

# Young Children's Participation in Curriculum Development: Educators' Transition from Prescriptive to Emergent Curriculum in Maltese Early Years Settings

*Fostering Rights-Based Solutions to Tackle Child Poverty and Social Exclusion across Europe  
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During this presentation, we will unpack highlights emerging from the seven educators' narratives/interviews and create an open dialogue about child participation in curriculum development and the emergent curriculum in a Maltese early years context (0-7 years).

We will also experience it hands-on 😊

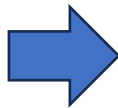
**Early 90's  
KG Curriculum**

6 major aims:

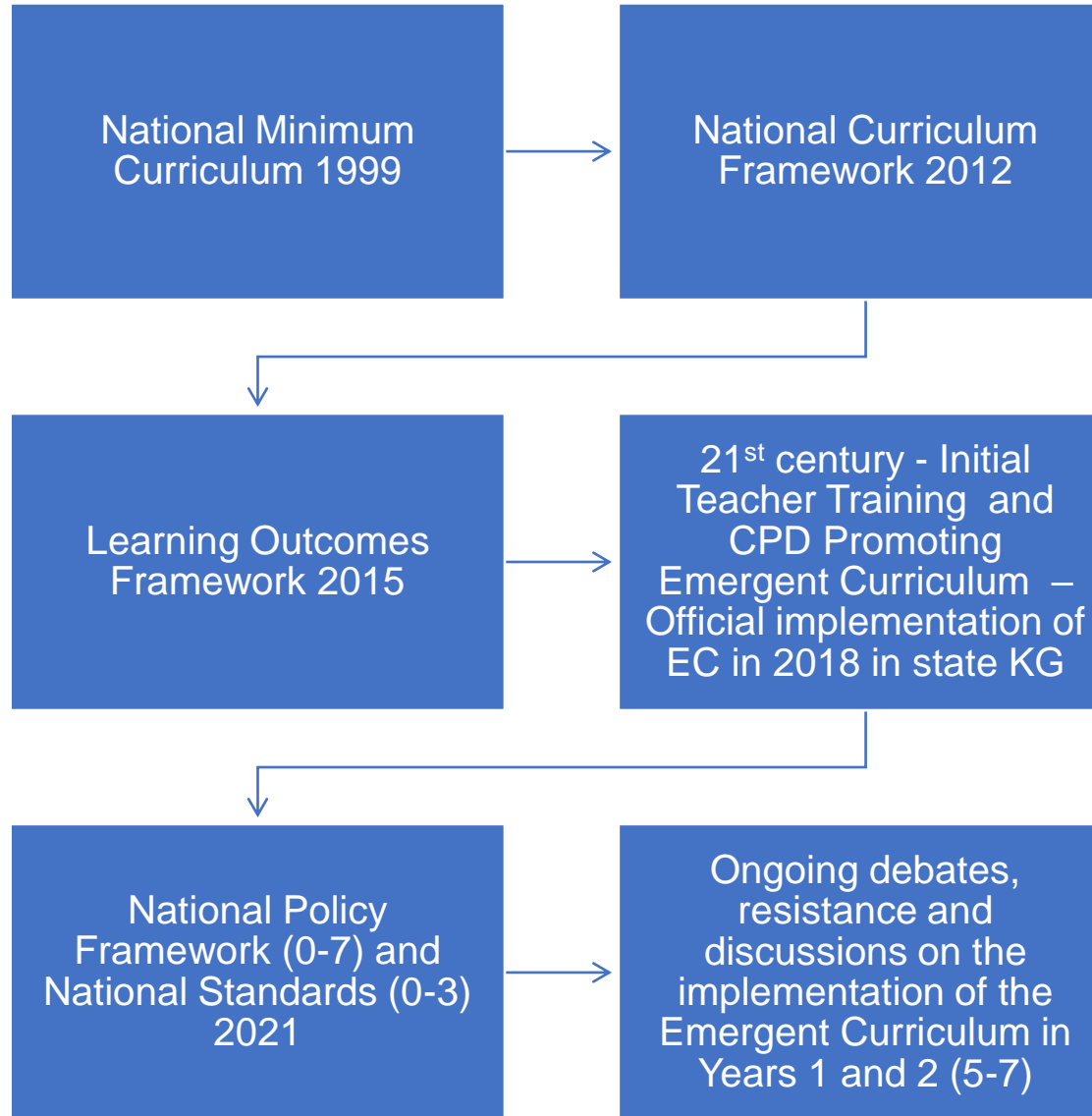
- S&E development
- Health and Hygiene
- Physical Development
- Acquiring concepts in academic subjects (Maths, Language, Science)
- Preparing children for reading and writing
- Developing children's imaginative and creative capabilities

(Sollars, 2002, p.158)

Early Years Curriculum Development in a Maltese Early Years Context (0-7)



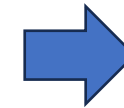
# CONTEXT



**2012** – “The main thrust of the NCF is to enable teachers to respond to children’s interests, arouse their curiosity and instill an inquiry-based approach to learning (the Early Years)” (0-7 years) (NCF, 2012, p. xiv)

*New Curriculum discourse:*

- Emergent Curriculum
- Child-centred
- Reggio Emilia Approach
- Project Approach
- Authentic assessment
- Documentation
- Learning Stories
- Learning Journal
- Learning Outcomes Framework
- Cycle of Inquiry
- Planning in the moment
- Documentation





## The Research Question:

*How are early childhood educators understanding the new curriculum discourse, implementing it in their educational settings, and perceiving its impact on children's learning?*

# Theoretical and methodological framework

- Seven qualitative case studies were carried out using an educator-researcher partnership model – convenience sampling. Participants: 7 early childhood educators (0-7).
- Social constructivist theory provided the theoretical framework to collaboratively capture the educators' narratives and accounts as they lived through and enacted the curricular change.
- Three initial planning online meetings with educator-researchers (recorded).
- Two online focus groups with the educator-researchers at the end of data collection (recorded).
- Educators' reflective written and visual accounts about new curricular discourse, implementation of the Emergent Curriculum, and the impact on children's learning.
- Individual online interviews after collecting the narrative data (recorded).

## Childcarer with babies (0-1):

I was first **introduced** to the child-centred approach and child-led activities **during my childcare course**. Throughout our lectures, we saw videos and heard lectures about how this is practiced in **Reggio Emilia**. This left an impact on me.

Throughout this **shift in the centre's approach**, I researched this **methodology extensively**. I sought **advice** from both the centre coordinator as well as my colleagues and also learned from my mistakes. After each activity, I **would evaluate the outcome and work on identifying and improving any shortcomings**.



# Childcarer with babies (0-1):

- The baby room had to be **redesigned**... I removed lots of plastic and soft toys and replaced them with natural objects... These include wooden blocks, carton boxes, and natural sensory baskets (accessible in wicker baskets replacing closed plastic containers).
- She mentions the importance of **researching** on a daily basis to learn and improve her pedagogical practice.
- I became a much **calmer** teacher with the emergent curriculum and now I focus more on the **process** of learning and not the product. Activities are no longer done on highchairs but in a tuff tray on the floormat.
- ... we Maltese are just as capable as other nationalities... but they do not take the plunge, and I want to **remove that sense of disempowerment**.



# Exploring Paint on a Mirror

February 2021



Emilia dove right into this activity without any explanation or encouragement. She walked towards the mirror and chose a paint brush from the tray. She dipped the paintbrush in the green edible paint and began her process art. The brush strokes on the mirror were different – some were vertical strokes, others were made using dabbing or a circular movement.

...**assessment** used to be carried out using Meggitt's Checklist... Babies are unique, and milestones are not reached at the same time and in the same way by everyone. The **LOF** offers a **broader** set of outcomes that are not associated with specific ages.



# Childcare Educator (1-2) and Centre Manager

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- She says the emergent curriculum “makes more sense... rather than just pulling out a file and using it year after year” and that “it **keeps the enthusiasm levels high**, so you look forward to the days you spend with the children”.
- From her experience, other educators **need to see it working in practice** to better understand the approach.





## Childcare Educator (1-2) and Centre Manager

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- She is impressed by how children retain knowledge thanks to this approach. So, for her, “quality has to have the emergent curriculum.”
- “And I enjoyed hearing someone say that that was the children’s work. That made me realise that the **mentality is changing** – that it is the children’s work, and we should accept it and not try to make everything look perfect.”



**The environment as the third teacher**

- Natural light
- Neutral colours
- No visual clutter
- Hanging children's work from the ceiling can also be distracting for the children
- Culturally representative of the community
- Embraces nature
- Filled with purposeful materials
- Materials should be thoughtfully added to the environment to promote creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills, questions, experimentation, and open-ended play.

# The environment as the third teacher

Our environment is **carefully made up of** different areas where children **can freely choose where to play**:

- **Book area:** **Different types of books** are available to the children, both fiction and non-fiction books. The books available address different themes, such as animals, people, nature, and food. These include lift-the-flap books, pop-up books, and feely books. **Books are also available in both the English and Maltese language.**
- **Blocks area:** Mirror blocks, sensory blocks, wooden blocks, coloured glass blocks, wooden tracks, and **various loose parts are available.** Such loose parts are textile pieces, shells, pinecones, CDs, peg dolls, cars, etc.
- **Role-play area:** Is made up of a child-sized kitchen, **coloured dolls to reflect the diversity,** loose parts, metal and wooden pots, and utensils.
- **Creative Area:** gives the children the opportunity to create, where we value the **process** rather than the product.





## Childcare Educator (2-3)

- After **extensive research that my centre manager carried out** on the Emergent curriculum, we decided to adopt this approach.
- We started learning more **about the philosophy behind Emergent Curriculum**. From then on, **training was ongoing**
- Since I feel like my **children are too small to create a web with me**, my implementation of an emergent curriculum is based mostly on daily observation (how they play but not only), listening to their conversations, and talking to them. **Once I gather information**, I can plan activities based on their likes. Sometimes when they show me a bigger interest in the subject, we start a **project approach** where they can explore the subject deeper and stay with this subject for a little bit longer.

## 2-3: The project approach with toddlers



- Another big project approach started when I observed that they daily play **doctors** using our small doctor's bag to check up on the dolls; from this small play, we arrived at the point where we explored x-rays and learned about our bodies. **Ongoing observations of children's play** led us to learn about our eyes and check our vision, and we created our own glasses.



## Childcare Educator (2-3)

- We started exploring loose parts play and also carried out **training on the project approach** and in-the-moment planning.
- Peekaboo **also joined several other Reggio-inspired nurseries online** for inspiration and ideas as we firmly believe that the emergent curriculum is not learned overnight, yet it is a process.
- All toys, loose materials, and other equipment were **placed at eye level**, which was accessible to all children.
- **Reusing and recycling materials** has always been our forte; however, we **involved the community this time**, such as parents donating any natural resources or reusable materials.
- **We liaise with parents on a regular basis** asking questions and discussing what it might be that their child likes to do at home, **even though we observe children through play at the centre.**

# Childcare Educator (2-3)

An emergent Curriculum depends **on a high level of teacher observation, documentation, and planning**. She believes that through the emergent curriculum, she has gained a **“greater understanding of each child’s individual needs”**.

She believes this way of learning has impacted the children in her care. She observed that they **developed more self-esteem and confidence when the learning opportunities were based on their interests**.





# Kindergarten Educator (3-4)

- As an early childhood educator, I **strongly believe that children should take an active role** in their learning, making them protagonists in the classroom.
- I think in the beginning, **everyone was a bit shocked, I was one of them!** Obviously, when you do not know what it entails, it sort of scares you until you start applying it and you start feeling confident.
- We had **a lot of support from the leadership team**, and I think all this helped us to act fast and work with the emergent.
- I could see the **drastic change as the classroom turned into a small community**. A community where children did research along with their educator. We could question, research, and learn together.



# Kindergarten Educator (3-4)

**There is no one way of doing it.** For example, in one class, the speech would be at a more advanced stage, so the project is easily achievable. In contrast, in another class, the children would be of a younger age, and the speech would be less developed, so you struggle a bit, and you have to provide more input from your end. Not every project evolves in the same way, ....emergent, after all!

**My plan** is thought of as a **living plan**, which is constantly developing, revised, and changed as the week or day goes by. Plans evolve week by week, and sometimes even day to day, as I observe the children and respond accordingly.



# Kindergarten Educator (1)

While exploring flowers, I laid out a beautiful setup on a Tuff Tray for the children to explore and investigate. In my mind, I thought that the children would carefully examine the flowers or point out the different parts of the flowers etc. However, they took this activity to a whole other direction.

As an educator, I could have stopped them and instructed them on what I wanted them to do or observe; however, I took this time to let them experiment and explore without any interruptions. I just simply observed.

A pin drop could have been heard while they were so captured by their play, as they carefully took the flowers apart, one petal at a time, put them into buckets and bowls, and mixed and stirred using tweezers, magnifiers, and flower stems as spoons. They were “in their own world”.

If I hadn't let them freely explore and hadn't stopped to observe, all this imagination would have been lost, and above all, I would have ignored their way of communicating with me. During these moments, I do not care much about the activity plans, which I carefully plan and write. Instead, in my mind, I had already changed the plan and started thinking of all the new learning opportunities I could provide them based on my observations.

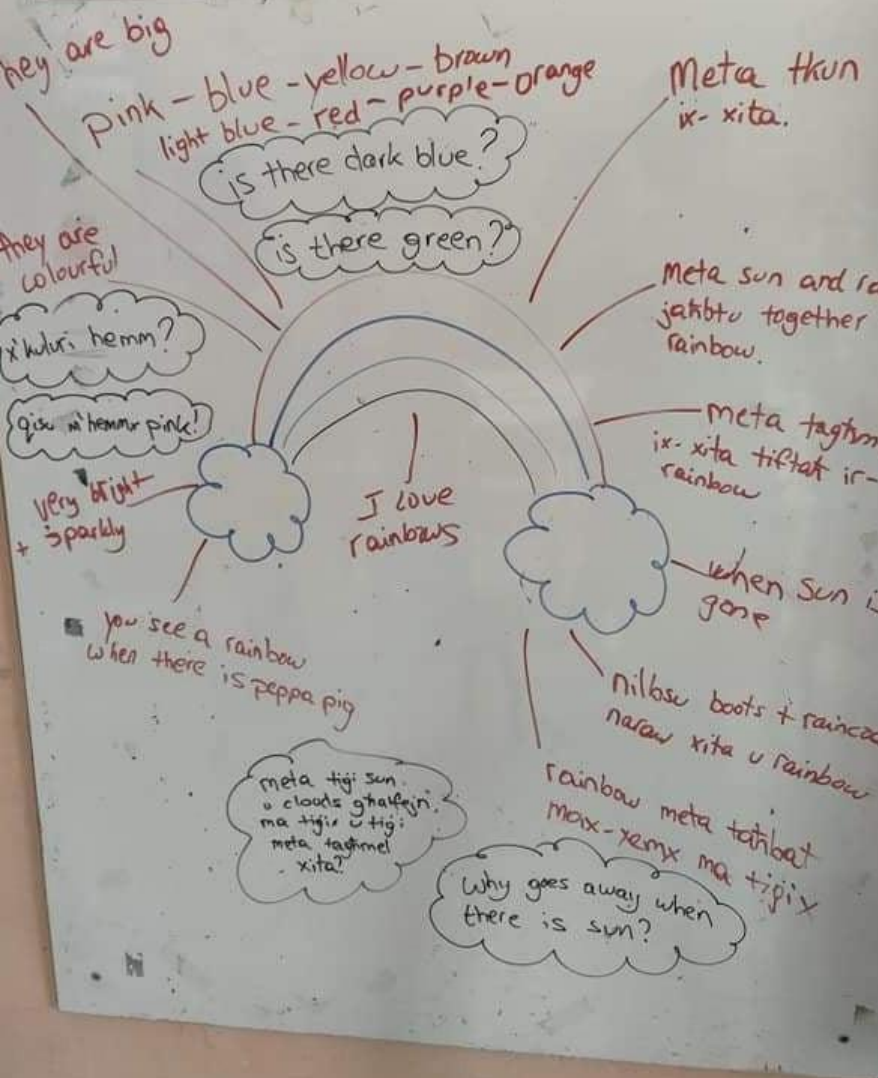
This is the beauty of the Emergent Curriculum.



# Kindergarten Educator (3-4)

- In terms of **observation**, it is something that is **ongoing that I do all the time, even if I am not taking any notes... then sometimes, I decide to observe one particular child or a group.**
- When I document and send it to **parents, they would even send notes saying that even they notice** these things or that even at home, he does that thing. There would be a continuation from school to home in such a case.
- The **Learning Outcomes** help me see where the students are at so I can continue planning their next steps, which I find **useful.**





## Kindergarten Educator (4-5)

- She says that a fundamental thing that helps her implement the emergent curriculum is her: **“flexibility and on-the-spot thinking”**. She truly believes that it is **not a one-size-fits-all** type of curriculum but rather a **“celebration of everyone's growth, including my own”**.
- She believes the emergent curriculum has impacted children's development by helping them stay motivated during a project and has **created a love for learning**.

# Kindergarten Educator (4-5)

- I first start with **my observations** which sometimes include taking notes, videos, and photos of students' play but mostly by being involved and eavesdropping in their conversation or **digging deeper** into their daily interests and play. I also do **learning provocations** to help me **guide the interests** of the students better and therefore dig deeper into what we ought to investigate and move towards too.





## Kindergarten Educator (4-5)

Such **examples of provocation** include free play, stories, drawings, outdoor play, and even role play. For example, suppose students are showing interest in a particular general theme, such as stories and fairy tales. In that case, **I provide various scenarios to grasp a deeper understanding** of why such a topic is interesting. **It may result that the common interest is a princess** or a witch or a big bad wolf, and later on, these interests get provoked further to ensure that my observations are, in fact, intact.

# Kindergarten Educator (4-5)

I remember a particular event in which students were interested in the game “The Floor is Lava”. Automatically my adult knowledge starts reeling in the information that I am aware of in relation to lava, like volcanoes, eruptions, etc. However, when I stopped and observed the students, **I was intrigued by everything else they talked about...** I discovered a historian at the tender age of 5 years.

His knowledge of the Roman Empire was more interesting than what I had learned in my Form 3 History lesson... I put on my own thinking hat, and luckily **my flexibility and on-the-spot thinking** took me back to that Form 3 lesson of my own. I adapted my knowledge about the Roman Empire, merged it with our brand-new theme of “the floor is lava,” and conjoining both together, we were able to discover the wonders of Pompeii.







## Year 1 Teacher (5-6)

- Once she started implementing the Emergent curriculum, she realised that: **“the ideas that children came up with were so exciting** – nothing I would have ever thought of myself”. This is what made the educator believe in this approach.
- She felt that now **she was a co-learner with the children in her classroom**. She believes that when using the emergent curriculum: **“you give the children a voice, you plan with them, you brainstorm with them”**.

## Year 1 Teacher (5-6)

A box contained some resources the children could leave at school. Every morning until all the children arrived, **the early arrivals would build forts and castles using these boxes** (the boxes were bigger than an adult-size shoe box). By the time all the children arrived, most of the class would be engrossed in this game; those who weren't building the fort would choose to sit at their table to build something using their own set of blocks.

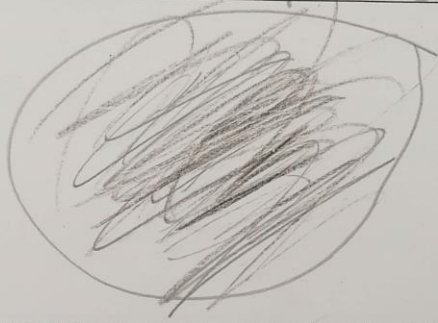
**This interest in building** was also observed during our weekly Nature Days. The children were observed building Bug Hotels and forts using stones and resources found outdoors. Over the weeks, the walls they built became bigger, and the methods they used improved, so it was only natural to ask the children if they wished to explore the theme of 'construction'.



Date

11th June 20

Sam Antonio



I was at the

nachurara  
area

and we

built a dam

so we

the / n sees.

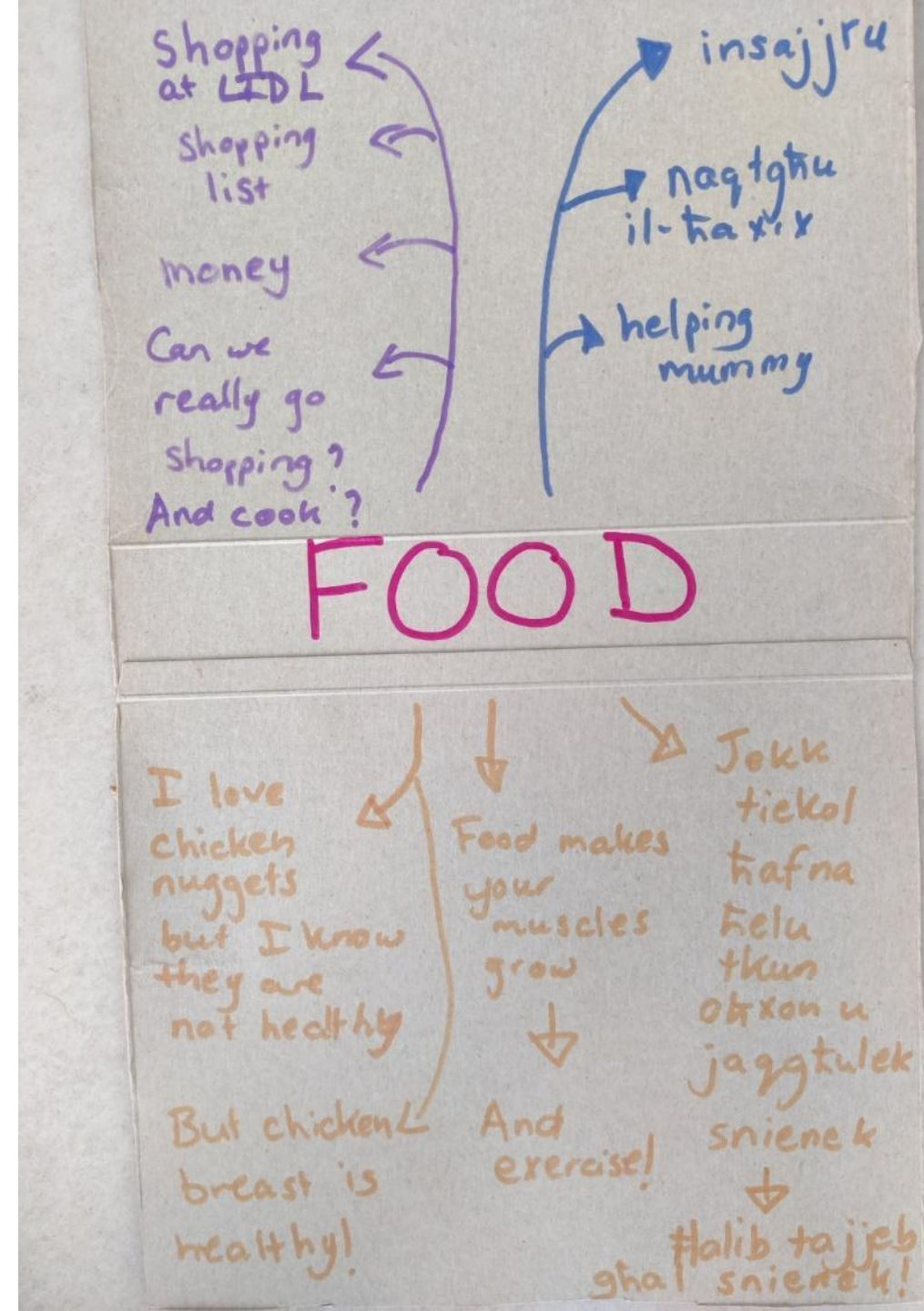
## Year 1 Teacher (5-6)

**My schemes** kind of go into my project plan... they are still subject-based for the teachers to use as guides to make sure that in maths, you have to cover, like, the syllabus that is on the government website.

Usually, we'll put in the picture of the web and all that... the scheme of the grade, I tick off and make sure that by the end of the year, all the work has been covered. So then when May comes along, and you see you haven't covered, you know, this, this, or that, you have to see how you're going to fit them in. **But it works. I mean, you do.**

# Year 2 Teacher (6-7-year-olds)

- She implements the emergent curriculum with a **“strong conviction that this pedagogy benefits young learners the most.”** To her, it **“plants the seeds of joy in learning”** and **“motivates and encourages educators to remain in love with their job”**.
- The **Year 2 standardised curriculum is challenging** when it comes to implementing the emergent curriculum. However, she manages to **“bridge what is formal with the project approach... it is doable”**.
- For her, a benefit is that **“you are trying to reach everyone”**.



# Planning (6-7)

My planning throughout the week ensures that there is:

- a) **Systemic teaching.** This includes the more formal subjects such as Maths, Maltese, English, Religion, Science, and Social Studies - these subjects are still integrated within the project of children's interest. Each lesson includes a fun introduction and hands-on activities like group games.
- b) **The project work.** This includes the classroom play areas, which allow children to explore their interests on a deeper level during their play. It also includes activities that allow children to be more investigative and to then represent what they are learning, such as going to a grocery shop to buy food, cooking and then writing about their experience, science experiments related to the body, and arts and crafts to represent what they are learning about the subject.

The reader will understand, as **more examples are given** about the Food Project, that there is a lot of overlap between systemic teaching and investigative work because the formal subjects and investigative activities can be so well integrated together.



# “Hopping on board the Emergent Curriculum Train”

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Something that truly helps is **discussing issues with the School Leadership Team** to reach a compromise. For example, in the case of our school, it is understood that as long as learning is still happening through meaningful, hands-on activities, **books do not need to be filled in cover to cover but are to be used as a resource.** This **information is also given to parents** at the beginning of the scholastic year. When they see the learning that actually goes on, even if books are not filled from cover to cover, they soon **hop on board the Emergent Curriculum train.**



# Challenges they faced

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I feel I have a group **settled** then suddenly someone new joins our group, for example, now I have this girl, joining us in December. I find this challenging.

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**Not having enough resources:** “Either you cannot get them, you don’t find them, or they don’t arrive on time.”

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She has experienced **a lack of shared understanding about the emergent curriculum** from different stakeholders.

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She also recounts that when she was a teacher in a school, **other colleagues did not like her** “because you always come up with something innovative.”



# Challenges

- **Verbal communication.** But then you have to deal with it; like we said, children do not have to speak to you to show you what they are interested in or what they want, and in that case, I had to learn how to read those signals.
- **Change in leadership** – from being supported to like you are struggling on your own.
- **Documentation** does not go home or to the educator that will be taking care of the children the next year.





# Challenges

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**Time** is our greatest challenge in class, the children have eight specialist lessons a week which are set on their timetable.

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The **books and workbooks, the overwhelming syllabus** in early primary, and the resistance to include the emergent curriculum at this level.

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Some parents fear that this way of teaching will not help their **children to be ready for compulsory/primary schooling in Malta.**

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**I think the more you go, the more you start realising that challenges are less,** to be honest, because you start getting into a routine that the parents are part of the classroom, so they are, for instance, much more responsive to what you're telling them about their child.

# Implications:

- Within an emergent curriculum perspective, pedagogy and assessment **need to be understood** across research, policy, and practice—a **systemic approach** is also needed to develop a shared understanding.
- The right **policy infrastructure** is needed to provide educators with **ongoing monitoring and support** to implement child participation in curriculum development.
- **Prescriptive syllabi** for the 5-7 age group need to be discussed, revisited and rethought.
- Children's high level of engagement/participation in curriculum development is to be reflected on and used **as a measure of quality** in early years education and beyond.
- **Further research** in this area would continue to unravel how the emergent curriculum philosophy **sustains child participation in curriculum development** within an education system.

# Concluding thoughts

We welcome your insights following this workshop.

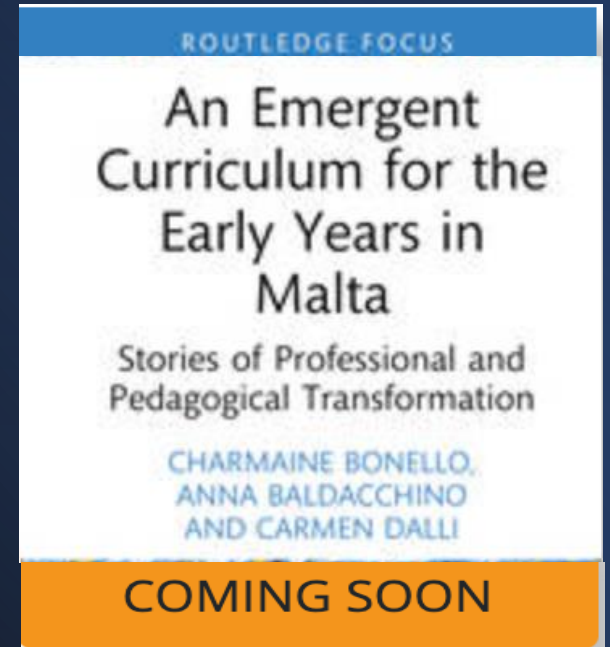
We look forward to sharing the book with you towards the end of 2024.

**Thank you**

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