

# Talking Trauma: Intervention for Maltreatment



Author: **Maria Chiara Grech**


*'I think we often look at maltreatment as this huge, untameable beast that's out of our control' (**Estelle Zahra**). The maltreatment of children is an issue that everyone agrees should be prevented at all costs. Yet despite, or indeed because of, this importance, collecting the data and putting structures in place for actual, long-lasting solutions is challenging. In this article, **THINK** converses with a Ph.D. researcher who is actively doing just that.*

**E**stelle Zahra is no stranger to working with children with communication issues, having worked as a speech pathologist in various private and public sectors, including state schools. At UM, her ongoing study is being done thanks to a scholarship granted by Hill Ventures Group through RIDT. Zahra is supervised by Prof. Daniela Gatt from UM's Department of Human Communication Sciences & Disorders and co-supervised by Prof. Judy Clegg from the University of Sheffield. Zahra's previous academic achievements include a Master's Degree in Language and Communication, which she

obtained through a dissertation that looked into the connections between language and movement. Zahra recalls thoroughly enjoying investigating this subject but says her Ph.D. research 'is fuelled by something completely different.' The study itself focuses on the language development of Maltese bilingual 5–8-year-olds with a history of maltreatment issues.

### **FALLING HEADFIRST INTO THE LITERATURE GAP**

When asked about what exactly fuelled this somewhat drastic change, Zahra shares a personal story: 'In December 2020, shortly after my husband and I were married, we found

ourselves meeting a social worker at Aġenzija Appoġġ, both keen to learn more about fostering. It was something we both wanted to do, and we were just looking for more information. A month later, we were sitting in on training sessions, and after that, we had social workers visiting our house. We ended up with a four- and a five-year-old living with us. I couldn't help but notice that there were patterns – linguistic errors – which I had never really seen in the clinic. I found myself thinking about the tools we use to assess kids in the clinic and knew, deep down, that if I were to suggest that a colleague assess them using these tools, their score wouldn't be indicative of 



**Estelle Zahra**  
*Photo by Angela 'Giola' Cassar*

speech and language intervention. And yet, they were still struggling to communicate basic narratives.'

During this time, Zahra also recalls thinking back to her university days and how, in the few times the topic of language development in children with maltreatment histories came up, 'it was always spoken about in the context of neglect: that in any neglectful situation, one would expect that language exposure would be limited or inadequate, and once they are in a setting where language exposure is adequate, we should eventually expect to see them "catch up". We never really spoke about the actual effect of the maltreatment itself; it was always like this kind of "catching up" exercise.'

This led Zahra to discover that maltreatment in relation to language development was being discussed in academia, but there were a lot of questions that remained

unanswered. Seeing that the issue had very much become a part of her life, she decided to try to answer them herself.

### **THE QUESTIONS THAT NEED ANSWERING**

Since the majority of research in this area revolves around preschool age or adolescence and early adulthood, Zahra chose to focus on the specific age range of 5–8-year-olds. A point of interest for Zahra was the narratives in the various studies she read. She recalls, 'As I was reading more research, often children with a history of maltreatment either find themselves with a social worker who's carrying out some sort of investigation or, in worse circumstances, in adolescents when things would have already gone south.' Zahra further elaborates that these investigations would often be done to decide whether child protective services needed to

be involved or, even in the situation of adolescent studies, whether or not there needed to be incarceration during investigations following alleged delinquent behaviours.

Zahra's investigation aims to look at linguistic profiles that may or may not present specifically at 5–8 years of age and to propose a working model that will facilitate collaborative practices in the child's best interests. For more accurate results in such an under-researched area, Zahra intends to have a comparison group of children with no history of maltreatment, 'to compare not necessarily performance, but linguistic profiles: what kind of grammar they use, what kind of errors they're making, how long their narratives are, how their narratives are structured, so on and so forth'.

Part of the reason why gathering data around this subject is so complicated is that there is no clear



reason why maltreatment affects language development. 'Every child reacts differently to maltreatment – same event, completely different response. There is also evidence for a neurological component. When someone goes through a stressful situation, they release stress hormones. In typical contexts, a person is able to regulate these emotions, and the stress hormones stop being released. But in the event that an adverse situation is somewhat chronic or extended, the stress hormones are going to be fired for a longer period of time to the point where the brain learns that this is the way it needs to function. This, in turn, can have a neurotoxic effect on the brain, quite literally changing the structures it's developing. But unless you're mapping out the brain neurologically, it would be difficult to account for these factors with clear certainty.'

Zahra also considers Malta's bilingual context, analysing the effect of maltreatment on both the Maltese and English languages. Although her research so far is preliminary, Zahra has already observed that the effect of maltreatment may be greater on the child's second language.

### **THE DREAM**

Her study looks into what Maltese professionals in the area of language development understand by the idea of trauma-informed practice, and whether or not it is being used. Zahra's primary aim lies beyond simply helping these children 'keep up' with their peers in terms of academic milestones: 'It is an idea we are letting go of, and instead, we're moving toward a reality with more neurodivergent acceptance, where these children can be seen as individuals rather than "what they should be".'

The final and most important point in her study is that in all maltreatment cases, 'early intervention is key.' In fact, in a lot of cases, by the time child protective services are called, most of the damage has already been done, and in those cases where language difficulties have persisted into adolescence without adequate support, the children are more likely to fall into the 'school-to-prison pipeline'. Zahra concludes with, 'The implications are massive. The sooner a number of professionals are involved, the earlier we can see the signs and prevent harm from happening. That's the dream I guess.'

And what a dream it is! As a fellow student, I would like to thank Estelle Zahra. Allowing one's academic journey to have an influence on one's personal life and vice versa is not a boundary everyone is willing to cross, especially not on such a delicate subject. 