain private for the educators, as realities shared only between the team. My position as an outsider might have been perceived, both by Early Childhood educators and trainers, as someone coming to assess the quality of the training, which would increase the feeling of assessment and evaluation of their every move that it is already so prevalent in the sector. In other words, I considered that trusting the views and needs of the respondents during the interviews and focus groups was more important than portraying a picture of professional learning and development as a reproduction, which might have had an impact on the feeling of trust that the Early Childhood educators had in me as a researcher.

In terms of being able to generalise and transfer the findings of this study to other local realities, I believe that ECEC services should be seen as a 'system of opportunities' (Silva et al., 2018). This is why it is not possible, from both a pedagogical and an ethical stance, to uproot the approach from its professional context and transfer it to another context of practice in another location. Every context of practice is strictly linked to its location and its ethos of practice and this study aims to highlight the strengths and possible criticalities of each context taken

into consideration. It looks at the culture of childhood in each context as a common ground from which the different realities could, and should, start a ‘mutually enriching dialogue’, expanding their pedagogical outlook beyond their realities of practice (Silva et al., 2018:244).

Due to the time restraints brought by a funded PhD it has not been possible to explore all aspects of professional learning and development for ECEC Early Childhood educators in the entirety of Italy and the United Kingdom. However, I am satisfied to have represented the realities explored rather than claiming to have accurately reproduced them (Cohen et al., 2011). My aim was never to generalise the results but to represent the local realities as being investigated fairly (Cohen at al., 2011).

7.7 **Final reflections**

I have intended this research to be a medium through which two different communities of Early Childhood educators could connect and share their thoughts and reflections. For too long Early Childhood educators have been put in competition with each other during the infinite search to find the perfect system which can be easily replicated in any country and any professional context. I believe instead that constructing a dialogue with different realities is the way forward for the development of a united system of Early Childhood educators across countries, forming a strong workforce which is not isolated within geographical borders.

As I have aimed to convey with this study, I don’t believe it to be particularly useful to construct yet another comparative study, with one reality as an example and, as a

consequence, the other reality being diminished, with one group of Early Childhood educators being the example and the other having to learn and follow to the letter regardless of their experiences of practice. I wanted instead to show that the views of Early Childhood educators in local realities should be the starting point to implement change in national systems of teacher education and development. Each system of practice can be used to shine a light on the other, highlighting interesting ways of shaping the professional learning and development offer, and that these should be looked at with a critical eye and discussed within local teams of educators, to understand how they can be better adapted to the local context and tailored to the experiences of the Early Childhood educators that we are trying to engage and develop.

To disseminate the findings and recommendations of this study, I will produce two reports and offer them to the settings who participated. Each will be specifically tailored to their needs. To further disseminate the findings of this study and link Early Childhood educators from the two settings, to encourage dialogue and the exchange of ideas, I am planning to open a blog where I can give the participants and the wider research audience a way to voice their opinions about the findings and start significant discussion on the topic of professional learning and development in Early Childhood settings. The blog will be used to give participants a chance to show their practice developments long after the research has been concluded, providing a platform where Early Childhood educators can share their discussions with a wider audience. My aim is to start a lively community for professional learning and development in Early Childhood settings that includes educators, researchers and the wider Early Childhood and care community. The blog posts will have a twofold aim

– to promote connections between existing practice and research findings, and to promote collaborations and communication between ECEC settings and the wider ECEC community. The blog will give Early Childhood educators a chance to share examples of practice, ask questions and leave feedback about the findings of the present research. Readers will be allowed to create posts and start discussions about their experiences of PLD, while also commenting on my posts and those of other readers, continuing the co-construction of knowledge that has started with the present research.

As Powell (2020) discussed during her seminar talk for the Froebel Network, the state of the current global economy, where state investments and funding for public services have been reduced – even more so while a global pandemic is taking place – will not be developing national discussions on childcare as a political priority. Without this, it remains challenging – if not impossible – to see how the status of the Early childhood education and care workforce can really be given the respects it deserves, with adequate pay and conditions as a minimum requirement. Issues around the employment of women must also be addressed, together with an understanding of where the current growth of the commercial sector in the care and education of young children will leave discourses of care and love for young children and what place families and children will have in this discourse (Powell, 2020). In this case it is left to local Early childhood education and care settings and Early Childhood educators to join forces with other settings, to start a ripple which will help their voices become loud enough not to be ignored anymore, creating a powerful hum that will shake all systems with unified aims, so that the work done in

Early childhood education and care is appropriately recognised and valued by societies everywhere.

This thesis started as a small seed when I sat in on a PLD session as a nursery nurse still studying for my MA in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Roehampton. Eyes glazed, bored, but also thankful for the escapism from the nursery the course in question provided me with for one workday, I thought to myself, 'it could be worse'. I thought that it could not be right for this to be the only thing I could aspire to, after the brilliant lectures I had received at university – lectures that made me think and challenged my beliefs right to the core. Would this be the only knowledge I would acquire once I was working full-time? How was I going to grow and develop? In the emotionally gruelling days I experienced as a nursery nurse, when I came back home and felt like I had no more love to give as I had given it all (willingly) to the children in my class, I sometimes felt like my mental health was crumbling in front of my eyes and there was nothing in my PLD to support this. How could this be?

I have seen so much of myself in the Early Childhood educators who participated in this thesis. My struggles echoed theirs, my challenges were theirs too – I was not alone. Sometimes knowing that we are not alone acts to legitimise our feelings and make us feel that these are validated by other people's experiences of it. This has, however, made my role of a researcher sometimes difficult – where was my place in all this? I resorted to pouring myself into my memos as a way to always be aware and consider the integrity of this research and my place in it. Coming to any research without preconceived ideas is not possible in my opinion. I have not aimed at

eliminating any subjectivity from this research and I hope that the reader has seen glimpses of me in the way that this thesis has been written and presented. In the end, this research was a group effort – without the participants it would not have been possible. Although this is a small-scale study, I believe it has highlighted some important perspectives of educators' thoughts and feelings about PLD and their development of professional identities. This study shows the importance of asking Early Childhood educators about PLD as their voices are an important part of the contexts of practice. Early Childhood educators play a crucial role in society due to the power they have to influence young children and families and I believe it is essential to understand how their professional identities are formed to understand the impact that these can have on the children in their care.

Appendices

Interview schedule, London

1. Tell me a little bit about your role (Job title? What do you do? What does the day to day involve? How long have you been working for?)
2. Why did you choose to work with children?
3. Do you have any specific values that underpin how you interact with children?
4. What motivates your work?
5. What are the key characteristics that a person working with young children must have?
   Prompt: How important do you think each of these are?
6. Do you think emotions play a role when working with children?
   Prompt: How free do you feel in expressing those around children in your care?
7. Are you aware of any policies that regulate your professional learning?
8. How is your professional learning and development organised?
   Prompt: Costs covered by the nursery?
9. Are there any key characteristics to how the professional learning and development is structured?
10. How often do you attend courses?
11. Where are they based?
12. Do you think that professional learning and development courses are important?
    Prompt: Why?
13. Do you wish that you had more of an input on the courses available?
    Prompt: Why? How would they be different?
14. Which changes, if any, would you make to anything to do with how your professional development is organised?
    Prompt: This could be anything to do with the course content, its organisation, cost, availability, frequency, mode of delivery, location for delivery etc.
15. Would you like to participate in a focus group once the interviews are transcribed? (approx. 2-3 weeks time)

Follow up questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders within your setting?
2. What are the rules and norms guiding your work?
3. What would you like to achieve within your work?
4. Do you think that policy developments are in line with your thinking?
5. What does the term professionalism mean to you?
   Prompt: How would you link this definition to your work?
6. Do you think the way that you see yourself now professionally has changed since the start of your career?
   Prompt: Can you give me an example?
7. Are the courses planned by your place of work or do you have to plan them yourself?
   Prompt: Please describe.

8. Do you think that there are enough courses available for you to attend?
9. Does the current layout of both course organisation and content suit you?
   Prompt: Please describe how.
10. Which skills and knowledge needed in your work would you like to develop further?

Interview schedule, San Miniato

1. Quale funzione hai nel tuo posto di lavoro? (Cosa fai? Quale è il tuo titolo? Come è una giornata tipo? Da quanto tempo lavori nel settore?)
2. Perché hai deciso di lavorare con I bambini?
3. Ci sono dei principi specifici che guidano il tuo approccio nel lavorare con i bambini?
4. Cosa ti entusiasma e ti fornisce la motivazione per andare avanti nel tuo lavoro?
5. Secondo la tua opinione, quali sono le note distintive fondamentali per una persona che lavora con i bambini?
   Suggerimento: Quanto ritieni importanti queste caratteristiche?
6. Ritieni che i sentimenti e il dimostrare emozioni sia importante quando si lavora con i bambini?
   Suggerimento: quanto libera/o ti senti nel dimostrare diverse emozioni con i bambini nel tuo asilo?
7. Sei al corrente di alcune leggi che regolano la tua formazione professionale?
8. Come è organizzata la tua formazione professionale?
   Suggerimento: i costi sono coperti dal tuo datore di lavoro?
9. Come descriveresti la struttura generale dei corsi di formazione professionale disponibili?
10. Quanto spesso partecipi a corsi di formazione professionale?
11. Dove si tengono?
12. Ritieni che i corsi di formazione personale siano importanti?
    Suggerimento: Perché?
13. Vorresti avere un maggiore input nell'organizzazione e struttura dei corsi disponibili?
    Suggerimento: perché? Come li cambieresti? Cosa cambieresti?
14. Quali cambiamenti, se possibile, vorresti fare ai corsi di formazione professionale disponibili?
    Suggerimento: Qualsiasi cosa circa l'organizzazione, contenuto, costi, disponibilità, frequenza, stile di insegnamento, ubicazione.
15. Saresti disponibile a partecipare ad un gruppo di discussione?
    Il Gruppo di discussione si terrà dopo che le interviste saranno trascritte (3-5 settimane).

Domande follow up:

1. Quali sono le regole e normative che guidano il tuo lavoro?
2. Cosa vorresti realizzare con il tuo lavoro?

3. Sei d'accordo con i recenti sviluppi di leggi e normative nel mondo dell'educazione per i bambini più piccoli?
4. Cosa significa il termine professionalità?
   Suggerimento: come connetteresti questa definizione con il tuo lavoro?
5. Pensi che il modo in cui ti vedi e consideri professionalmente sia cambiato dall'inizio della tua carriera?
   Suggerimento: puoi darmi un esempio?
6. Il tuo posto di lavoro pianifica i tuoi corsi di formazione professionale o li devi organizzare da te?
   Suggerimento: puoi descrivere?
7. Ritieni che ci siano abbastanza corsi di formazione professionale in offerta?
8. Pensi che la struttura e il contenuto corrente dei corsi di formazione professionale sia adeguato?
9. Quali abilità e conoscenze richieste per il tuo lavoro vorresti approfondire o sviluppare?

Training course application form, London

Appendix 9: Training Course Application Form

TO APPLY FOR A TRAINING COURSE, PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

1. Complete the table "Course Applicant Details" below
2. Give form to Deputy Head or Deputy Nursery Officer
3. Attach photocopy of complete course application form
4. Attach photocopy of your training record for the current year from your Personal Professional Development folder- unless this is now on electronic data base
5. You will receive a copy of this form for your records
6. If course is approved, please SEND OFF completed course application form
7. If you receive course confirmation directly, please notify Project Co-ordinator

Course Applicant Details	
Name	
Date of course	
Have you attached the course details?	
Does the course match your identified training needs? Refer to your Performance Appraisal Management Plan and please give details.	
Does the course match identified priorities from the Centre Development Plan? Please give details.	

To be completed by a member of the Strategic Planning Team	
Cover provided by	
Cover funded by	
Date application discussed	
Signature if approved	
Reasons given if not approved	

Satisfaction survey, San Miniato

QUESTIONARIO di GRADIMENTO
CORSI di FORMAZIONE
MOD.025 rev.4 del 04.12.13

CORSO:____

PERIODO DI SVOLGIMENTO: ____

Con il presente questionario, chiediamo di esprimere un giudizio sull'iniziativa che si è appena conclusa.
Le informazioni, infatti, costituiscono degli stimoli importanti per la realizzazione di altre iniziative.
Ad ogni domanda si potrà rispondere utilizzando la scala di progressione che va dal punteggio 1, il più basso e negativo, al punteggio 4, il più alto e positivo.
Si deve perciò segnalare con una crocetta la linea corrispondente al punteggio che interessa assegnare.

Con il presente questionario chiediamo di aiutarci a capire:

- *quali sono i punti di forza ed i punti di debolezza dell'iniziativa*
- *se e in quale misura le aspettative sono state soddisfatte*
- *quali modifiche e miglioramenti si potrebbero suggerire.*

OBIETTIVI

Credi che gli obiettivi principali del corso siano stati raggiunti?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

CONTENUTI E ARGOMENTI TRATTATI DURATA E ARTICOLAZIONE

I contenuti del corso hanno risposto alle tue aspettative?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

Che cosa vorresti aggiungere e/o ampliare?

....
....
....

Che cosa vorresti ridurre e/o eliminare ?

....
....
....

MATERIALE DIDATTICO

Come giudichi la documentazione fornita ?

Assolutamente Inadeguata	Inadeguata	Adeguata	Assolutamente Adeguata

Assolutamente non utile	Non utile	Utile	Molto utile

Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione sull'Infanzia LA BOTTEGA DI GEPPETTO Istituzione del Comune di San Miniato	**QUESTIONARIO di GRADIMENTO** **CORSI di FORMAZIONE** MOD.025 rev.4 del 04.12.13

DOCENTI

Nome e cognome del docente :……………………………………………………………………

Argomento:……………………………………………………………………………………………

Si ritiene che il docente:

Abbia trattato gli argomenti in modo soddisfacente?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

Nome e cognome del docente :……………………………………………………………………

Argomento:……………………………………………………………………………………………

Si ritiene che il docente:

Abbia trattato gli argomenti in modo soddisfacente?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

Nome e cognome del docente :……………………………………………………………………

Argomento:……………………………………………………………………………………………

Si ritiene che il docente:

Abbia trattato gli argomenti in modo soddisfacente?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

Nome e cognome del docente :……………………………………………………………………

Argomento:……………………………………………………………………………………………

Abbia trattato gli argomenti in modo soddisfacente?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

STRUTTURA

I locali della struttura in cui si è svolto il corso/seminario/convegno, sono adeguatamente attrezzati ?

Assolutamente no	no	si	Assolutamente si

CONSIDERAZIONI PERSONALI

Come può essere valutata complessivamente l'organizzazione ?

Insufficiente	Sufficiente	Buona	Ottima

L'iniziativa appena frequentata, ha fatto nascere nuove esigenze ?

- ❑ Si
- ❑ No

Se si, quali: ……………………………………………………………………………………………..
……
Se no, perché: …………………………………………………………………………………………
……

Quali sono stati , gli aspetti negativi e quelli positivi di questa iniziativa ?

Aspetti negativi: ……………………………………………………………………………………….
……

Aspetti positivi: ……………………………………………………………………………………….
……

Quotes from focus group discussion, London

"Professionalism means to never give up, never feel complacent in our knowledge, we never stop learning"

"I would never dare to kiss children in front of their parents or to call them with affectionate nicknames. It is not appropriate, these are things that only family members can do. We cannot compete with their families"

"I am really angry about all this focus on professional love in nurseries. This element risks devaluing our professionalism. I will never understand why is there the need to look at professional love for nursery educators and we don't do the same for paediatric surgeons that see children die every day"

"I love that in our job there is not a recipe, you always have to analyse your choices, it is self-discovery that comes from self-reflection"

"It is fundamental to think of children not as small, fragile, vulnerable, only needing care, but as strong, competent and deserving of respect"

"It is a common thought that being a mother is at the basis of working with young children, this is absurd in my opinion"

Quotes from focus group discussion, San Miniato

"Quando mi occupo dei bambini mi metto nei panni della madre, ci sono bambini che hanno bisogno di essere confortati e supportati e siccome la mamma non e' qui ci sono io a supportarli nello stesso modo in cui farei con I miei figli"

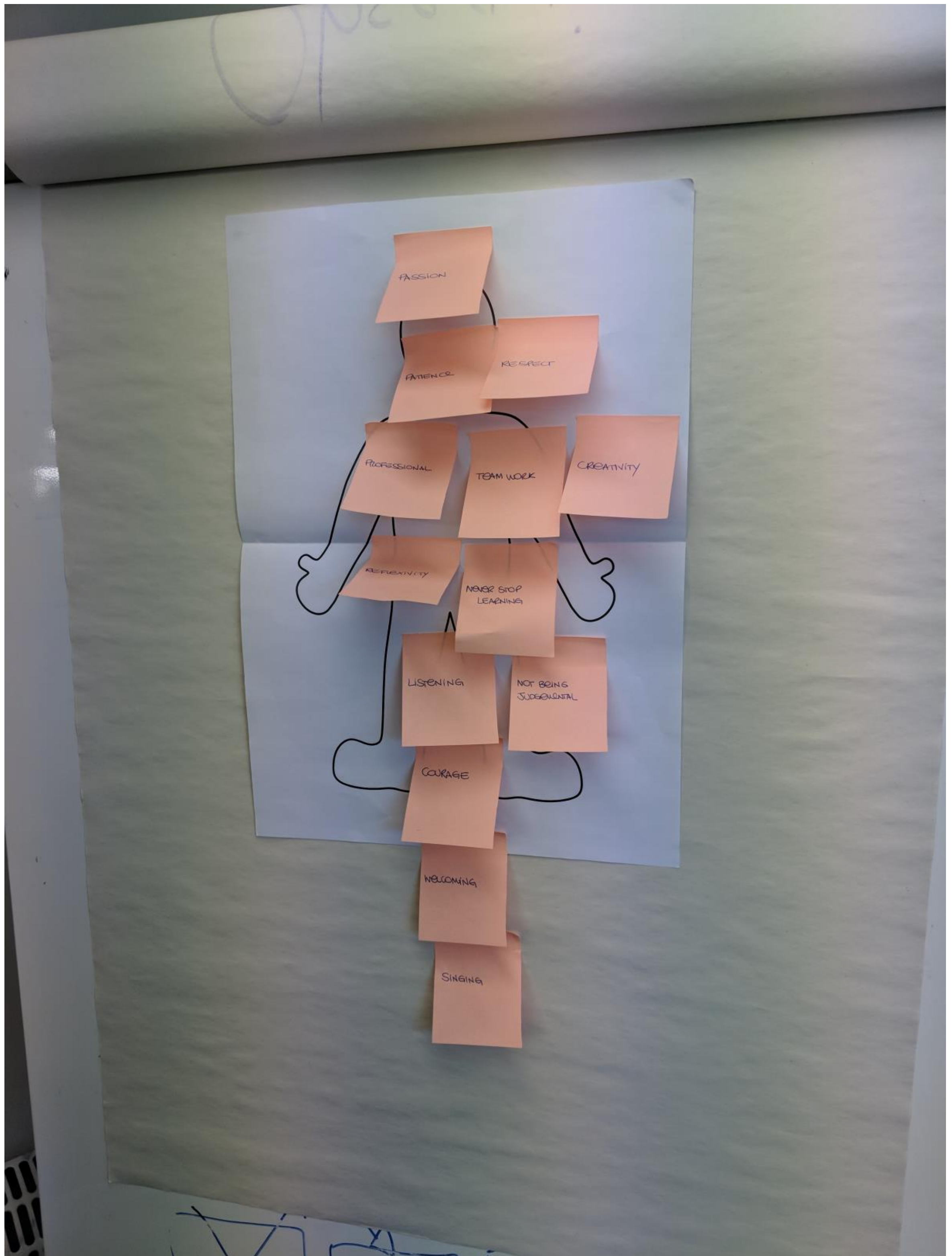
"Il cliente (in questo caso il genitore) ha sempre ragione"

"Il mio ruolo e' di prendermi cura dei bambini"

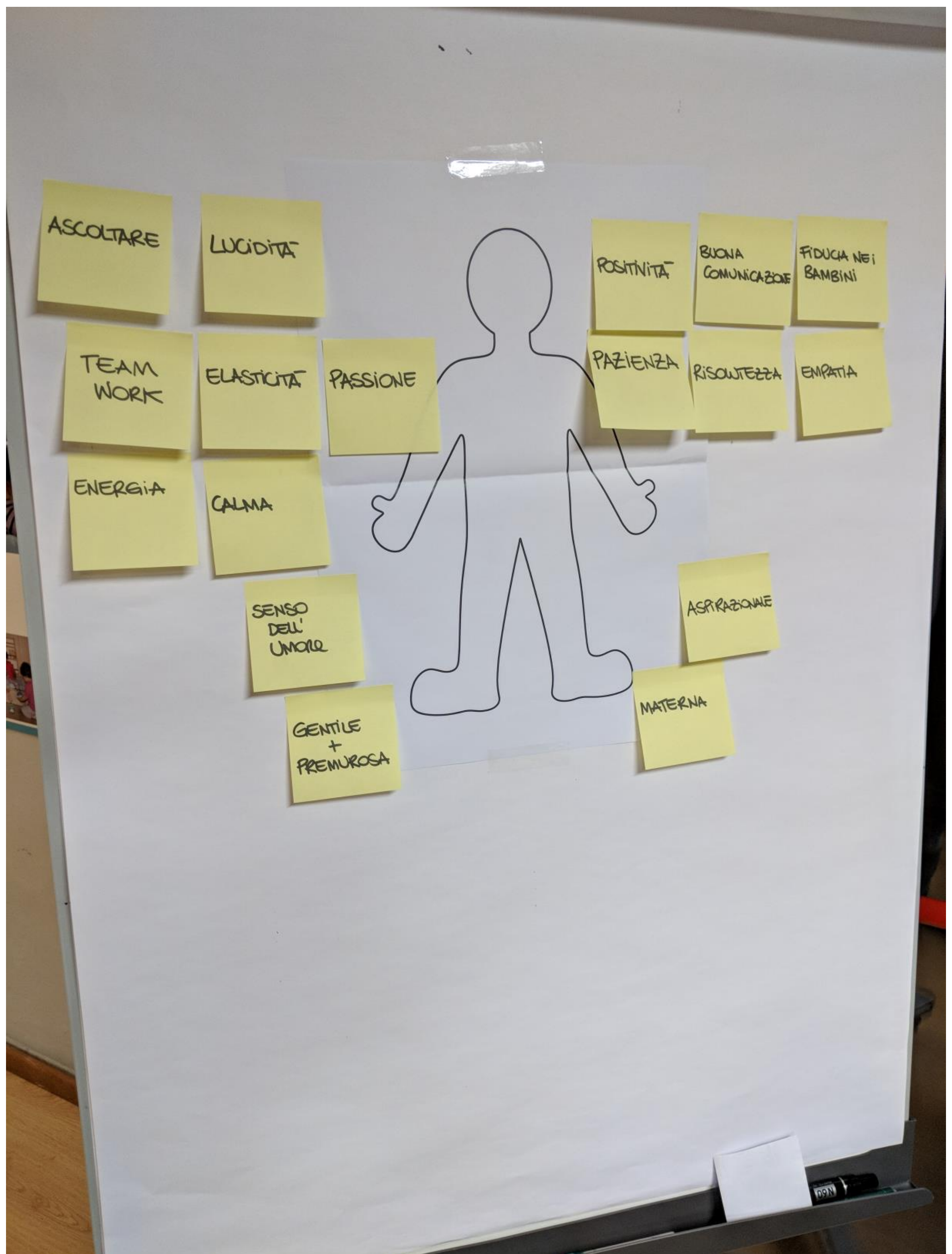
"Non coccolate I bambini semplicemente perche' sono adorabili"

"Se non sei in buone condizioni emotive non sei nella posizione adatta per occuparti dei bambini"

Focus Group Activity, London - the most important characteristics for an Early childhood education and care educators are…



Focus Group Activity, San Miniato - the most important characteristics for an Early childhood education and care educators are…



Implications arising from the relations map

Preliminary open coding

Some examples of the open coding generated during this phase of data analysis are shown in the table below.

Participant	Extract	Open Code
Elena	'Yeah, I suppose the big one I, in terms of values, I suppose I feel that every child has the right to access the nursery provision or children's centre services within their local community. I feel it's important that it's inclusive, that you know, families and children are respected, that children are given autonomy and opportunities for risk taking'	Reporting Personal Work Ethic
Giulia	'At the beginning of the year we get offered some possible paths for our professional development that will be developed during the year. This is a more specific type of professional development. This year for example we have reading with children, documentation, and then…ah yes the continuity with the *scuola*	Explanation of Current Practice

	dell'infanzia specifically centred on physical development. So we get offered these different paths and then we sign up for the ones we are interested in'	
Megan	'I guess someone that is, um, well I guess someone that's professional I guess. And you know, not keeping your work to your work and not taking things too personally at the same time, having that boundary that, you know, for me, I'm a manager, so having that boundary that I manage this person. The way you are with the families, some families, you know, might have had problems, don't just shut them out or say this is the only way you can do this. I have that. Actually talk to them, understand them, help them. How you can, it's just because we might have a role like this, it can technically change. So it's just being professional like that and actually	Explanation of Professional Identity

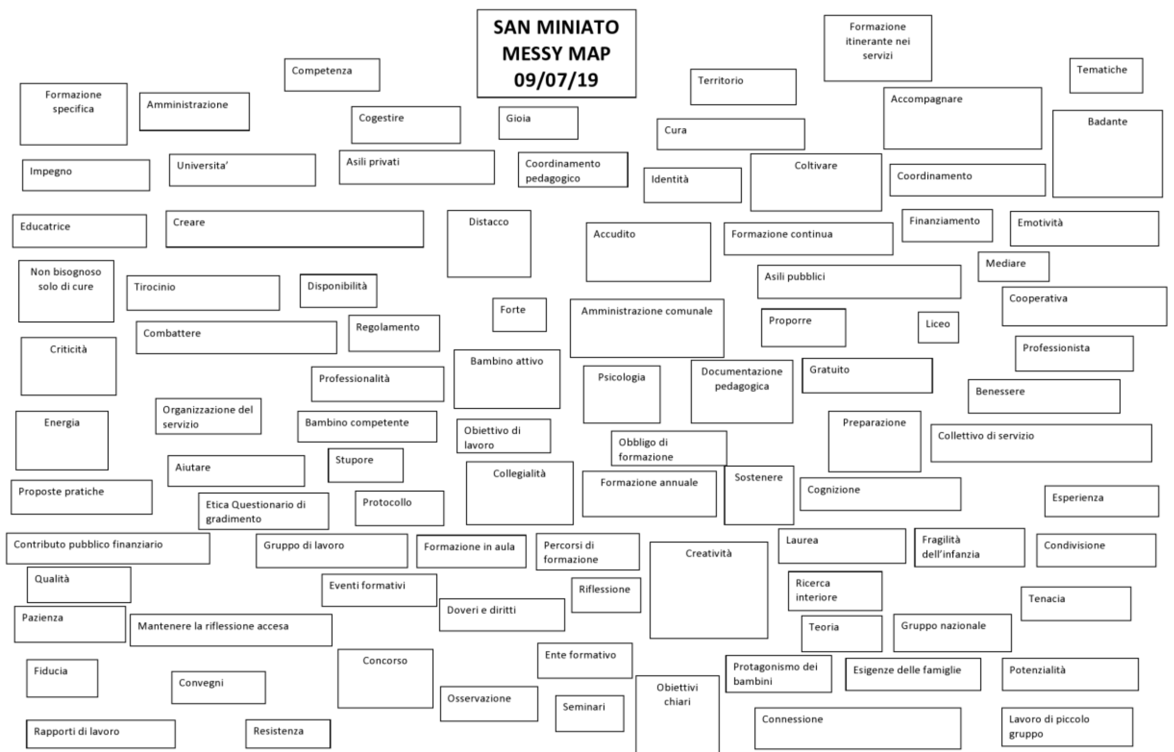
	seeing what is actually happening’	
Chiara	‘The Region funds the professional development courses offered. Not only they set the rules for how much professional development we must do but they also pay for it, so there is a public fund in Tuscany, and here I am emphasising…IN TUSCANY because at national level the rules are very different, and these public funds support our professional development’	Explanation of Rules and Regulations regarding PLD
Imogen	‘It's not always easy, you know. And um, I think there's lots of research at the moment actually out there about, because I think there's a big struggle to retain staff in Early childhood education and care in private nurseries as well as schools. And that reason is that there's lots about their emotional wellbeing and people feeling stressed and they can't cope with the job’	Expressing Need for Change

Advanced coding

Open Code	Extract	Theme
Exploration of Professional Identity	'I believe that as educators we are like the Cinderella of the sector, in the sense that we are not recognised as professionals from the state, or at least recognised enough according to our professional dignity…we are often considered babysitters…like fluffy grandmothers…and I believe that there are not enough laws protecting and recognising our professionalism' (Emma)	The struggle to be recognised as professionals
Reporting personal work ethic	'I put myself in a position of mother because the children, uh, who need comfort, support and the mom is not here' (Lara)	Professional Love/ emotions in the work with young children
Reporting personal work ethic	'The adult is a scientist, is a farmer who constructs a situation…the soil…he puts plants next to each other because it's good for them, controls the light, the water but he doesn't start ripping leaves out to make them grow' (Martina)	Professional Identities defined

Expressing need for change	'Um, I think I'd like more to come from me (…) I'd like to sort of have more control over what I wanted to do really. And it to be as the year goes on rather than just, cause sometimes I think that your appraisal or you don't always have a, sometimes at your appraisal, you're just thinking in the here and now (…) Whereas I think as you're progressing through your jobs for the year you think, you know, I'd really like just some training on that or as things pop up or difficulties arise and you see where your weaknesses are. Um, I think I'd like to have training in response to that' (Violet)	Suggestions for change
Explanation of current practice	'At the end of every course we get asked to fill up a satisfaction survey where we talk about positive aspects, negative aspects, we propose new courses…so we really are very listened to' (Giulia)	Ways of monitoring educators' needs for professional learning and development

London and San Miniato messy maps



Relational analysis of the case studies, London

Mother
Listening
Training day
SENCO
Speech and language groups
Ethos
Making a difference
SEN support assistant
Safeguarding
Supervision
Resilience
Health and Safety
Passionate
Rules of the profession
Team
Assistant Head
Warm and friendly
Key person
Senior nursery teacher
PLD provision
Appraisal
Patience
Impact
Kind and caring
Teamwork
Borough
Firm
Training course request form
Parents' forum
British values
Site manager
Love of the job
Inset Days
Support
School
Early closures
Fun
Diploma
Paediatric First Aid
NNEB
Inclusive
Sharing good practice
Guard yourself
Feeling secure
Leadership
Autonomy
Hug
Respect
Children's centre
Centre assistant
Improve the staff
Interactive
Plan
Boundaries
Practical
Male
Trust
Pay Development
More time
Determination
Curriculum
Emotion
Cost implication
Performance management
Job role
Educate
Training budget
Training Consortium
Statutory obligations
Children's centre manager
Families
Staff retention
Caring
Clear vision
Legal Requirement
No set hours
Professional boundaries
Experience
Common sense
In-house
Emotional wellbeing
Expectati ons
Council
Investment
Can't cope
Junior schoolteacher
Lunchtime assistant
Training room
Empathy
Tough
Close working relationships
Invest in the staff
Local Authority
Policies
Positive
Communicate effectively
Engage
Bachelor of Education
PLD
Don't compete with families
Nursery visits
Nursery nurse
Feeling stressed
Control
Not easy
NVQ
School business manager
Ofsted
Teacher terms and conditions
Rewarding
School Development and Centre Plan
Emotionally draining
Professional
Professional backgrounds
Protect yourself
Home visits
Nurture groups
Relationships
Growth
Core training days
Open discussion
Confidentiality
Be recognised
Reduced funding
Teaching assistant

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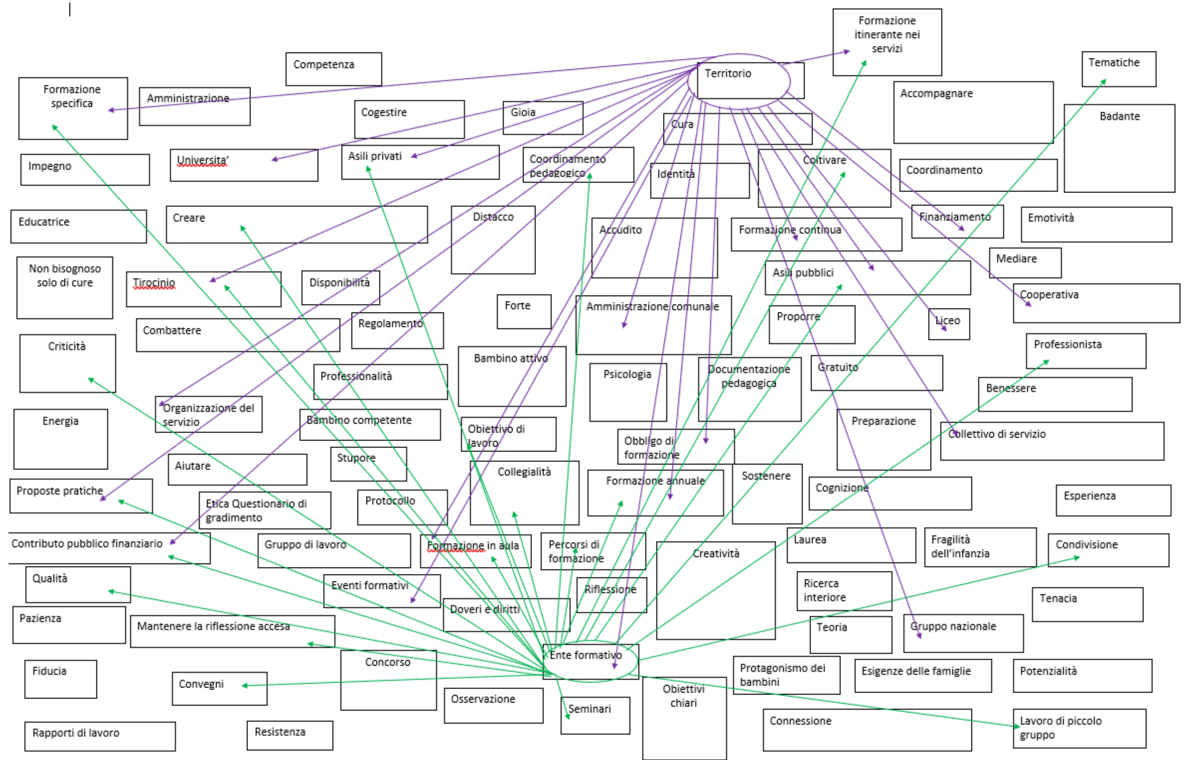
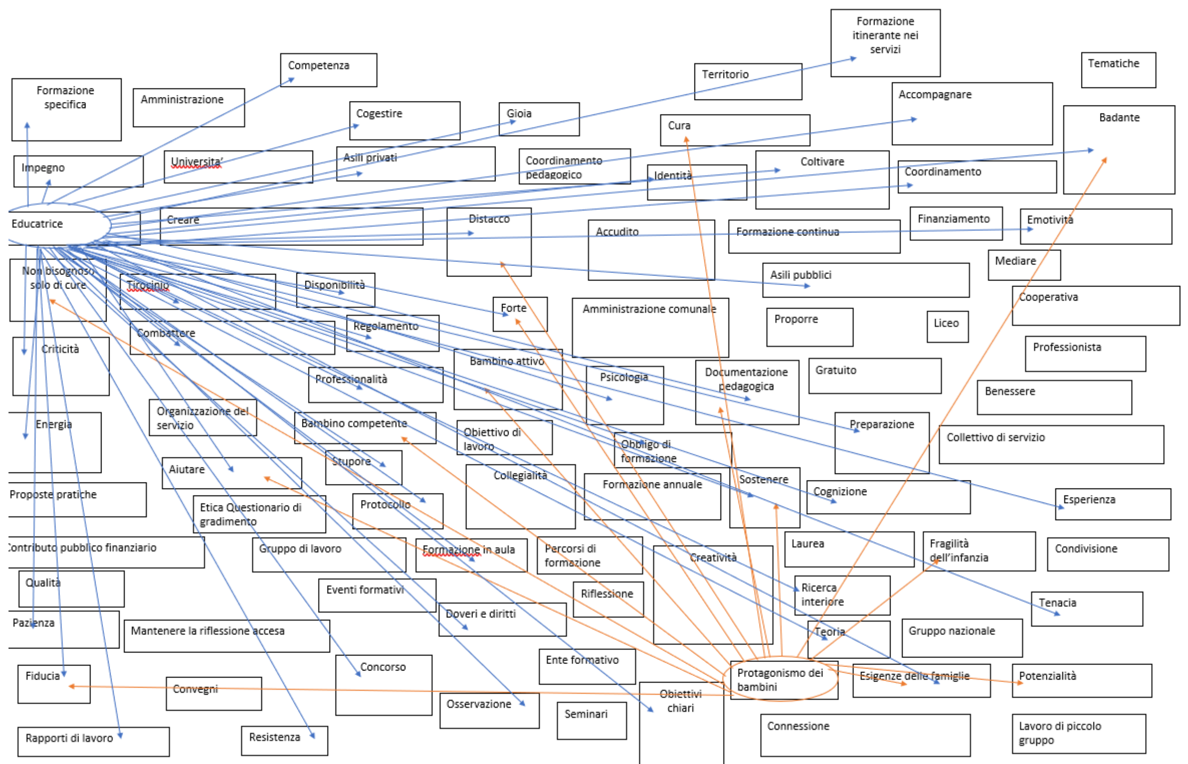
Relational analysis of the case studies, San Miniato





Centre development plan, London

Key Priorities Overview 2018/2019

Ofsted Framework	Whole Centre Priorities	Lead Staff
Leadership and Management *Link Governor:*	1.1 Continue to develop a model of school partnership review and improvement with the NLC and Nursery Schools. 1.2 Develop a model of coaching and peer to peer support to improve *all* staff practice.	HT/SLT HT/SLT
Quality of Teaching, Learning and Assessment *Link Governor:*	2.1 To continue to develop Early Literacy skills and raise standards in Communication and Language, Reading and Writing through 'Talk for Writing' 2.3 To refine and consider the use of documentation of children's learning using the Planning, Floorbooks, 2Simple observations and other strategies to increase progress	AHT/Senior Teacher/CC co-ord
Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare *Link Governor:*	3.1 Further development of Outdoor Learning using the Natural Thinkers and Forest School approach to continue to raise awareness of adult and child mental health and physical health 3.2 Support children to have a high level of well-being and engagement using the Leuven Scales for Involvement and raise standards in Personal, Social and Emotional development. 3.3 To further improve the attendance of 2 year olds through working with families to understand the impact on learning, progress and wellbeing.	HT/SLT Senior Teacher/CC co-ord HT/SLT
Outcomes for Pupils *Link Governor:*	4.1 46% - 50% of children to reach ARE or above 4.2 15% - 18% of children to achieve ARE+	AHT/Senior Teacher/Teachers

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

Key Priorities	Actions	Timetable	Who	Resources	Success Criteria by July 2018	A	S	S
Leadership and Management	HT/AHT/senior teacher to attend Cluster meetings for SSP	Ongoing	HT/AHT/Senior Teacher	£1,653 as part of HEP membership (school improvement)	HT/AHT/senior teacher refine experience of carrying out peer review model			
	HT/AHT/senior teacher to participate in reviews of other NET NLC schools in Cluster	Ongoing	HT/AHT/Senior Teacher	As above	As above			
	RH review by NET Cluster	TBC	SLT and middle leadership	As above	TBC following pre meeting to identify area to review.			
	Participate in reviews with Haringey Nursery Schools	TBC	SLT and middle leadership	As above	Based on outcome of previous review and any update identified in pre meeting.			
	SLT to carry out annual Safeguarding Audit and plan actions	Autumn	HT/AHT/CC Manager	0	To create a plan of actions and complete within given timeframe			
	All staff to identify Safeguarding training needs	Autumn	HT/AHT	0	Training programme meets self-identified needs			
	Programme over the year of regular safeguarding updates and training based on the analysis of above.	Ongoing	Designated safeguarding leads	In-house £0 External Training at cost EY CDP	Staff demonstrate secure knowledge			
	Strengthening communication strategies with families and the community through: continued development of the new website and 2Simple parental engagement		SLT Admin team	Ongoing maintenance cost of website	High level of occupancy and positive feedback from parental questionnaires			
	Senior and middle leaders attend training – Wisdom Drops	Ongoing	SLT and middle leadership	MNS Shared training cost	Appraisal reviews show progress towards individual's			

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

		Senior and middle leaders to add an individual target to their appraisals following training			£588.40	targets			
		Quality Supplement Project – tbc (widening impact)	TBC	TBC	Funding from LA				
		Consortium Training Programme in collaboration with other Haringey Nursery Schools (widening impact)	Ongoing	HT/CC Manager/ AHT/Senior Teacher in collaboration with other MNS staff	0	Positive impact on wider EY community – course evaluations			
		Erasmus Project – A Whole Centre Approach to Young Children's Health and Wellbeing	Ongoing	HT/SBM	Funded from Erasmus	Refer to project outcomes and dissemination			
		University of Roehampton – PhD research into early years professionals comparison of UK and Italy	Autumn	HT	0	Developing understanding of current EY professional development opportunities			
		Karl Koebing Foundation – continue to strengthen links with German foundation and sharing integrated working practices	Spring/Summer	HT/AHT/CC Manager/Senior Teacher	0	To identify for this year			
Quality of Teaching, Learning and Assessment		AHT to continue to participate in T4W project with Pie Corbett, Jane Ralphs and MNS colleagues	Ongoing	AHT	£800	Talk for Writing success criteria to add			
		Teachers to carry out T4W assessments	Autumn/Spring	AHT/Senior teacher/Teachers	0				
		20 staff to attend Talk for Writing – part 2 training with WP&PH	Autumn	AHT/Identified staff	Shared costs £400 tbc				
		Reflections Visit – staff across the centre	Autumn	Identified staff	£750	Continuous Provision success criteria to add			
		Provision mapping for Nursery and 2yr olds	Establish Autumn and Ongoing	Senior Teacher	0	Comprehensive recording of all interventions/targeted work/parental involvement in			

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

						order to analyse impact			
		In house STEAM training	TBC	AHT	0				
		Embedding Helicopter stories provision – Nursery and 2yr olds	Ongoing	AHT/Senior Teacher	0	success criteria to add			
		Establish parents/carers access to 2simple	Ongoing	SLT, Admin and Senior Teacher	2Simple SLA	Increased sharing of children's learning from the home environment			
		Continuation of SSTEW framework to refine practitioner's knowledge and understanding. To use framework as an observation tool to assess quality of teaching and learning	Ongoing	HT/AHT Senior teacher/Childcare Coord	0	Base on scores from previous year's observation - increase			
Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare		14 staff to attend Finland and Sweden Training Courses and develop an action plan for implementation.	Autumn/Summer	Identified staff	Erasmus funding	Refer to project outcomes and dissemination Established and sustainable			
		Devise whole staff training and dissemination of EU experience	Spring/Summer	Identified staff	As above	forest school provision across the centre			
		Sustain the ten commitments for Natural Thinkers school status. Be a model Natural Thinkers setting and share practice with others	Ongoing	Senior Teacher CC Manager CC coordinator		Staff and families have an Increased understanding of the benefits of the Forest School approach			
		Sustain Forest School on site programme universal and targeted	Ongoing	Forest School Leaders	0	Target from CC childhood			
		Launch Forest School with community families event in Natural Thinkers group ELP to shadow Forest School leader and use strategies in the Natural Thinkers group.	TBC	CC Manager/Outreach staff	0	obesity PSE target PD target – Health and Self Care			
		Achieve Travel Plan	Autumn	Senior Teacher Key Person	0	Travel Plan awarded			
		Continuation of the Daily Mile	Ongoing	Senior Teacher	0	Established DM sessions			

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

	Consideration of how to implement in the community groups.		CC co-ordinator CC Manager/Outreach staff		Improved levels of fitness for children, staff and families			
	Re-establishing the recycling area and having a whole centre focus (Research kite mark).	Ongoing	Need to identify		Centre recycling weekly and plan for achieving kitemark			
	Den Building Dad's event	Summer	AHT	TGG funding to be applied for where appropriate	PSE target tbc			
	Range of Parental involvement workshops in partnership with Health and Adult Learning.	Ongoing	AHT/CC Manager		TBC Target from CC for adult learning Target from CC childhood obesity			
	Road safety/Child safety/Healthy eating weeks	Autumn/Spring	AHT/CC Manager/Senior teacher/ Childcare Co-ord		PD target – Health and Self Care			
	Gain Bronze HEYL award (Haringey launch tbc)	TBC	CC Manager	0	HEYL Bronze award Specific target to be identified			
	Range of onsite community experiences to support child & adult	Ongoing			PSE target UW target			
	Charity events to foster empathy	Ongoing			PD target – Health and Self Care			
	Induction of new children- Rights and Responsibilities.	Autumn (ongoing in smaller numbers)	Nursery and 2yr old staff	0				
	Parental Involvement and visitors to support learning about a range of religious festivals	Ongoing	AHT/CC Manager/Outreach staff	0				
	Review systems for monitoring attendance (key worker role/admin/website/new letters).	Autumn	HT/AHT/SBM/Admin	0	Establish baseline for nursery and 2yr olds attendance and punctuality – autumn term			

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

	Updated Welcome workshop focus and info on website	Autumn	HT/AHT	0				
	Consultation with families of two years attendance and parent targeted workshop	Autumn/Spring	HT/AHT/CC Manager	0				
	Introduce Home visits by outreach team for poor attenders and action plans.	Spring/Summer	CC Manager/Outreach staff	0				
Outcomes for Pupils	Parental involvement – Wow Wednesdays (range of curriculum/pedagogy focussed activities to support learning at home)	Ongoing	AHT/Outreach staff	0	Parents/carer s feedback that they have been able to implement ideas/activities at home			
	Targeted off site trips and onsite learning opportunities to impact on attainment in specific areas of learning.	Ongoing	AHT Senior Teacher SENCo	Grant and voluntary donations	Targeted children making rapid progress - tracker			
	Themed weeks on target areas of learning – Maths, STEAM	Ongoing		0 (additional resources grant funded)	SSTEW here? Ratings for teachers, key persons and centre assistants?			
	Art and Music programme of interventions for pupil premium and target children	Ongoing	Artist Musician	£18,130	Targeted children making rapid progress - tracker			
	Identify target Children – Nursery and 2yr olds	Autumn – following Baseline assessment	Senior teacher Childcare coordinator	0	Agreed target children for 2018/19			
	Curriculum meetings and targeted pupil progress meetings using the tracker software	Ongoing	HT/AHT/Senior teachers/teachers/CC co-ord	0	46-50 % of children to reach ARE or above			
	Continue RWI phonic sessions run by teachers and identified key persons	Ongoing	Senior Teacher	0	15-18% of children to be above ARE			

Actions to meet Key Priorities 2018/2019

	WellComm programme – identify new staff lead and implement half termly	Ongoing	SENCo	Costs of NQT				
	Projects with resident artist – STEAM (colour, shadow, light, sculpture, materials, photography and film)	Ongoing		Included in costs for Music and Art interventions				

Participant Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: Reconceptualising professional development in early childhood education and care

This research looks to consider in service professional learning and development (PLD) for early years' professionals both in the UK, in London and in Italy, in Tuscany. The current offering of PLD will be interpreted through a Froebelian lens, striving to look at existing practice in a holistic way without seeing current practice as serving primarily an economic or political agenda. PLD will be looked at as a system, building onto Froebelian principles of practitioners' cooperation and autonomy fostering the development of a community of practice. There will be specific attention payed at exploring early years' professionals' understandings of professional identities as well as a focus on existing PLD.

The principal research question guiding the study is:

1. How can Professional Learning and Development (PLD) in Early Childhood Education and Care be conceptualised through a Froebelian lens in light of contemporary PLD practices in Tuscany and London?

In addition, the following sub-questions will also be addressed:

2. What are the key characteristics of PLD for early childhood practitioners in the English and Italian early childhood education systems?
3. What is the current picture of Professional Learning and Development in Tuscany and London?
4. What are the features of Professional Learning and Development in professional contexts?
5. How do participants define, perceive and make sense of their professional identities?

If you wish to receive a summary of the final report please send me an email at the address below.

The study will involve 10 participants from each country. I would like to invite you to participate in a one to one interview lasting no more than one hour. This will be done in your place of work at a time of your convenience. I plan to audio record the interview with your permission. After the interviews have been transcribed and analysed I would like to invite you to participate in phase two of the research. A focus group with no more than five to eight participants will take place roughly two to three weeks after the end of the interviews. The focus group will last no more than two hours and will be located in your place of work and at a convenient time for all participants. The focus group will be video recorded with your permission, fully transcribed and analysed.

As part of the final presentation of this research your words might be used in text form. This will fully anonymised so that yourself or your institution will not be identified.

1

I would also like to inform you that if you accept to participate in this research, you have the right to withdraw from the project at any time and without giving a reason for it. You can do so by contacting myself or my Director of Studies.

Investigator Contact Details:

Valeria Scacchi
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Roehampton Lane, London, United Kingdom, SW15 5PU
Valeria.scacchi@roehampton.ac.uk
+44 020 8392 4185

Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason, although if I do so I understand that my data might still be used in a collated form. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings, and that data will be collected and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and with the University's Data Protection Policy.

Name …………………………………….

Signature ………………………………

Date ……………………………………

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator or the Director of Studies. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department.

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