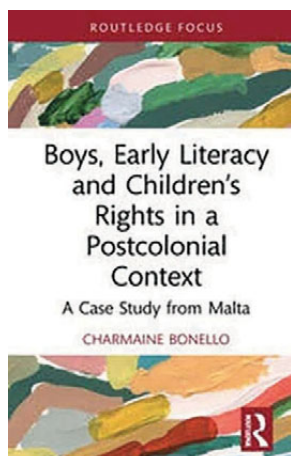


Boys and literacy in Malta – is the system failing them?



BOYS, EARLY LITERACY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

by Charmaine Bonello,
published by Routledge, 2022

**ROSIIENNE CAMILLERI,
JOSEPHINE DEGUARA,
JOSEPHINE MILTON and
TANIA MUSCAT**

It is high time that we beat the boredom and unease some boys equate with reading and writing. The author, Charmaine Bonello, is a mother of two boys, an educator with many years of experience with boys in the early years, an advocate of children's rights, a researcher and a lecturer at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta.

Through this publication, she invites readers to listen to the unheard voices of the boys in her study. She firmly believes that all children deserve and have a right to an excellent and meaningful reading instruction so they may become passionate about reading and writing.

To capture these voices, Bonello held focus group interviews with 14 boys, aged five to six (Year 1 in primary school), in three state schools in Malta.

In chapter 1, Bonello presents the historical, cultural, social and economic context for the study. The researcher's values, beliefs, attitudes and work experience guided her to conduct a mixed method case study that explores boys' underachievement in literacy in early years education in Malta.

Although the participants were young boys, elements of the context in which they live can be traced much further back in time. It is for this reason, that the researcher adopts the dual lens of



The book explores boys' underachievement in literacy in early years education in Malta. PHOTO: CLIFTON FENECH/DOI

children's rights and postcolonial theory. The Maltese islands have been occupied by a succession of foreign powers. The author argues that the legacy of foreign influence is reflected not only in the languages with which five- to six-year-old Maltese boys become familiar, but also in the ways in which they come to experience and struggle with school reading and writing practices in a Maltese postcolonial ECEC context.

The study does not only strive to document the 'voice' of the children in their own familiar setting, hence the children's rights stance. By adopting a post-colonial perspective, the research aptly highlights that when children engage in literacy practices in their everyday school life, they do so from within a local context that is tied to global contexts.

This local-global relationship has important implications when attempting to understand the perennial 'why' of gender differences in literacy achievement.

In the second chapter, the author takes a critical approach towards the dominant gendered discourse that percolates early literacy practices in Maltese schools and that seems to position young boys at a disadvantage. The so-called gender gap is unpacked, and the reader is invited to revisit, question and refute traditional gender stereotypes.

Freire's thinking on the diverse and subtle shapes and forms that oppression and control can take is used to create awareness of those factors that may be shaping and negatively impacting boys' identities and attitudes towards literacy learning.

Bonello argues that it is only through a critical lens and the joint effort of all stakeholders involved that specific action for change can be taken. The author proposes a bottom-up approach that prioritises the participation of children and their families in the co-construction of

learning spaces that are equally safe and enabling for all learners.

Apart from providing a fresh view of early literacy learning, this book, and this chapter more specifically, authentically mirrors the work and advocacy of the author in her determination to give a voice to the voiceless, and to help create the right conditions for a shared understanding and a shared dialogue about culturally and socially just pedagogies.

The third chapter re-examines the views of young boys in Malta's highly formalised approach to early literacy learning that is still prevalent in our schooling system.



Boys seemed demotivated by the highly formalised and structured approach to reading

Children should be given the opportunity to be co-participants in their experiences of early literacy and this does not happen when education is highly formalised and overly teacher-led, referred to by Bonello as "the early literacy oppressive pedagogy".

Moreover, Bonello points out that boys seemed demotivated by the highly formalised and structured approach to reading instruction that places systematic synthetic phonics at the centre.

Other literacy-rich experiences such as those inherent to a balanced literacy approach (storytelling, shared reading, read alouds, guided reading, songs, rhymes, play, drama, and so on) did not seem to be

given the time or space required. Bonello argues for children's interests and reading abilities to be recognised and reflected in the selection of books available in schools.

Through analysing the boys' interventions, she calls for texts related to popular culture, community-specific and culturally relevant texts in class to reduce the gap between home and school literacy experiences for the children.

Research indicates that books are frequently sent home for children to read but it is less common to find the literacy exchange going the other way – from home to school.

Bonello uses chapter 4 as a springboard to advocate for literacy as a social practice for the under-sevens. The chapter challenges a formal and traditional approach to early literacy learning as it unravels the impact it has on young boys.

The author's in-class observations as well as excerpts from interviews with different stakeholders, reveal that some five- to six-year-old boys struggle to be motivated and engaged with the required, menial, literacy tasks. Without proper transition, these boys moved from a play-based kindergarten environment to a formal school setting, where they were subject to the drilling of repetitive words and the filling of endless pages of workbooks.

The author asserts that this ingrained colonial philosophy devaluates play and maintains a formal and traditional concept of school and the teaching of literacy in structured and decontextualised ways.

The chapter reveals how hidden colonialism and the effects of neoliberal principles, that provoke top-down pressures, prevent educators in postcolonial contexts from providing more democratic and socially just early literacy pedagogies.

Bonello invites us to re-envision, re-configure and recreate our notions of literacy learning and urges political, institutional and individual stakeholders to deconstruct a colonial frame of mind and reconstruct a literacy pedagogy that empowers all children.

The young boys and several stakeholders in this chapter tell us that a highly formalised approach to literacy for the under-sevens is not socially just and fails to honour the principles of a children's rights perspective – this is too important and too significant to be ignored.

This publication will appeal to policymakers and educators at all levels as it will enable them to become aware of the local situation and understand how we can overcome the current literacy challenges to provide all young children nationwide with quality literacy education.

Dr Rosienne Camilleri, Dr Josephine Deguara, Dr Josephine Milton and Dr Tania Muscat are all members of the Department of Early and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta.