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**SELF-ORGANIZATION OF MIGRANT & REFUGEE STUDENTS  
THROUGH  
PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF THE COMMONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research was to examine pedagogical practices of the commons in a formal education setting, at an Educational Priority Zone (ZEP) class of a public primary school in western Thessaloniki. ZEP are reception classes within the mainstream school for refugees, migrant, Roma and returnees, who do not have the required knowledge of the Greek language. These students attend a few hours parallel to their regular classes in order to be fully included in their classroom and in their school. An intervention was carried out through an educational action research by which a designated ZEP class was perceived as a potential hybrid common<sup>1</sup> and students and teachers were perceived as ‘commoners’. Pedagogical practices of the commons have the potential to shape horizontal ways of thinking and acting, escaping established social practices, habits and relationships. In particular, students learned a) fundamental ways of collective decision-making and democratic citizenship b) how to self-organize without conferment of knowledge by their teachers c) how to co-

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create authentic knowledge. Thematic analysis revealed that students experience the concept of solidarity and mutual support in the course of deciding and learning processes. However, they were in the habit of passively receiving instructions and information from their teachers and, therefore, they used to consider that their teachers were obliged to explain the lesson.

Keywords: refugee students, migrant, self-organization, pedagogical practices of commons, solidarity, mutual support

## Introduction

The need for this intervention was prompted by the concern that school education remains highly resilient in the way it operates (Kemmis et al. 2014), maintaining an ‘established framework of action’ (Bourdieu 1977). This framework of action leads to a common model for the initiation and progression of the lesson, the treatment of the subject and the assessment of its outcomes. It involves the perpetuation of a whole system of values, attitudes, beliefs and ethics, a kind of hegemony (Gramsci 2023).

The starting point between conservative and progressive circles of pedagogy is that education as a process is based on a web of social interactions (Xochelis 2010). The ‘commons’, as a concept and as an interdisciplinary field, is about promoting an alternative grid of social interactions and social relations, different from those hitherto established. The logic of the ‘commons’ provides the possibility to formulate horizontal ways of thinking and acting, free from entrenched social practices and relations (Pechteldis 2020).

In short, ‘the commons’ constitute a social governance practice. In short, ‘the commons’ constitute a social governance practice of a resource. According to such practice any resource is regulated not by the state or the free market, but by a community of people, who self-manage the resource through institutions that they create themselves (Kioupkiolis 2019). How does all this translate into school education, especially in a structure with strong elements of disciplinary mechanism and hierarchy? The answer we could possibly give is that it can be achieved through micro-political actions that involve processes of self-organization, and democracy as well as with the terms of equal participation.

More specifically, in this research we wanted to examine how the logic of the ‘commons’ can be transferred to the school, and how it can be adapted to the needs of the educational context through the ‘pedagogical practices of the commons’ (Pantazidis 2023a,b). These practices emerge as a ‘product’ of self-organization, not -as usual- through the transfer of knowledge by the teacher, so that children co-learn (Mitra, Kulkarni & Stanfield, 2016). Furthermore, through the application of such practices, the students co-create knowledge by solving realistic problems (Scardamalia & Bereiter 2021). In this way, the application of such practices seeks to promote equitable and inclusive education for all.

In this study, children faced difficulties, not only in terms of language, but also issues of social exclusion due to their different ethnic, religious and socio-cultural background. So, our aim was not only that they learn the

Greek language, but also their social empowerment. A crucial aspect was that children be exposed to different ways of learning that would allow them to express themselves and co-create without barriers in their classroom.

### **Pedagogical practices of the commons**

The 'commons' can be seen as equal, interdependent relationships between people who intend to organize themselves and co-manage a resource. A 'common' needs to follow the triadic 'resource-community-rules' structure. The resource can serve as an occasion for the members of a community to cooperate, share and establish rules for co-management (Bollier & Helfrich 2019).

Experimentation with innovative approaches to democracy and governance lies at the heart of the 'commons'. The idea of the 'commons' democracy is prefigured in various initiatives, raising issues of openness, pluralism, equity and horizontality, so that individuals can participate in a collective self-management of common resources (Kiouпкиolis 2019). In this context, it is interesting how education can potentially promote values such as equality, solidarity, cooperation and sharing. It's also interesting how education can play a pivotal role in social caring as, well as in shaping positive ethical values in today's society.

Our position is that learning emerges as a result of interactions with each other. While it can be affirmed that the goal of a better school for children and teachers alike is a sensible goal, it should be noted that getting there requires a series of daily struggles, demands and pedagogical practices. These practices are presented in the next section as 'pedagogical practices of the commons'.

The teacher -under the logic of the 'commons'- does not seek to educate heteronomous and disposable consumers of knowledge, but to help children to become autonomous, responsible and act in solidarity. For this reason, he/she uses collaborative and interactive practices for a more democratic experience of school life.

In the effort towards this goal, self-organization is one of the most important skills. However, teaching self-organization becomes in a sense paradoxical. As Rau & Koch-Gonzalez (2018: 24) state, *'we want children to decide how to self-organize. Isn't it ironic to tell individuals how to self-organize? I wonder how we can help and share our experiences without imposing an established framework?'*

The practices we experimented with the children during the intervention relate to issues of governance and learning. Children's assemblies were implemented in terms of governance (Pantazidis 2020; 2021), and in terms of learning 'peer learning' and 'co-creation of knowledge' (Pantazidis 2023a). In more detail, the following practices were adopted and followed:

- children's assemblies: how we decide, collectively, with the children
- peer learning: how to promote children's self-organisation in learning
- co-creation of knowledge: how we jointly create knowledge

(Pantazidis 2020; 2021; 2023a,b).

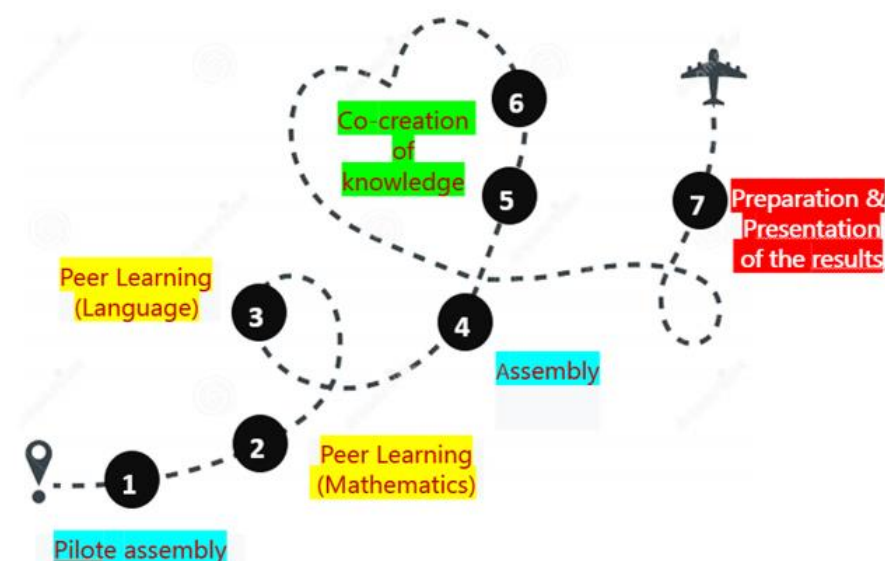


Image 1 Schedule of the meetings of the educational intervention

The first meeting was an introductory meeting, as not all the children had known each other, and because they participated in different groups of ZEP. During this meeting the second researcher was introduced, and the other researcher was presented to the students as the class teacher. After the introduction and some ice breaking games, we proceeded to a preliminary discussion on the concept of assembly, with which the children were not familiar, neither in terms of its content nor in terms of process. After this first discussion, facilitated by relevant photos and pictures, we moved on to a pilot assembly with an unrealistic problem issue to solve. Thus, the children tried out in practice the roles that exist in an assembly and experienced, firsthand, the process of co-decision.

In our second and third meetings, we attempted to observe how would peer learning function in practice through the subjects of Mathematics and Greek Language. More specifically, in Mathematics they worked on topics that they

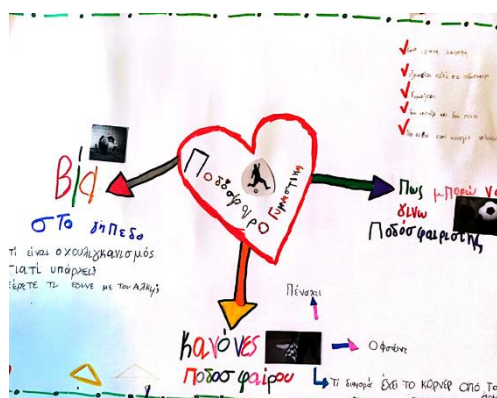
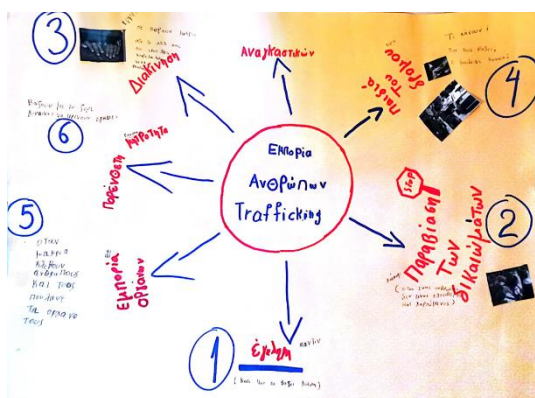
had not worked on at all, or very little. In particular, we chose the concept of 'power', while in Language they worked on the official way of speaking in plural and polite language expressions and phrases. In Language a short role plays spontaneously arose at the end of the workshop, in which they used what they had just learnt.

During these lessons, the children were divided into groups, and they were given a worksheet in order to work cooperatively so as to answer the exercises. Our input was as minimal as possible with guidance questions and/or examples, as the children either had little experience in working in groups, or they were not used to working independently at all.

Then, in the fourth meeting, the second assembly was held, which was about something that directly appertained the children and would influence the course of our intervention. It was about the topics that the children would later enjoy to researching, in the following meetings. Consequently, they suggested various topics of their interest, and voted for their most favorite ones. Then, they were divided into two working groups based on the topic they decided to participate in. The topics were: 1. football & sports violence and 2. trafficking.

The above procedure determined the fifth and sixth meeting. First, they were asked to formulate their questions in relation to the topics. Afterwards, they searched online for information, videos, photos etc. in the computer room, and exchanged ideas and related experiences. Throughout this process we were again minimally involved, mainly by asking questions.

They created a poster where they used photos and key word-phrases to illustrate what they had learned, and what their thought processes were on the two topics mentioned above.



### Images 2 & 3: The posters of the two teams

Finally, in our last meeting - which lasted a whole school day - the children delved into the aspects of the themes and rehearsed repeatedly, so that they would be able to present their work in the sixth grade, of which two of the participants of the intervention were students. So, the intervention concluded with a presentation to the sixth-grade class, which was followed by a very interesting discussion among the children of the class and the students of ZEP class. All the children had the opportunity to position themselves and raise questions in relation to sport, bigotry, human rights, gender stereotypes, child labour, and many other issues.

Overall, the research participants learned new vocabulary, terminology and important concepts (trafficking, rights, bigotry, etc.). In addition to this, they were introduced to basic computer skills (e.g., word processing) and internet information search skills (e.g., use of keywords on authoritative websites). They also experienced the process of co-decision and plenary presentation, which for the majority of the children -especially for refugees and migrants- is largely an unknown and rare process. In fact, it was the first time they had ever attempted to co-decide or present something in a plenary session. During the presentation, some children struggled, while some others seemed to feel very empowered by the chance, they were given despite the fact that they had to co-decide or present in front of a class unrelated and unfamiliar to their own ZEP class.

It is essential to note that before the implementation of our intervention, one of the two members of our research team conducted an in-school training for the teachers of the school on the following topic: 'Children's assemblies in the classroom'. This training examined the practice of 'children's assemblies' with emphasis on their use to promote democratic coexistence in the classroom, and on how can affect children as in their becoming prospective citizens. Thus, the intervention had a general character in the school context since, in addition to the ZEP class, it involved the teachers, the headmistress as well as another class.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative research design, that of Practical Action Research (PAR) was followed through a process based on the principles of the reflective spiral (Kemmis et al. 2014). PAR is guided by the interest of educating or enlightening teachers, so that they can act more wisely and consistently. In this case, participants have a voice, that is, they are able to speak and act but also suffer the consequences of the eventual course of the intervention.

The decisions are largely up to the teacher, but he/she is more open to the children's views.

More specifically, the participants of the study were a group of girls and boys (10 children in total), aged 10-15 years old. The students came from different countries, (Albania, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Palestine). The interventions took place between May-June 2022. The number of sessions (7) as well as their content was something that evolved from workshop to workshop and was adapted to the needs of the children and the context (mentioned in more detail in the next section).

Data collection tools included tape recording, participant observation through field notes, and reflection notes which were kept after the intervention. Data processing followed data collection. The recordings were transcribed and detailed field notes were kept. Data analysis was conducted using the six-step method suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

### **Analysis**

The thematic analysis resulted in 321 codes, 23 categories and 4 themes which were related to four thematic categories: a) Non-Directionality & Self-Organization, b) Mutual Aid, c) Schooling and d) Critical Awareness. All thematic categories are discussed below, separately.

The letter E (1,2) refers to the teacher-researchers, while the letter S (1-10), refers to the children who participated in the educational intervention.

#### ***a) Non-directionality & Self-organization***

During the activities organised in Mathematics and Language, each group worked independently, without assistance and on some concepts that had not been taught, before the intervention. There were several examples and instructions in the booklet given to them so that they could understand and then solved the assigned exercises. Usually, we replied like this *'All we will tell you is that you can read these and look at the examples. Everything is in there.'*

The times when they used to achieve something themselves, their enthusiasm was very encouraging.

*S6: Ahhhh, S2, here we go! Wait, I see how it works!*

What we generally tried to do was to ask questions without giving ready-made solutions. As was said in a process of reflection among the researchers: *'We are there, and at the same time, when we see that something is going wrong, we give it a nudge to make it right'*.



In addition, during the assembly it was particularly difficult for the children to understand that they could address the other members of the group and/or the designated facilitator (one of the students) without the intervention of the teacher.

S3: *Mr., shall I say?*

E2: *You can tell all of us. There is a moderator!*

Certainly, the two assemblies that took place were not enough to contribute to an established habit, but the participants got some important impulses of democracy. It was characteristic that towards the end of the second assembly the group self-organized without much effort by us.

### ***b) Mutual aid***

Once they understood that they could work independently and cooperatively, they could solve the assigned tasks, (either within their group or with the help of other groups), they started to interact spontaneously, ask for and receive help, and practice their active listening. The goal was to leave no one behind. The following dialogue is indicative:

S1: *Can you teach me how to do?*

S5: *I'm gonna explain it to you. Look!*

At some point, four students tried to solve an exercise. S8 could not understand how to solve it. Her classmates explained it to her over and over again, and gave her examples to solve it herself, showing practical solidarity with each other.

However, there was a difficulty in providing help in many cases. The children tended to help, giving almost ready answers. This is where we had to step in and tell them that it would be best if they asked questions to help others think themselves. This was a way they had learned to operate in school, a way endorsed by the teachers and adopted by the students. In essence, upon our intervention they have entered another context, experiencing the concept of solidarity and mutual support.

S6: *Here put the number 22 and that's the end, it's okay.*

E1: *It would be good, if you want to help, not to tell the solution, but help them to find it out themselves.*

### ***c) Schooling***

Before the pilot assembly, we referred to the roles we will have in this process. On this occasion, the roles we adopt in our daily life were discussed. Thus, the following discussion took place:

E2: *At school what roles do you children have?*

Children: *Students.*

E1: *At home?*

S7: *At home we are people.*

S7 expressed the opinion that when the children take up the role of the student, they lose part of their will because they have to be disciplined to a certain standard in space and time. Below, it a question of a student about what they should have filled in the worksheet because he had not read the guidelines about the activity.

S4: *Mr., what do we do now?*

E1: *Read and decide.*

The children seemed to be influenced by force of habit in terms of receiving instructions and ready-made information from the teacher. Thus, they even refused to even try to see if they were able to solve an exercise on their own. In fact, they a strongly refused to take responsibility, considering it an obligation of the teachers to explain the lesson in a certain way.

S6: *No, Misstress, you should tell us! We can't understand ourselves.*

Moreover, it seemed that they had not learned to work in groups. When the first difficulty came up or the first mistake was made, they were quick eager to judge and underestimate the other child.

It was very interesting that even though they knew that they would not be graded and that our activities were generally more experiential, after the Maths and Greek language sessions were completed, they asked for the worksheet results of the previous sessions. They faced the worksheets as tests. This shows a focus on the outcome rather than the process, and it also shows anxiety about their performance.

S1: *Mrs., were the Language exercises were correct?*

*In the same context, one student thought we wanted to test them, and this is why we had given them a test.*

S9: *Teacher, will you give us the result of the test?*

E2: *It's not a test.*

S9: *It is a test, look.*

Here the student seems to be expressing the fragmentation of material and knowledge in each classroom by underestimating the power of understanding within the group. He also seems to underestimate the combination of knowledge and experience of all the members of the group.

S2: *You gave us exercises from the 6th grade and that's why we don't understand it.*

Also, children's responses show that they rarely have the time to speak freely and participate in-class. Assembly and the forms of active learning we experimented with, are tools that can help significantly to increase the amount and the quality of the time spent in classroom, as it promotes the expression of opinion.

E1: *When you are in the classroom do you talk?*

S4: *When the teacher asks something, I speak.*

S7: *When I read a text that is long.*

#### **d) Critical awareness**

Before the co-creation of the knowledge workshop, a meeting was held to discuss the topics that the children would like to address in the following workshops. In this assembly, various issues were suggested such as disability, asterism, trafficking.

S1: *Teacher, I think we should discuss about the bad guys who take children and kill them.(i.e. Trafficking).*

The suggestion above made by a student from Syria. The exploration of these kind of topics gave rise to deeper discussions about issues such as motherhood, women as workers, forced sex, and sports violence, providing an opportunity for further analysis of these issues while developing social and political thinking.

S1: *What do they do to women?*

S3: *To do something bad (avoids saying 'rape').*

E1: *To have sex by force.*

S3: *Yes.*

The discussion during the presentation in 6th class was equally enriching and interesting. The students of the class and the research participants raised issues such as forced marriage, slavery, sexual violence, organ trafficking, drugs and weapons.

Most important was the highly active role of the children from the ZEP class in another classroom. In short, they moderated the discussion to a large extent, asking leading questions to move the discussion forward, and one pupil spontaneously suggested that the children in the class should tell of their experiences with strangers on the street as part of the discussion on trafficking. At the same time, many of the children, who used to be invisible in their classroom, had the opportunity to express themselves freely.

### Conclusion

The aim of this research is to examine pedagogical practices of 'commons' whereby students are able to self-organize, help each other, learn peer-to-peer and consult. The relationships between students and teacher are redefined, learning is transformed into a creative process and students distance themselves from their traditionally defined roles. This intervention was carried out through an educational action research with the participation of refugee and migrant children in the ZEP class of a primary school in western Thessaloniki. The thematic analysis revealed issues related to children's difficulties to enter a self-organizing logic. At the same time, we must note that, during this intervention, we observed a lot of progress and adaptation.

Through the activities and assemblies, the children experienced a role that included more responsibilities and obligations. As Rancière (1991) argued, children's learning does not depend on others claiming to be able to see, think and act in their place. Thus, the teacher is not there to impart what he knows, but to set the process in motion, from which (s)he then stands back and watches the learning happen (Mitra, Kulkarni & Stanfield 2016).

Commons practices are understood as a way to cooperate, share and trust each other (Bollier & Helfrich 2019). On the one hand as intentional actors, and on the other hand as potential commoners, children are able to shape - even to a small degree- the reality they are involved in, such as educational institutions, through their relationships. For this to happen, it would be beneficial to do at least two things: to have an active learning environment to develop their communication skills, and to be included in the decisions that affect them.

Finally, there were some limitations of the research. The most important were: the physical absence of children -mainly refugees-, the co-housing of

the primary school yard with the yard of a high-school due to exams. Another impediment was that either many children had to leave for walks or that they had to rehearse for the celebration of the 6th grade. In addition, another limitation we witnessed was the language barrier and as well as the incomplete digital literacy of the children -as they did not have a computer at home-. Because searching on the internet was difficult, since there was vocabulary that was too official for children, so we needed to give synonyms, paraphrases or the English translation.

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<sup>1</sup> The commons include people living in a community, their relationship with those resources, and the rules they come up with.