

BOOK REVIEW

Charmaine Bonello, Anna Baldacchino, and Carmen Dalli
(2024). *An Emergent Curriculum for the Early Years in Malta:
Stories of Professional and Pedagogical Transformation*,
Routledge, 178 pp., ISBN: 9781032647814

This timely volume by Bonello, Baldacchino, and Dalli makes a significant contribution to the growing international literature on emergent curriculum and child-centred pedagogies. Situated in Malta – a context where early childhood education has historically leaned towards more prescriptive curricula – this book documents a bold effort to reimagine practice by foregrounding children’s voices, interests, and agency.

The book aims to examine how early years educators across diverse Maltese settings (0–7 years) have negotiated a shift from traditional, teacher-led approaches to an emergent curriculum model. Drawing on seven richly described case studies, the authors illustrate what such a transition entails in practice: from reorganising classroom spaces and daily routines, to fostering professional autonomy and reflective practice. Each chapter situates the narrative within a particular age group or educational stage, highlighting context-specific opportunities and constraints.

This narrative, while localised, is also framed as part of a broader movement to align early years provision with democratic, rights-based principles, notably children’s right to express views and participate in decisions affecting them (UNCRC, Article 12). The work resonates with global discourses on participatory pedagogies, echoing influences from Reggio Emilia, socio-cultural theory, and the Council of Europe’s Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture.

A primary strength lies in the book’s practitioner-centred lens. Rather than offering an abstract discourse. It presents educators’ authentic stories of professional transformation. These accounts vividly

demonstrate how practitioners grappled with uncertainty, negotiated institutional expectations, and ultimately embraced a more relational, co-constructed model of curriculum.

It was refreshing to read a narrative style that makes the book highly accessible. By weaving together observation, dialogue, and practitioner reflections, the authors enable readers to “see” the evolution of practice. This is particularly valuable for those engaged in initial teacher education or professional development, as it provides concrete illustrations of how emergent curriculum principles can be enacted.

By documenting both the pedagogical shifts and the accompanying changes in educator identity, I believe the book adds nuance to debates on teacher agency. It shows that fostering emergent, child-led learning is not simply a matter of changing classroom activities but about cultivating dispositions of trust, openness, and critical reflection.

However, the book’s emphasis on descriptive storytelling comes at the expense of deeper theoretical interrogation. While it gestures toward frameworks such as the UNCRC and democratic education, it stops short of systematically analysing the intersections between emergent curriculum and broader socio-political or cultural forces shaping Maltese education. For researchers, this limits its utility as a critical lens on how neoliberal or standardisation pressures might complicate such pedagogical transformations.

Similarly, although the case studies compellingly document practitioner change, there is relatively little exploration of outcomes for children themselves beyond anecdotal observations. For scholars interested in linking emergent curriculum to developmental or socio-emotional learning trajectories, further empirical data would strengthen the argument.

Despite these limitations, this volume holds substantial value. It contributes to a growing body of evidence that early childhood education, rooted in children’s lived experiences and voices, is not only possible but also profoundly transformative for both children and educators. It also highlights the systemic supports needed: professional trust, flexible regulatory environments, and leadership committed to participatory, rights-based education.

For policymakers, the book implicitly challenges the prioritisation of narrow outcomes or standardised curricula. It calls instead for frameworks that honour children's agency and educators' professional judgement. For researchers, it provides fertile ground for comparative studies on how emergent curricula evolve across diverse sociocultural contexts.

An Emergent Curriculum for the Early Years in Malta is an engaging, practice-rich account that bridges local innovation with global debates on child rights and participatory education. I am sure it will be of interest to early years practitioners, teacher educators, and scholars seeking to understand how curriculum can emerge from, rather than be imposed upon, the dynamic realities of children's worlds.

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