

2

‘WE WIN WHEN WE ARE TOGETHER’: SHARING, CARING AND COOPERATION AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. TWO CASE STUDIES FROM THE HORIZON PROJECT 2020 SMOOTH

Angeliki Botonaki*, Elena Viseri*, Chrysa Gatzelaki*, Yannis Pechtelidis*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the outcomes of two case studies, which are part of the EU funded Horizon2020 research project: *Passing Through Enclosures and Reversing Inequalities Through Educational Commons (SMOOTH)*. The case studies were implemented in two different kindergartens in Thessaloniki, with the participation of

***Angeliki Botonaki** is a preschool teacher, University of Thessaly, angelsunnyday@gmail.com

***Elena Viseri**, PhD candidate, University of Thessaly, elenaviseri2@gmail.com

***Chrysa Gatzelaki**, Doctor of Philosophy in Ecology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

***Yannis Pechtelidis**, Professor, University of Thessaly, pechtelidis@uth.gr

MuseumEdu 8 / Spring 2024, pp. 19-29

Copyright © 2024 by Museum Education and Research Laboratory, University of Thessaly. All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

55 preschool children over a period of one year. The design of the case studies was based on core values of the commons such as cooperation, sharing and caring. The aim was to address inequalities, challenge adultism, strengthen children's rights, and create smooth participatory democratic learning environments in which children can negotiate their identities in a safe space and realize the active role they can play in shaping their surrounding environment.

The main stimuli given to the children were group games, imaginary scenarios with problem solving, interactive storytelling, interventions on Active Listening and Conflict Resolution, discussions in plenary and art practices. According to the results of the case studies, children showed remarkable possibilities of cooperation, sharing, caring and self-acting, when they co-decided, formed the rules themselves or when they had a common and creative goal to achieve. Also, in this educational context, adults and children acted on an equal basis as peers and actively participated in co-shaping and maintaining their community.

Keywords: cooperation, sharing, caring, democratic learning environment co-shaping, community

Introduction & Overview of the projects

This presentation focuses on two different case studies (CSs hereafter) that took place in two kindergartens in Thermi, a municipality near Thessaloniki. The CSs were supported and funded by the European Research Programme SMOOTH.

The CSs were implemented over a period of a year. A series of meetings that took place in the school setting was organized biweekly in both cases. In the first CS, 40 children, aged 5-6 years old participated, as well as 2 school teachers and two researchers- one of them joining in the meantime. As the number of participants was too high, in the second CS, the participants were reduced to 16 children while the number of teachers and researchers remained. The methodologies used were ethnographic fieldwork, conflict resolution, peer to peer governance, methodologies focusing on children's rights, pedagogy of listening and pedagogical documentation. The main research question was whether the philosophy of the commons can be effectively used in early childhood education in order to reverse or negotiate inequalities and cultivate values such as co-operation, sharing and caring between the participants. The design of both CSs was based on the idea of creating an open educational participatory democratic learning environment through group games, imaginary scenarios with problem solving, interactive storytelling, role playing, interventions on Active Listening and Conflict Resolution, discussions in plenary and art practices.

Theoretical Background

The 'educational commons' refer to educational communities where decisions about the educational process are made collectively with equal participation in assemblies jointly by the three groups of educators, learners, and their guardians (when they are minors). The practice of education and learning itself becomes a 'common good' that is collectively shaped and managed by the members of the educational community in terms of equality, freedom, active and creative participation (Bourassa 2017, De Lissovoy 2011, Korsgaard 2018, Pechtelidis 2020, Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis 2020).

In educational commons, children play a significant role in the processes of producing new knowledge, making decisions, and shaping the rules of their community, challenging prevailing beliefs and ideas about children's political capabilities and their right to participate in public life on their terms. Usually, policy-making and conventional politics are distant from children's perspectives and their ways of

expressing opinions and participating in public life. Policy-makers and education professionals tend to have a 'limited' regulatory way of thinking focused on the institutional and developmental aspects of children's participation, concentrating on how children's participation should be regulated by adults (Pechtelidis 2020 & 2022).

On the other hand, educational commons have emerged as a transformative approach to education, challenging traditional educational models and fostering an environment that emphasizes collaboration, shared decision-making, and the collective shaping of educational practices (Bauwens & Kostakis 2014, De Lissovoy 2011, Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis 2020). This alternative framework empowers all members of the educational community, including educators, learners, and guardians, to participate equally in decision-making processes and engage in active, creative, and democratic learning experiences (Bourassa 2017, Korsgaard 2018). So, the concept of educational commons is grounded in the idea that education should be treated as a common good, accessible to all and managed collectively by its stakeholders (Bollier & Helfrich 2015, De Lissovoy 2011). In this context, children are seen as capable and reliable agents, with the right and ability to participate in public life and make choices about their own lives (Pechtelidis 2018 & 2022). By fostering an inclusive and participatory environment, educational commons disrupt traditional power dynamics and promote a sense of shared responsibility, mutual respect, and interdependence among all members of the community (De Lissovoy 2011, Pechtelidis 2020).

Research Data

Throughout the CS we spotted various inequalities in the groups of participants that were most of the time related to gender, adultism and cultural capital. In the first round of the present study, children were not differentiated so much on the economic level as on the educational-cognitive-developmental level. In particular, some differences were observed between children in terms of fluency in language use, as well as differences at gender level. More specifically, in terms of cultural capital, a low percentage in both sections showed fluency in language use and greater participation compared to the other children, equally divided between the two genders. Regarding discipline and following rules, a mediate to high percentage of the class was able to follow the school rules. Finally, in terms of the children's behavior (verbal/physical), most children expressed themselves through a combination of speech and body, with only a small percentage predominating in the use of speech over body. The children who were fluent in speech initially showed a higher degree of compliance, more frequent participation and initiative in the respective intervention

activities. However, at the end of the present study, this difference decreased significantly, enabling greater participation in children who at the beginning of the program appeared isolated and passive.

Gender differences were also observed in terms of the way children cooperated in the activities. In particular, girls showed greater attachment to the same gender and a stronger need to share activities with the 'friend' they felt closest to. 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 not as strongly, showing greater adaptability to sharing an activity with a girl, although this was not their best-case scenario.

In order to help reverse these inequalities we designed and proposed various activities that would help enhance equality, openness, co-creation and inclusion. The findings are organized in the following categories.

Cooperation

In terms of cooperation, we observed that children were most of the time actively involved and equally participating when they had a common goal to achieve. It was in these very moments when they put aside the gender factor and collaborated peacefully and joyfully. Some of the activities that fostered cooperation among the young participants were the creation of a collective large-scale painting, a little tale with drawings which they named 'Athropocrocodile Tale', based on their experiences of a drama game that we played earlier that day and also the collective construction of a tower made of spaghetti and marshmallows.

Moreover, it is important to note that during a certain game, named 'mix-freeze-group', which is played in small groups quickly and randomly formed by the children themselves, they were asked to 'construct' with their bodies a variety of shapes, as a river and a bridge, a heart, a house etc. Throughout the whole game, children cooperated with each other, discussed their ideas and created the shapes altogether, in a joyful atmosphere. Age or gender differences as well as preferences or friendships were not observed and therefore did not seem to affect the game.

Sharing

The young participants, throughout the activities, shared ideas, pieces of paper, colors, chairs. The most outstanding example though, happened on the last day of the interventions. The researchers, in collaboration with the teachers, placed a big parachute fabric in the middle of the big room, where most of the meetings took place and observed how children interacted with it as well as with each other, without any given instructions. They used the same material in order to hide, sleep, or even as a shelter or an island. Several games and stories were taking place at the same time under or around the fabric while children ‘hopped’ from one game to another in small groups or at times collectively. Some of them hid there while being chased by crocodiles and sharks while others were using the same space as a bedroom and were singing lullabies. At the same time, some other children were looking for food around the shelter and were throwing bombs to the wild animals around them. In the reflective conversation that followed, children talked about the different games they played and one girl noticed ‘I tried to combine all the games together but I couldn’t do it, so I played a little bit of everything’.

Caring

We also observed that children most of the time cared more about meeting the aims of the activities instead of building strong relations with their mates. However, there were some moments when children expressed caring for each other, such as during the musical chairs game’s two variations. The first is the ‘antagonistic’ popular version, and the second is the non-antagonistic ‘commons’ version. One girl “lost her chair” in the first version of the game so she had to ‘be excluded’. But once she told all of us that the reason she lost was because her shoe was off, children agreed that it was unfair and gave her another chance immediately, putting her back in the game.

The following is an example of self-care and self-regulation from the first case study. A preschool boy came to the researchers one morning before they started the intervention saying that he wasn’t feeling well, he felt a little tired. To reinforce the child’s tendency to self-care, they asked him what he thought would be helpful and he responded at once that he needed to rest, to lie down for half an hour and specifically outside the classroom, in the area where the cots were. Trusting the child’s judgment and adherence to the agreement they had made, he did in fact go and lay down for half an hour on his own and then returned as agreed and also in a better mood.

Equal participation

To ensure that the children participated equally, we established certain commons' routines as part of our interventions. Our meetings for both CSs began in a similar and unique manner, with an individual personal contact between each researcher and each child. The first CS included a personal 'high-five' with brief eye contact, while the second CS focused on eye contact greetings. This provided an equal starting point, an equal opportunity for each pupil to engage, having already received a personal welcome.

Another reason for selecting this action was the necessity of familiarizing children with eye contact, particularly with regard to the difficulties that socially weak and low-confidence children have with it, with the goal of increasing their confidence and closing the gap with the socially stronger children.

Furthermore, the end of our interventions for both CSs was memorable, bringing togetherness and joy. It was an action provided by the children in the first CS that the researchers deemed worthwhile and decided to repeat as a 'closing' at the end of each intervention. The so-called 'balloon' action appeared to satisfy the children's need for a hug and began when some children ran to hug the researchers as a farewell at the end of the intervention. Seeing this act, others followed, and as a result they ended up hugging each other, participating in a big hug. By the time all interventions were over, the children had developed this action further, falling on the floor at the end of the hug and laughing all together.

In the second CS, as a way to say 'goodbye' after the meetings, children, teachers and researchers formed a tight circle, placing hands one on top of the other, and chanting out loud 'Shi-ny-Little-Stars', the name of the group that the children had come up with during the meetings. What became crucial over time was that children were accustomed to ensuring that each child had enough room in the circle to put their hand and then waiting for everyone to be ready before calling out the group's name.

Conflict resolution

Children typically voiced their demands and wants during disagreements, and occasionally arguments would occur. Because of their egocentric emotions and lack of conflict resolution skills, children's fights typically ended in failure. Consequently, the group would split up, ending the game, or the dispute would finish with the strongest voice being imposed.

Crying, shouting and 'sulking' were among the most common expressions of children during conflicts in group activities, as well as assigning the responsibility of resolution to the teacher. After identifying these characteristics during conflicts, the researchers introduced children to Gordon's conflict resolution in an experiential and multisensory way. More specifically, students understood through motor play and feedback questions that the line between acceptable and inappropriate actions varies from child to child. Furthermore, role play was used to illustrate active listening, which children then applied to their own situations. Pupils also experienced recognizing emotions and dealing with unaccepted behaviors by using Gordon's I-Messages, pantomime, and their own improvised instances of it. During the latter interventions, Gordon's Conflict Resolution was conducted and applied with the children, providing them with different strategies to address their issues. This method, however, required more time to be properly understood and applied by more children, as only a few children found it simple to follow at first.

Conclusions

Our main conclusions can be categorized in three axes:

The importance of the school teacher's role

It is important to cultivate the idea of teachers as commoners as well. In the second CS, the teachers equally participated in all the activities proposed by the children and the researchers. As a consequence, they were positively affected in their daily practice and also created new forms of internal relations in the group; they questioned their roles and got closer to the children as they played creatively and cooperated with them instead of giving directions or managing the process. As a matter of fact, this is considered top priority in order to apply educational commons effectively. So, it is after ensuring the teachers share the same spirit and values not only in words but also in actions, that there is a solid basis where educational commons can be built. The children in a very short time adopted the main values of the educational commons, through the appropriate interventions. The role of the kindergarten teachers was found to be crucial. In the second CS the kindergarten teachers fully adopted the principles of the commons and significantly helped to maintain them even after the end of the interventions. Therefore, an important step is the initiation - training of kindergarten teachers based on educational commons. Another conclusion we reached was the need for two educators in one class.

Requirements and needs for the commons to “flourish”

Children showed they had certain needs to fulfill in order to share, cooperate and act like commoners, like having enough free time to play (outside preferably) and not having all their day programmed inside their classrooms. Building a strong team identity as a class (find a name, set common goals, find commons among them, etc, on a regular basis) was also of great importance. The children showed us that everyone has their own voice, sometimes louder and sometimes quieter, which through the right practices can be heard equally. Within this framework of highlighting each individuality, an autonomous collectiveness emerges, which to a large extent can function autonomously, through the principles of cooperation and democracy.

The age of the children was found to be very appropriate for the initiation into the educational commons, as the children are old enough to function as a group and collectively follow the rules they all set together. Also, this age is well known to be the most appropriate developmental stage to cultivate these values. Finally, children showed that they all need to be heard but have difficulty in listening to others. They also showed the need for free expression and not fully guided activities, so that they can take initiatives and co-shape their school reality.

Practices that foster the common’s values

Educational commons’ core in the preschool age, according to our research, is the use of drama games, dramatization, music and movement games, storytelling on commons’ values, active learning techniques (like think-pair-share, mix-freeze-group, role playing) and also co-deciding and putting trust on the children, finding ways to listen to every voice and make them count, on a daily basis. The researchers used as pedagogical tools the educational commons in combination with art in education and some active learning techniques aiming to reduce inequalities in the classroom. Through the commons, they focused on creating a network of collaboration, dialogue, sharing and interdependence, with the researchers and children actively involved in co-designing and maintaining it as well. According to the results of the research, in all the aforementioned activities the children participated with joy and great interest, resulting in inclusion, even for children who were initially on the margins.

Closure

The concept of educational commons brings a refreshing paradigm shift to the existing educational systems, pushing the focus away from competition and individual

accomplishment to a more inclusive and cooperative model. The research posits an intriguing framework based on the commons theory, addressing the crucial developmental years of pre-school children. As a logical next step to the findings and insights gleaned from the Horizon 2020 SMOOTH project, there appears to be an exigent need for educational commons training for educators. Teachers play a critical role in establishing these learning environments, and so hold the key to the successful adoption of the commons concepts in educational settings. Training teachers in creating a "safe environment" could extend beyond mere physical safety to emotional and intellectual security, empowering children to openly express their "needs, desires, and dreams. This, in turn, promotes active listening, a crucial component for participative governance and empathy, enabling the children to become more effective agents of their own learning. Given the pressing challenges of social inequalities, mental health issues, and the evolving dynamics of education, the educational commons framework presents not just a theoretical proposition but a viable pathway for reimagining education in a more equitable and empathetic manner. In summary, the proposed educational commons training for teachers could serve as a cornerstone for building such learning environments, and in doing so, enhance the collective well-being and individual agency of pre-school children.

References

- Bauwens, M. & Kostakis, V. (2014). From the communism of capital to capital for the commons: Towards an open cooperativism. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique*, 12(1), 356-361.
- Bollier, D., & Helfrich, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Patterns of commoning*. Commons Strategy Group.
- Bourassa, G. N. (2017). Towards an elaboration of the pedagogical common. In A. Means, D. R. Ford, G. Slater (Eds.). *Educational commons in theory and practice* (75-93). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Lissovoy, N. (2011). Pedagogy in common: Democratic education in the global era. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 43(10), 1119-1134.
- Korsgaard, M. T. (2018). Education and the concept of commons. A pedagogical reinterpretation. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(4), 445-455.
- Pechtelidis, Y. (2018). Heteropolitical Pedagogies, Citizenship and Childhood. Commoning Education in Contemporary Greece. In C. Baraldi & T. Cockburn (Eds.). *Theorising Childhood: Citizenship, Rights, and Participation* (215-238). Palgrave Macmillan.

Pechtelidis, Y. (2020). Reclaiming the commons of education: The interdependence of social actors, pedagogy and the common good. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 52(4), 349-358.

Pechtelidis, Y. & Kioupkiolis, A. (2020). Education as Commons, Children as Commoners: The Case Study of the Little Tree Community. *Democracy and Education*, 28 (1), article 5. Retrieved 19/10/2023 from <https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol28/iss1/5/>