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# Sowing the Seeds of Commons in Education: Three Case Studies from the Horizon Project 2020 SMOOTH

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how educational commons, in which education and learning are shaped by the members of the educational community in terms of equality, freedom, and creative participation, contribute to addressing inequalities, empowering democracy, and enhancing inclusion. The discussion focuses on the crucial debate around public formal education and the potential for radical democratisation it offers through three case studies carried out in formal and non-formal educational settings in Thessaloniki, Greece. The research was conducted in three different types of education centres: a public kindergarten, a self-organised autonomous libertarian educational community, and an after-school programme of a primary school where Workshops for Nurturing and Developing Environmental Resilience (WONDER) were implemented by the environmental organisation Mamagea. Through patterns of commoning practices, like peer governance, co-creation of knowledge, and peer learning, the case studies aimed to establish the prerequisites for the co-creation of a community that offers pupils and students, teachers, and educators the chance for self-formation and equal participation. The article makes the case that educational hierarchies and governance models can be reconfigured in order to incorporate the democratic values of solidarity, equality, self-organisation, and self-formation even in structures that are still tailored to formal schooling. The article argues that educational commons can make a decisive contribution to tackling inequalities, and the commons logic can grow effectively in school education under specific conditions. The pedagogical practice is shifted in educational commons in ways that balance out contemporary enclosures based on several inequalities.

**Keywords:** education; commons; inequalities; childhood; educational commons; school education



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## 1. Introduction

The paper presents the results of three action research studies carried out in Greece and discusses them in relation to the literature on educational commons. The present study is part of the EU-funded research project SMOOTH (Horizon 2020, available online: <https://smooth-ecs.eu/> (accessed on 1 June 2023), which introduces the emergent paradigm of the “commons” in the field of education. The project proposes an innovative action research programme to reverse inequalities; strengthen intercultural and intergenerational dialogue and social inclusion; develop vital social and personal skills for children and adults; create smooth spaces of democratic citizenship and experimentation with new ways of thinking and doing on the basis of equality, collaboration, collective creativity, sharing, and caring; and build and foster community through differences.

Despite the undeniable fact that education is a key institution of society with a central role in shaping our reality, it has not been the subject of systematic empirical study until recently by theorists of the commons. Apart from a few empirical studies (Cappello and Siino 2023; Kioupkoulis 2023; Pechtelidis 2018; Pechtelidis and Kioupkoulis 2020; Pechtelidis et al. 2023), most of the theoretical approaches concerning the commons in education lack empirical evidence. It is precisely this deficit in empirical data on common practices in

education that was a key motivation for conducting this research in formal and non-formal education settings. Specifically, from 2021 onwards, in the context of the SMOOTH project, research has been carried out in several European countries to study whether and how educational commons can reverse inequalities. In particular, around fifty case studies have been implemented in formal and non-formal education settings in eight different countries (Greece, Belgium, Estonia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). The case studies are planned to be experimental, open, and contingent, and designed according to the logic and ethics of the commons.

The term “commons” is used to describe dynamic social, economic, political, and cultural systems that grow around nature and the outcomes of social labour, such as codes, networks, information, and knowledge, which are organised as shared resources through the direct participation and collaboration of citizens (Hardt and Negri 2012, pp. 69–80; Ostrom 1990). Those who follow the commons’ logic, the commoners, want to build a social network of cohesion, solidarity, communication, sharing, and interdependence that binds all members of a community on an equal footing.

Since it can serve as a stimulus for social change and subjective transformation, education assumes special significance in this context. In fact, research on “educational commons” in schools, where teaching and learning are formed by the educational community on the basis of equity and participation, is currently gaining traction (Burton 2022; De Lissovoy 2011; Kioupkiolis 2023; Locatelli 2019; Means et al. 2017; Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis 2020; Pechtelidis 2023; Pechtelidis et al. 2023).

Educational commons is a loose term, and the different elements suggested under this umbrella do not occur in every case. Characteristic mixtures vary from context to context. It is an umbrella concept used to label a shift from a traditional education (learning and teaching) approach promoting hierarchy, top-down discipline, competition, and individual work to a commons-oriented education characterised by the use of sharing, caring, cooperation, and experimental learning practices arranged from below and democratic styles of administration.

Educational commons refer to communities where decisions about the educational process are taken collectively with equal participation by the three groups of teachers/educators, learners, and their guardians (when they are underage). The very practice of education and learning becomes a common good or resource that is collectively shaped and managed by the members of the educational community in terms of equality, freedom, and active and creative participation.

In the educational commons, adults and children communicate and collaborate beyond the conventional age and learning divisions and hierarchies in a process of collective inquiry and learning that is resourceful, critical, and ongoing. In the educational commons, teachers or educators become “fellow companions” who facilitate and support, rather than guide with instructions, the educational process, in which children are largely self-acting, creating individuality, and cooperating with each other (Pechtelidis 2020; Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis 2020).

Through the implementation of the case studies in the educational field, we sought to make a shift to the commons. The purpose of this shift is to explore whether the ontology of the commons is more inclusive and beneficial for the individuals involved, in the sense that it promotes equal freedom for all in the here and now (Bollier and Helfrich 2019).

Specifically, the research questions raised in the three case studies in this paper are as follows:

- Can educational commons address inequalities?
- In what ways can educational commons contribute to addressing inequalities?
- Can school education be rearranged on the basis of the logic of the commons, and if so, to what extent?
- Can democratic empowerment be actualised through the educational commons?

The major objective is to investigate if the commons’ logic can be effectively developed in formal and non-formal educational fields and help combat inequality. Whether school

education can be refigured on a commons' footing or not. Additionally, to demonstrate the unique lived experience of the participants (the commoners). In doing so, we present current knowledge on how alternative children's subjectivities and citizenship come into existence, as well as descriptions of rituals, practices, and mentalities created within these alternative educational social spaces. We look at whether people relate in a new way to other people and evolve into different roles and perspectives, more specifically into commoners. The challenge is to transform and adapt institutions so that they can support human empowerment and conviviality (Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Especially, the process of being a commoner is deeply connected to the concept of empowerment. Empowerment refers mostly to the processes by which a student acquires or strengthens the necessary resources that will enable personal or collective decisions, critical thinking, and the feeling of personal growth (Dolničar and Fortunati 2014).

All of these actions were considered to be micro-heteropolitical endeavours to create accessible, democratic education places for being and becoming (Pechtelidis and Kioupiolis 2020). In the paragraphs that follow, we shall argue that the three case studies, the results of which will be presented below, are examples of a "smooth" institution since they do not only undermine traditional social divisions and hierarchies but also spark radical democratic transformation in subtle, non-doctrinaire, and non-directive ways.

Particularly in the three case studies presented below, we examine the commoning practices at two interrelated levels: (a) decision-making processes (peer governance) and (b) learning processes (co-creation of knowledge and peer learning). The core intention of these practices was to question inequalities such as adultism, strengthen children's rights, and create participatory democratic learning environments in which children can negotiate their identities in a safe space and realise the active role they can play in shaping their identities and the surrounding environment.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The way the case studies were developed can be broken down into four different phases: (a) designing the pedagogical project; (b) implementing the project (action); (c) evaluating the project; and (d) reflecting on the project. Additionally, at a preliminary stage of the research, meetings between the teachers, educators, and researchers preceded the design of the pedagogical project, with frequent feedback and communication between them. Many of them participated in some training events for the SMOOTH project. In all three case studies, the researchers met with a reference group consisting of experts, activists, and artists once every fifteen days to discuss issues and questions that arose during the fieldwork. The researchers received feedback and new ideas from the reference group members, which were tested in the field. The composition of the reference group was relatively stable.

All three case studies of the SMOOTH project were implemented in Thessaloniki, Greece, from March to June 2022:

(a) Action research (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) was carried out in two classes of a public kindergarten in the metropolitan area of eastern Thessaloniki. The kindergarten consists of two spacious classrooms hosting nineteen (19) and twenty (20) children each, aged 4–6 years old. It also has a large joint interior space and a front green yard with playground toys. There are two main preschool teachers from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and another two from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m., plus an English teacher who visits the preschool twice a week. The frequency of interventions was two days per week from March to June 2022. The main objective of this case study was to bring preschool children in touch with some values of the commons, such as cooperation, caring, sharing, and equal participation, to create an open participatory space of free expression and co-decision, and to explore the dynamics of educational commons in dealing with inequalities.

The methods used were group games, aimed at promoting collaboration and co-decision, and more specifically, imaginary improvisation and problem-solving scenarios through group collaboration; group painting through co-decision; collaboration through

music and musical instruments; collaborative construction in groups; collaborative composition of imaginary stories and narration; collaborative selection of their own photos; and the creation of collages of moments of collaboration in the classroom. Beyond the collaborative activities, contact games, activation songs, trust games, breathing, and balance poses borrowed from kids' yoga were used to energise and bond children as a group. The types of qualitative data collected concerned both whether children collaborated and/or shared roles with each other and how this was made possible. On top of this, an open framework of dynamic rulemaking was promoted throughout the project between researchers and children.

Finally, Active Listening and Conflict Resolution (Blank and Schneider 2011; Gordon 2003) practices, adapted to the ages of children, were conducted, aiming at distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, recognising that some behaviours may be (un)acceptable for some and not for others. Simple descriptive behaviours were distinguished from behaviours with elements of personal judgement, active listening exercises (Active Listening), recognition of emotions, cultivating empathy, reaction exercises to unacceptable behaviours, and experiential pantomimes (bullying management through I-Messages such as, for example, "When you shout at me, I feel afraid").

(b) Another case study was carried out in a self-organised autonomous educational community named "The Little Tree that will become a forest. Institute for theory and practice of a libertarian education" (hereinafter Little Tree). The main goal of this study was to explore the ways and processes in which preschool children in a libertarian context of the commons co-shape educational practice and co-create knowledge. The foundation of the institute was a result of the needs and desires of several parents/guardians and educators/companions for an alternative way of education, which emerges out of respect for the autonomy of each child and their personal pace and has been developed through the experience of direct-democratic decision-making processes, peer learning, solidarity, and participation in collective life. During the research period, the Little Tree consisted of a group of three educators and a group of fifteen (15) children from 1.5 to 5 years old.

During the implementation of the study, the Reggio Emilia School's methodology of pedagogical documentation was used (Dahlberg et al. 1999). Rich material was collected from a variety of sources, such as handwritten notes by the researcher, the educators/companions, and the children about what was said and done, recordings and videos of the morning routine, photographs, and the children's artwork. In this methodology, the documented material was used as a means of reflection for all participants in the pedagogical process in a rigorous, methodical, and democratic manner. This study was mainly about trying to make visible and understandable the real pedagogical process and what the child can do beyond predetermined expectations and rules.

Therefore, a reflection space was created where those involved enhanced their understanding of how children learn and produce meaning and how the concept of the "child" is built through the actions of the educators. The material collected was preserved as a living record of pedagogical practice. Hence, pedagogical documentation functions as a way of revisiting past experiences and creating new interpretations and reconstructions of what happened in the past (ibid.). Researchers and educators draw on documented experiences and simultaneously take part in articulating new theories about children's learning and knowledge co-construction based on evidence.

In this methodological framework, pedagogical documentation is not perceived as the description of a universal and objective social reality but as a process of co-construction embedded in specific spatio-temporal situations. Pedagogical documentation, therefore, acts as a tool for creating a critical and reflective practice that will challenge dominant discourses and provide alternative discourses that are ethically acceptable and aesthetically pleasing to the person(s) involved (Stedman 1991).

(c) The WONDER Schools project was applied to a mixed group of thirteen (13) students and their parents/guardians in a primary school in the centre of Thessaloniki. Particularly, it was conducted in fourteen weekly afternoon workshops, using the indoor

and outdoor spaces of the school. The group of participants consisted of eleven (11) girls and two (2) boys, and their parents comprised ten (10) female mothers and three (3) male fathers. WONDER (Workshops for Nurturing and Developing Environmental Resilience) is an environmental educational programme tailored for children, parents, and teachers of the environmental organisation Mamagea to cultivate and enhance environmental education. The workshops were animated by members of “Mamagea”, two teachers, and two forester-environmentalists, and actively observed by a researcher from the SMOOTH project. All members of the case study put together elements of educational commons and innovative practices about environmental education during the design period of the pedagogical plan. “Peer governance” and challenging “adultism” were at the core of this plan, which developed upon the participatory planning of the school yard.

The focus of the study was on (a) raising awareness on critical environmental issues, active citizenship, circular economy, natural and urban environment, and sustainable urban culture; and (b) engaging participants in the participatory design of the schoolyard. The methods used were (1) participatory observation and (2) a focus group with members of Mamagea. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

The SMOOTH case studies aimed to create the conditions for the co-creation of a community that gives children, pupils/students, and adults, teachers/educators, the opportunity for self-formation and participation through the patterns of commoning practices, such as peer governance, co-creation of knowledge, and peer learning.

### *2.1. Peer Governance*

Through peer governance, people make decisions, establish boundaries, uphold rules, take responsibilities, and resolve conflicts on an equal basis. Peers are people who have equal power with other groups or network members. Despite their different personalities, they view each other as having the same rights and capabilities to participate in a joint effort and to decide how it should go (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, p. 85). “Peer governance is open-ended” (ibid., p. 123); its implementation and properties cannot be fully predicted or stated in advance. The pattern of “peer governance” needs to be a dynamic, ongoing process in and of itself. Thus, the commons’ patterns do not supply a complete set of prescriptive formulas; instead, they offer procedural guidelines that enable a gradual, adaptable path for building a common (ibid., p. 122). There is no predetermined plan of action for building the commons; however, peer governance is a reliable means by which pupils/students, teachers/educators, and parents/guardians can build authentic relationships with each other, thereby developing a coherent form of commons.

In the analysis section below, we will see how this pattern was applied in the three case studies, what forms it took, and how it contributed to the development of the logic of the commons in different educational spaces.

### *2.2. Co-Creation of Knowledge and Peer Learning*

In our cases, the co-creation of knowledge is about how the children collectively create new content. This practice can have a theoretical and practical impact on the act of commoning since it promotes horizontal ways of organising, sharing, co-management, and collective knowledge creation. In such a process of co-creation, the teacher/educator and the children do not aim at a predetermined outcome designed for them, but rather at the knowledge that is produced by them (Pechtelidis et al. 2023).

In educational commons, this practice is often articulated with peer learning, where children work together, help each other, and use knowledge and skills to teach other children, learning themselves at the same time. Peer learning can be seen not only as a way of facilitating the process of the co-construction of knowledge but also as a way of co-learning without direct teacher intervention.

Commoning practices concerned with governance and learning are pedagogical and political practices that do not allow the transformation of power into domination. Domination refers to fixed mechanisms by which some people manipulate the behaviour of others

consistently and with certainty. It is an oppressive ethic that produces enclosures as it normalises childhood and adulthood based on specific norms of governance and guidance towards predetermined political and economic goals. Educational commons undermine a state of domination through the commoning practices that will be described below, in which children form their own practices of freedom. Through these practices, children curate themselves and actively shape their thinking and behaviour in collaboration so that power relations do not turn into domination relations, remaining flexible and amenable to challenges and change. It is a particular way of relating to oneself, others, and the environment that results in undermining the external governance of oneself. In other words, it is an alternative micropolitics of the self in which one seeks to develop and transform oneself in order to counter and control the effects of being subject to power (Foucault 2000, p. 282).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Public Kindergarten

The researchers, through the articulation of a variety of art-based techniques (drama games, music-kinetic games, storytelling) with some active learning techniques (think—pair-share, mix-freeze-group, role playing), tried to reduce or even eliminate inequalities in both classes. Following the ontology of educational commons, they focused on creating a network of collaboration, dialogue, sharing, and interdependence, with the researchers and children actively participating in its co-shaping and maintenance.

The pupils differed mainly at the level of cultural capital with regard to language expression and behaviour. The distinction of children at the level of cultural capital means that some of them coming to school were already equipped with fluency skills, possessing more processed (adult) speech and more general knowledge than the rest of the children. In this way, they prevailed in comprehension and reflection questions, where speech played an important role. This specific inequality was addressed through the “think-pair-share” method (Kaddoura 2013), designed to mitigate the phenomenon of the same children answering repeatedly in the classroom, which had been observed in both classes of the kindergarten. The result was that many of the children, who initially did not speak at all, acquired a voice in the plenary.

Additionally, gender differences were observed in terms of how children cooperated in the activities. Specifically, girls showed greater attachment to the same sex and a stronger need to share activities with a close friend. Boys expressed this desire less often and less strongly, although in some cases they refused to cooperate with the other sex as well. When this was not the case, they usually refused to participate or participated completely passively and indifferently. On the other hand, boys expressed this desire less often and less strongly, showing greater ease of adjustment to sharing an activity with a girl. The formation of fixed pairs or groups was also prevented by the researchers through the “mix-freeze-group” game method. The emphasis was also placed on the better acquaintance and communication of all the children among themselves, in addition to group cooperative games.

Regarding adultism, this was perceived through the reinforced role of teachers and the inability of children to make decisions and assume responsibilities. By challenging prevailing beliefs and ideas about children’s poor political capacity and promoting their right to participate in public life on their own terms, from the beginning, all the rules suggested by the children were listened to and recorded, with the children voting for the most important ones. With the aim of mitigating the inequality of adultism, the researchers encouraged the children, when they saw a violation of the rules they had set as a group, to remind each other to follow the rule instead of the researchers doing it themselves. There were times the children intervened to keep the classroom rules in order, thus showing active action and recognition of the practice of keeping the classroom quiet as a shared responsibility. They also self-managed the common space of the classroom by co-deciding on how it would be used, felt free to discuss in plenary issues that concerned them, reflected on each action, and showed enhanced participation in the discussions of the class,

answering first in pairs with each other and then with the researchers (as a strategy to support and empower the less talkative children).

The following example shows how children were encouraged to take the initiative in the classroom by strengthening horizontal relationships and the feeling of caring:

When A1 lost a game, he frowned furiously. When A1 was upset, the children and teachers had grown accustomed to his outbursts. We decided to cope with it by assigning responsibility for what was going on in the classroom to all of the students. We addressed the other children after we spoke to him, and he did not respond. "A1 appears to be bothered by something. What do you think we should do?", we inquired. L1 instantly stood up and said that since he will not talk to us, we cannot do anything but leave him alone. However, we persisted and asked the other children, who ordinarily would not speak up like L1, to demonstrate that we valued everyone's viewpoint. Then some children offered that we tell him jokes, and one by one, they all eagerly agreed with this suggestion. Even L1 had a change of mind. A1 first made embarrassed gestures in response. "A1 do you see all the children, all your friends, how much they love you and think of you by trying to help you?" we asked him. They all show you how much they care. We agreed to give him some time and moved on because he appeared numb from the unexpected outpouring of love and support. He joined in and played the following activity game after finding his mood.

In order to strengthen the concepts of cooperation, sharing, and horizontal relationships, we asked the children to explain what they believe facilitates cooperation in the group drawings we completed. They eagerly and with delight shared their knowledge with the others. If they wish to create distinct drawings, D1 replied that "they should combine them even if they don't really match." "They should say what they both think and if their ideas don't align, suggest something else", C1 said. "It's important to be quiet", A2 said. The children spoke out and offered their suggestions for how to improve teamwork.

Furthermore, it was observed that the behaviour "I assign my problems to an adult", which was very common before the interventions, in a very short period of time turned into "I handle my problems by taking responsibility" by several children. An important indicator was the obvious difference between the children who were absent from the interventions and those who were present and participated. When some children appeared for the first time after several interventions had taken place, they faced difficulties in adapting to the collaborative framework created by the group; this was in contrast to the rest of the children who regularly participated in the activities and seemed familiar with the practices and values of the educational commons.

According to the results of the research, in all the activities, the children participated with joy and great interest, resulting in inclusion, even for children who were initially observed to be on the margins. In particular, a child who initially lacked confidence and was reluctant to speak in front of the class—with just one other shy friend—made a reversal of attitude. In the plenary, she started to interact practically on an equal footing with the talkative girl. She also improved her standing among the boys and girls by taking more initiative during free play.

Through the implementation of the pedagogical project, equal participation and inclusion of all children were achieved, regardless of the abovementioned inequalities of gender and cultural capital. It was even observed that the children who did not participate enough (if not at all) in terms of the use of oral language during the first interventions gradually became more and more active and present. For instance, after our interventions, children whose voices had not been heard during plenary discussions started to raise their hands and express their opinions, demonstrating a desire to participate. The kindergarten teachers also reported that many children improved their friendships as a result of the initiatives. They specifically noted a pair of boys who grew closer and astonished them. These boys continued to utilise the collaborative drawing method after the interventions on a regular basis, showing that they seemed to enjoy it a lot. The teachers also observed that they were "more talkative with each other while having a lot of fun drawing together"

as a result of this approach. We believe that the everyday practice of co-decision was the primary factor in this shift from a passive to an active and participatory state. As a result, the children felt empowered, and their opinions mattered. The commons' activities and games encouraged interaction between group members, enhancing the safe environment that horizontal relationships made the school environment into. The main reason for this transformation from being passive to being more active and participative was the children's interest in team games and their active pairing with the other members of the group.

The limitations of the research concern the limited duration of the intervention. In order to build a solid relationship of trust with the children, more time investment is needed. In addition, the time constraint was the main reason why the interventions focused mainly on the value of collaboration. Nevertheless, at several points, the other common values, such as caring, sharing, and equal participation, were present, proving how strongly all the common values are interconnected.

### 3.2. *Little Tree*

By investigating how children co-construct knowledge in autonomous learning groups and observing children's sayings and doings, we noticed that the children's learning interests extended far beyond the contents of the formal preschool curriculum. In these groups, children tended to work on a variety of subjects, such as the lives of animals and plants living in the field, the functions of the human body, the names of the genitals, sex and gender roles, the decision-making processes, love affairs, friendship, and many other subjects. In an environment that offers freedom of movement, safety, and a wealth of stimuli, we observed that children form small groups, with or without the presence of an adult, in which they are preoccupied with all the abovementioned issues. Children can do this either by putting together the information they already possess, seeking new information (using the adult as a source of information in some cases), or creating knowledge through symbolic play and artistic expression.

The role of the adult in this process is to help children gather the information they already know, to create new questions, to suggest ways of exploring these questions and searching for sources, and finally to provide the information they know about the topic.

Many times, autonomously learning groups can work on a topic by bringing it to the children's assembly, where they have the opportunity—either the children or the adults—to suggest a visit to a place that allows further work on the issue in an experiential way. During the study, this had taken place twice with visits to a former military camp in Thessaloniki, where the community of the Little Tree had the opportunity to observe various vehicles working on a construction site, as well as to a train museum within the camp where the children and the adults boarded old waggons and saw the evolution of trains over the years. These two excursions arose from the children's interest in trucks and trains. After each excursion, the members of the community returned to the children's assembly, where the children and their companions reflected on the implementation of the assembly decision. The children had as much time as they needed to take the floor and share their experiences and impressions of the excursion. The children's assembly as a form of peer governance is the epicentre of this educational community, and the "curriculum" is an open work on progress co-shaped by the group members (the commoners).

Another important issue that emerged during the research was the way children handled conflicts that had been emerging among them. In the setting of the Little Tree, the adult companions try to explore together with the children the values of solidarity, mutual help, and non-violent communication. In this context, the adults share communication tools with the children by suggesting the different ways in which they can ask for what they want, express their feelings, or set their limits. Through the pedagogical documentation, it is observed that children not only use these tools in a functional and effective way, but they also invent others on their own. What is more, some children play the role of a mediator-facilitator in order to help other children resolve a conflict. In many cases, the

conflict is not resolved immediately, and so it is important to trust the children and give them the time to express what they really want and feel.

Finally, the participation of younger children in these processes attracted our research interest. We investigated whether and how two-year-old children, who do not yet share the tool of speech with others, participate in autonomous learning groups and in the conflict resolution process. What emerged from the research process is that these children participate in these processes in a variety of ways.

During a field trip to a construction site, children from two to four years old created a participatory learning group. In the area where the community gathered, there was a hand-operated concrete mixer. Child (C hereinafter) 2 put stones into the concrete mixer together with C5 and C3. They collected stones and threw them in. They also put in grass. C8 came in, and C2 showed them the steering wheel of the cement mixer. C5 started to turn the steering wheel, and C2 told them that they would do it together. The companions opened a discussion about the steering wheel of the cement mixer and other vehicles, which caught the children's attention for days.

In an environment that allows freedom of movement, we often observe these young children participating for as long as they can in the various groups that are formed by older children and then leaving or often observing from a distance and engaging in their own, often non-verbal, embodied ways. They also usually enrich their vocabulary with new words around the issues the educators are working on. The young children try to repeat these words, even the more difficult ones, such as "earthworm".

### 3.3. Wonder School

Through the analysis of the material, several themes have emerged. In this paper, we focus on the theme "Designing together with children and promoting community building".

This theme is mainly concerned with the analysis of the participatory planning projects made by both the children and their parents/guardians. Participatory planning with children has been studied for several years. It was explored by [Druin \(1999\)](#), who highlighted the importance of collaboration in designing places between children and adults. Participatory approaches in education have also grown in significance since the emergence of trends such as "student voice" research in the 2000s ([Cumbo and Selwyn 2022](#)). Modern research highlights many roles that children can take on during the participatory design process, such as testers, informants, users, and design partners ([Smith and Iversen 2018](#)).

The three main levels of participatory planning (information, co-planning, and co-decision) allow user involvement in all stages of the architectural/educational project, from planning to the final formulation of the developmental process of the plan. Participation not only transforms the collaboration of the expert with the users into continuous and mutual learning but also becomes an organic process that aims to strengthen the sense of place and community ([Cumbo and Selwyn 2022](#)).

In this case study, we investigated the participants' perspectives on how they would like their schoolyard to be. Through the participatory design workshops, the participants' need for change in the schoolyard became visible. Some elements that the participants focused on were (a) green areas in the yard (flower beds, grass), (b) safe ground with different materials instead of concrete to avoid injuries, and (c) multi-use spaces, whether this is for games, sports, learning, study, or relaxation. According to children's explanations, the green spaces in their drawings do not only mean a concrete-free yard but also a safe floor.

Through the workshops, strong relationships among teachers, educators, researchers, parents/guardians, and children were built.

Parent 4: We share the same values and environmental concerns and after too many meetings we feel familiar with each other. We began to hang out after the workshop. It is important for us and for our children," Child 2: Today we had a very useful experience (a visit in an ecological farm) I want to spend more time with (all of) you.

Some elements of building a community were evident during the participatory design period, such as solidarity, care, and the smooth inclusion of the new members. In general, there was enthusiasm whenever the responsibility was passed on to the children.

Child 7: It is my turn to coordinate the assembly, I was waiting for this time. Teacher 1: Who will bring recycled cups for the next time? Child 5: May I handle it myself? Me, my mother will forget it!

In the participatory design workshop, old and new members worked together. In the beginning, the new members were hesitant to take initiative and had difficulty working independently. However, the old members (children) took the initiative to help the new ones.

Child 1: It's simple, just go in front of the school board and start presenting, no need to feel shame here.

In the participatory design process of the school yard, the participants co-shaped their ideas about the school space and moved away from the logic of "education for knowledge" to the logic of "education for action". This is a phenomenon observed in several other studies in which people's purposes were shared (see [Ledwith 2021](#)). Even in the context of participatory planning, in many cases, the role of children is limited and guided by adults ([Smith and Iversen 2018](#)). Taking this into account, in our case, the educators tried not to impose their views on the other members of the group but were there to facilitate the dialogue and contribute with their own knowledge and experience.

In contrast to conventional design methods (top-down approaches), where the involved parties are usually the designer (active role) and the client (passive role), in the participatory planning (bottom-up approaches) process of the study, the users are actively engaged in it. The result of this participatory planning was a more immediate and in-depth appropriation of a space by users, as it promoted respect and awareness for the protection and preservation of the place ([Chatzinakos 2017](#)). On the whole, it provides opportunities for them to perceive and experience space and knowledge as a whole.

#### 4. Discussion

In the literature on educational commons, there is a debate about the role of the school. On the one hand, there are those scholars who argue that the commoning of education is only possible outside and beyond the school institution, while on the other hand, others claim that the logic of commons can also develop and gain ground in public school education institutions.

The former usually refer to libertarian educational communities or learning networks and platforms, which are in some ways related to the logic of deschooling and exopedagogy, advocating a new horizontal politics of education that is formed in the common space of the crowd outside of a formal institutional framework ([Collet-Sabé and Ball 2022](#); [Lewis 2012](#)).

However, while this approach that views institutional structures of education as unfair, oppressive, and disciplinary is understandable and, to a significant extent, acceptable, the formal school educational field is more complex, contradictory, antagonistic, and has potential that can be harnessed and modified to promote progressive and emancipatory goals ([Apple 1995, 2012](#); [Biesta 2011](#); [Bourassa 2017](#); [Korsgaard 2018](#); [Means et al. 2017](#), p. 12; [Pechtelidis 2020](#)). [Pechtelidis \(2020, pp. 70–84\)](#) claims that the official school education system is "triadic." Along with "supple" neoliberal enclosures of competition and individualism, disciplinary components of a "rigid" enclosure that enforce hierarchy, segregation, bureaucracy, and authoritarian adultism are integrated, while a "smooth" institution of democratic commons somewhat unsettles this hegemonic order.

Yet, these three forms do not share the same strength and gravity. Regarding the rigid shape, we may state that formal education is a social control institution that produces a sort of violence that originates from the institutional hierarchical structure of the classroom. The stiff, striated, and therefore apparent kind of confinement of the social and pedagogical life of the school, known as structural violence, tries to subjugate and control the people who engage in it. The strict and striated organization and meticulous planning of the

educational process and content are results of the rigid disciplinary lines of enclosure that faithfully adhere to the orthodox dominant way of thinking about childhood, such as the one produced by theories about the predetermined development of children. This conservative form of enclosure was developed mainly in modernity but still has a strong presence and coexistence in formal education with neoliberal forms of enclosure, such as supple lines of thought and practice that give more choice to children and adults, but to the extent that they serve the predetermined goals of the state and the market.

In particular, in the current social context, a new postmodern discourse has begun to develop and enter dynamically into the field of education, which promotes the image of the autonomous, capable, and flexible child, who is independent, can solve problems, and is responsible for their learning path through self-reflection. This child is supposed to have a natural desire and ability to learn and is encouraged to ask questions, solve problems, and seek answers. Hence, it differs from the model of the individually and naturally developing child of modernity since the goal is no longer to reveal the true essence of the child with the help of developmental psychology (Dahlberg 2003). However, the current social changes reflected in this image of the “capable child” should not lead us to the conclusion that governance is diminishing, but that it is another form of governance. The “supple”, invisible pedagogy associated with this new form of governance is not only aimed at the discipline and regulation of the child’s body and spirit but also at penetrating the most intimate and inner desires of the child so that the children themselves voluntarily want to learn and adapt to the new logic of continuous learning through individualistic and flexible ways of solving problems. Children’s abilities are assessed now with reference to a new predetermined and objectified set of goals and specifications. The child is no longer compared and evaluated only with reference to the developmental scheme imposed by developmental psychology but also with what is considered “ability” at the local and global level by the state and the capitalist market and includes various gradations of autonomous and flexible behaviour. Neoliberal logics impose two enclosure patterns on education: (a) turn education into a marketable good and a means of profit; and (b) use education to produce submissive, indebted, and “entrepreneurial” individuals who pursue “lifelong learning” and the assembly of credentials (Means et al. 2017, p. 3; see also Kiouпкиolis 2023, p. 2).

Both these conservative and neoliberal forms of enclosure of formal education, rigid and supple, are drawn from a fixed starting point to a predetermined end, and in this sense, social control is necessary to safeguard the borders, visible and invisible, and by extension, the hegemonic order. The enclosures, however, create the anticipation of their own crossing and the hope for the transition to alternative, more open realities. The desire to escape from this suffocating and predictable situation is triggered.

In between and in contrast to the logic of rigid and supple enclosures, the democratic logic of the commons is developed. According to the commons’ logic, education is seen not only as a vital source for the well-being, prosperity, and self-development of people but also as a basic tool of less governance and self-formation for both children and adults. This distinguishes commons-based education from conventional education, which tends to be disciplinary and in the service of the accumulation of private capital, promoting subordination, competition, and individualism. Educational commons shift common sense into directions that counterbalance contemporary forms of enclosures related to class, race, nation, religion, age, sexuality, and gender.

The commoning of education is often developed beyond the formal education system in small-scale libertarian communities of non-formal systems, but the logic of the commons can be developed and gain ground in public formal education as well. The libertarian educational commons are in a way relevant to the logic of “deschooling” and “exopedagogy”, which supports a horizontal policy in education beyond the formal institutional framework (Lewis 2012). Although this argument that considers the institutional structures of formal education to be unfair, unequal, oppressive, disciplinary, and illiberal to a large extent is correct, it does not recognise that the formal educational field is more complex,

contradictory, competitive, and with possibilities that can be exploited and modified to promote progressive and emancipatory goals (Biesta 2011; Korsgaard 2018). Indeed, today, the processes of “schooling” and the demands and expectations of compulsory education are also infiltrating pre-school education (Dahlberg and Moss 2009, p. xvii). Therefore, the request for de-schooling is more relevant than ever; however, this process of de-schooling can also take place within a formal educational institution.

Both of the abovementioned forms of enclosure, conservative and neoliberal, although different, have a common image of the poor child who is not “capable of self-mastering, and not ready to choose, and is in a deficient state of dependency and domination” (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p. 97). The image of the poor child is linked to adultism, which is “the power adults have over children” (Flasher 1978). To put it more precisely, adultism is the prejudice and systematic discrimination against young people and children (Fletcher 2015). On the contrary, in the ontology of educational commons, all children are rich. Drawing on Lois Malaguzzi and the other educators of Reggio Emilia, the premise of the commons’ pedagogical theory and practice is the image of the rich child who is a protagonist and an active citizen in society (Cagliari et al. 2016, pp. 368–69). Children are “not bottles to be filled” but “active in constructing the self and knowledge through social interactions and inter-dependencies. . .not bearers of needs, but bearers of rights” (ibid., p. 369; see also Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p. 96). Rich children demand “rich educators, able to recognize, value and respond to this vivid image of the child” (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021, p. 96). Rich educators act as companions who challenge the power structure of adultism and, consequently, the predominant relations of dependence between children and adults to empower the status of children.

## 5. Conclusions

According to the results of the three case studies presented above, educational commons have the potential to play a significant role in tackling inequality, and the commons logic can be developed in school education under certain conditions. Inequalities can be reversed, and active inclusion can occur in both formal and non-formal educational settings through the commoning practices of (a) peer governance and (b) peer learning and co-construction of knowledge. These results are also in line with the results of a recent empirical study where Kioupiolis (2023) argues that there is room for democratic transformation and educational commons even in structures that are still tailored to formal schooling.

Developing the value of equal cooperation rather than competition challenges the neoliberal image of the child as human capital (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021), challenging the reduction, demeaning, and degradation of the child to an economic object. This image of the “poor” competitive child of the economy and the market, as well as the image of the equally “poor” passive and obedient child, are linked to the low-trust relationships of the state and the neoliberal market with schools, teachers and students. On the contrary, in the three studies we presented, there was strong trust in schools, teachers, and children at all stages of implementation: (a) the design of the pedagogical project, (b) the pedagogical action, (c) the evaluation of the project, and (d) the reflection on it.

All three studies challenge the image of education as a factory, engaging actively with the passive child to achieve predetermined results. With the widely held view that creating clear and sufficiently high-performance standards for schools, instructors, and students will improve the quality of outcomes, education has become more and more standardised under neoliberalism. As a result, curricula now emphasise reading, math, and science as their core subjects, homogenising education and making it more focused. By limiting experimentation and the use of different pedagogical methods, a reliance on set standards and core subjects degrades education (Sahlberg 2012). On the contrary, by increasing experimentation and using alternative democratic pedagogical practices, a commons logic upgrades education, as shown in the three studies we presented.

Moreover, the various forms of peer governance redistribute power between adults and children and empower children in school and in society in general as democratic citizens. The children learn to take an interest in the community and to participate actively in the management and settlement of social issues. Additionally, the teachers learn to act as commoners, promoting the democratic values of the commons.

The case studies tried to show how children are empowered by a practice-based approach to democratic education, which helps to practically reverse socioeconomic and educational injustices. In educational commons, the development of a strong democratic ethos shared by students, teachers, and parents occurs primarily through the actual and thorough realization of fundamental democratic principles in the educational community, such as freedom, equality, and solidarity, as well as through maintaining effective democratic relations and cultivating the habit of thinking and acting in an egalitarian democratic manner. Children and students' self-confidence and respect are increased when democratic relationships of freedom, equality, and mutual care are fostered by effectively implementing these principles in the governing and pedagogical processes of a "school" setting. A commons-based education creates a secure and encouraging environment where children and students can use their right to free speech. It also inspires them to engage in educational activities and exercise democratic agency. In the educational commons, understanding children as social actors is crucial not only for how they become visible but also for their contribution to knowledge production and their participation in the decision-making processes.

In alignment with UNESCO's (2021) recent reports about the need to "repair" historical injustices, educational and social exclusion, and to move towards more just and inclusive educational futures through a perspective of education as a public endeavour and a common good (2021, p. 2), it is underlined the collective responsibility for education and also highlighted how children and adults (e.g., teachers) govern it as well as the ways in which they co-build and co-construct the learning process. The ethics of educational commons disrupt not only the competitive ethos of the market and the top-down logic of the state but also the conventional divides between teachers and students, adults and children, who would communicate beyond these hierarchical orders in a process of common inquiry and learning that is inventive, continuous, and critical (Bourassa 2017, p. 81).

The research indicates that most basic principles of commons' design (Ostrom 1990, pp. 90–102) have validity and are achievable in the field of education. In particular, the principle of collective arrangements applies, according to which children, teachers/educators, and parents/guardians have the right to participate actively in the collective arrangement of the rules of their community. The rules are also in line with local community particularities and local needs. Moreover, the collectively established rules concerning control and conflict resolution mechanisms are considered fair by the participants. The self-governance structure starts from the bottom to rise to the top, not the other way around.

Yet, the principle of clearly defined boundaries of a common, which defines who has the right to participate in the community and under what conditions, applies to the libertarian learning communities of the commons, like the Little Tree, but not to formal school education, which, as we have seen, is a triadic institution and therefore has a hybrid structure. However, the principle of minimum recognition of the rights of pedagogical subjects by the state, that is, the right of children and teachers to design their own institutions, which will not be challenged by external government authorities, is not legally guaranteed for the libertarian communities. The fact that these communities are treated with suspicion or hostility by the state, which, for example, in Greece does not recognise them legally and does not support them financially, creates a serious concern for their viability in the long run. However, we can use their "trace" or imprint and try to explore the possibilities of commoning formal public (pre)school education.

Public (pre)school education is a vital common good and should not be abandoned by the commoners, but on the contrary, it can be refigured in terms of the logic and ethics of the commons (Pechtelidis 2020). Education is both a source and a threat to capital, like the

commons (Bourassa 2017, p. 85; Korsgaard 2018, p. 8). Education is an activity that is not completely reduced to the reproduction of or overthrow of the dominant order of things in society (Bourassa 2017). The refiguring of the educational institution is not understood as a change from one system to another, but rather as a change in the arrangement and functioning of the power relations that make up a hybrid structure such as the educational one. Education is therefore not perceived here as a single and absolutely compact institution without contradictions, which can be destroyed either because, as part of the state, it is a force of oppression in society or because it can be occupied and used by the people to promote socialist ideals for the rearrangement of production relations. What should be resisted is not only the practices of domination that make up the system of education but also the rationality of the discourses that justify, legitimise, and rationalise the practices of domination (Pechtelidis 2020, 2023).

Through this study, it can be understood that it is necessary to continue and expand empirical research in environments that experiment with educational commons. In this way, it will be possible to make visible the different ways and processes by which the commoning of education can be implemented, but also to enrich the literature on the issue, enabling more and more people to get in touch with and familiarise themselves with the theory and practice of educational commons. It is also very important to explore further the perspective and experience of the children themselves involved in commoning processes.

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