

Children's Views of Psychotherapy in Residential Alternative Care in Malta by Dr. Daniel Mercieca

The MGSS scholarship proved to be really crucial in supporting me to read for a PhD at the Institute of Education, University College London. This journey involved designing and completing the study "Children's Views of Psychotherapy in Residential Alternative Care in Malta". The successful completion of the study led to the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Childhood Studies, Child Participation and Child Psychotherapy.

The study offers an alternative way of thinking about and engaging children in the evaluation of mental health interventions. It involved children as active agents, rights holders and knowledgeable participants in the evaluation of psychotherapy. This practice-based qualitative research aimed to elicit, represent, and understand children's accounts and evaluations of such therapy. It also enabled children's feedback about the methods used to engage them in research.

The study focused on the psychotherapy interventions offered to children by a team of psychotherapists from different modalities, working in a residential alternative care setting in Malta. The study also included including the perspectives of adults involved or related to the service. Thus I could analyse the similarities and differences between children's and adults' views of psychotherapy.

In designing the study I also involved a children's reference group. In this group I consulted children about the research aims and design. Fifteen children, who were attending, or had attended therapy, consented to participate. Within the actual study I collected data with children through a flexible, multiple method approach where children were offered a choice regarding how they wished to express their views.

Findings convey children's views regarding engagement, expression, change and power dynamics, and communicate children's needs and priorities which were absent from adults' understandings. They challenge adult-determined psychotherapy beliefs and practices. The findings can also be used to inform the development of psychotherapy services within the setting. This study contributes to knowledge about children in therapy as active agents and rights holders. It communicates the opportunities revealed by such an approach within research. It also offers critical insights into the development of data collection tools and proposes a relational, interactional and multi-layered conceptualisation of children's voices.

The impact of this study has been brought about by disseminating its outputs through publications in peer-reviewed journals, presentations to professionals, and through the co-authoring of the book *Child agency and voice in therapy: New ways of working in the arts therapies* (Jones et al., 2020).