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**APPLYING PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF THE COMMONS FOR AN
ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR: FEASIBLE OR DESPAIRING?****Stelios Pantazidis***

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present ways and conditions required to transfer elements of the logic and ethics of the ‘commons’, to a school class. The findings presented here are drawn from my PhD thesis¹, which is a field research exploring the experiences of children participating in efforts to share and co-manage a common resource (school classroom). The setting of my research was a sixth-grade classroom in a public elementary school. At the heart of everyday life, a pattern of combined utilization of ‘pedagogical practices of the commons’ was identified. This pattern comprises of two interrelated categories: the self-organization of the classroom (governance), and the co-management of knowledge (learning). The pedagogical practices of the commons served as the basis for a ‘Pedagogy of Educational commons’, a radical teaching methodology to transfer elements of the logic of the ‘commons’ for democracy, to public

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schools. The results chosen to be presented in this paper pertain the issue of how children co-managed knowledge, under the premise that knowledge is perceived as a common good. In general, the findings of my research reveal several cracks which create the conditions for change in habits, perceptions and the way of relating between the children and the teacher.

Keywords: commons, knowledge as a common good, self-organization, co-management, pedagogy of educational commons, public schools

Introduction

In Greece today, school education is associated with a learning environment which presumes that effective education can largely be obtained through strict discipline (Matsaggouras 2009). A hierarchical and regulatory model, which has been proven to be incapable of creating democratic citizens, is generally applied in public schools. It has been asserted that if the school does not allow the cultivation of democratic consciousness, it follows that democratic consciousness can be hardly cultivated elsewhere (i.e., other institutions) (Katsarou2020).

A democratic and meaningful school education has been an intractable issue for at least a century. In *'Democracy and Education'*, John Dewey (1916) envisioned a school founded on the pedagogical principles of discovery (inquiry-based learning) to acquire knowledge themselves and peer collaboration. The ultimate goal of those principles would be a more democratic, just and peaceful society (Meirieu 2017). Today, more than a hundred years after John Dewey first imagined a democratic school, we can observe that our school -as a structure- seems to present significant difficulties as to the possibility of charting such a direction. Educational systems *'seem stuck in a time warp... displaying an unwillingness or inability to engage with either new thinking or the state we are in—and worse, the state we are heading towards'* (Fielding & Moss, 2014: 33).

The educational system as a whole, refuses to design and implement a school education based on the needs of children, and the local specificities of the communities involved, (i.e. education that is directly relevant to children's lives). There is also growing consensus in the fields of 'citizenship education' and 'new sociology of childhood' that children should be more active in their learning (Kirby 2020), and more engaged in decision-making (Baraldi & Cockburn 2018).

This conversation above is related to 'educational commons', a new interdisciplinary field. By promoting the principles of the 'Educational commons' ethics, we could attempt to prefigure a bottom-up education, changing the shift concerning regarding our relationship to teaching and learning (Pechtelidis & Kiouпкиolis 2020). The dominant perceptions postulating that children are unable to make political decisions, or to participate in public life, are challenged by a great number of theorists and laymen alike (Prout, 2004). Not only children are conceived as trustworthy beings, but also, they are conceived as beings who can make choices which are actively involved in matters of their concern. These new modes of self-governing can operate as an attempt to promote new forms of subjectivity in the field of education in relation to the current critical, political and social context (Pechtelidis 2020).

The ‘commons’ in education might promote alternative pedagogical processes and practices that could enable the formation of horizontal ways of thinking and acting, free from entrenched social practices, habits and relationships. By reconfiguring pedagogical science through the ‘commons’, we could rethink education, develop a different conception of education as a common good as well as create new possibilities for the participation of the teachers and children in the educational reality. Through micro-political actions, it is possible to construct alternative ways to perceive the learning space, negotiate knowledge, and promote a more democratic experience in everyday life at school.

Through the logic of the ‘commons’ methodology, an alternative view of the classroom as a shared resource is given. According to such layout, children and teachers are the ‘commoners’. Learning is perceived as a process of ‘commoning’, as a way to collaborate, share and trust each other (Bollier & Helfrich 2019). Through the co-management of the resource, power is redistributed between adults and children, and children are empowered as democratic citizens.

Pedagogical practices of the commons

Due to the fact that the public school could not be entirely classified as a setting where the principles of the methodology of the ‘commons’ is applied, a hybrid model of the ‘commons’ was attempted (see Pechtelidis, Kozaris, Pantazidis & Botonaki 2023). The way to transfer the logic of the ‘commons’ to public education was through the pedagogical practices of the ‘commons’.

My research question matches the action research methodology I followed, because I intended to explore how theory can become practice that leads would lead to a new theory and a new practice, promoting a dialectical relationship between the two (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon 2014). This led me to blueprint a fairly open design. This design responded to the main research question, which was: how can the logic of the ‘commons’ be transferred to the everyday life of a public-school classroom?

I explored children's experiences who were participants in a combined effort to share and co-manage a common resource; in this case a sixth-grade class in a public elementary school attempting to assimilate the practices of the methodology of the ‘commons’. The students in my class and I (as the teacher) co-managed, shared and collectively created knowledge. We also co-constructed a set of rules of our own. This created a context whereby alternative modes of education could be constructed. Those modes appear

to subvert the dominant intergenerational understandings and practices in schooling.

Initially, during the planning of this action research, I intended to transubstantiate the elements of the theory of the 'commons' to the daily practice of the school. At the heart of everyday life, a pattern of combined utilization of 'pedagogical practices of the commons' were identified which consists of two interrelated categories: One pertaining the self-organization of the classroom (governance), and another addressing the co-management of knowledge (learning). More analytically:

- Governance: how to promote an egalitarian organization of the classroom with the participation of children. Hence, the students were held responsible for co-designing the rules for the time, space and various processes of education.
- Learning: how an alternative learning process can be promoted through elements of active learning, equal participation and solidarity in the way of working

Pedagogical practices of the commons were formed gradually. During the intervention, my experimentations and practices did not have a name. Theorizing daily routines as pedagogical practices was a step taken after my research was completed. Essentially, theory was transferred into practice (through everyday praxis) and the resulting practice was theorized (see figure 1). The result was the creation of a theory based on educational practice, which constitutes the 'pedagogical practices of the commons'.

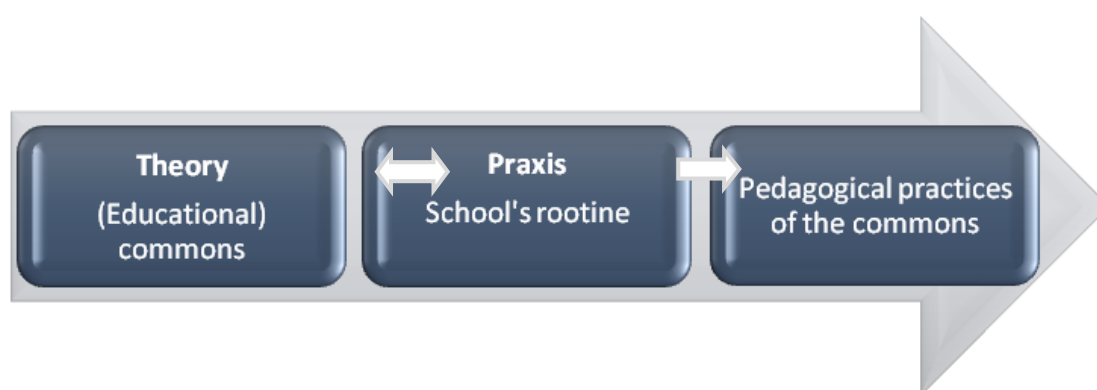


Figure 1: Theory to Practice & vice versa

Pedagogical practices of the commons are defined as processes of self-formation of a classroom in order to promote bottom-up ways of governance and learning. These practices can serve as a means of experiencing values and acquiring skills and knowledge so as to transfer the logic of the commons into a classroom. In summary, I list five key practices (that) the children and I experimented with:

- children's assemblies: how we decide, collectively, with the children
- peer dialogue: how we communicate more equally with children
- peer learning: how we promote children's self-organization in learning
- co-creation of knowledge: how we collectively create knowledge
- peer responsibility: how to activate processes of engagement and self-regulation.

Methodology

The school where I was employed as a teacher, was located in a non-urban area of western Crete and it was a 'conventional school setting'. The class consisted of fifteen children, of which eleven were boys and four girls. The empirical part took place between September 12, 2020 and June 26, 2021.

Throughout the school year I undertook was in both roles; as the role of the (action) researcher and as the role of the classroom teacher. My observations have been documented by a variety of means: field notes, researcher's diary, children's work materials and recordings of children's assemblies. The focus was on the subjects of the classroom -children and teacher- who were engaged in a process of renegotiating their roles, promoting an alternative construction of school reality.

The coding and creation of the categories was done using the six-step method, which follows the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in light of the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis) (Gürel & Tat 2017).

Results

I have chosen to present here part of the results of my research which has to do with how children co-managed knowledge. In this context, knowledge can be seen as a common good. The issue here is that modern economy has turned education and knowledge into a commodity.

Education is developed according to the following logic: '*I have more than you have, I am more competitive than you (are), and therefore I can expect to earn more than you (will)*' (Standing 2020: 215). Hence, knowledge is treated as a commodity, with limited access, and property rights. Knowledge is fundamentally different from other types of goods, and we should manage it differently (see Hess & Ostrom 2005). In compliance to the logic of the 'commons', the concept of knowledge constitutes a common

(intangible) good, accessible to all members of the community and promotes the importance of open access, collaboration and community participation in its creation and dissemination.

In educational commons, knowledge is understood as an intangible resource and its diffusion does not mean dividing it into smaller pieces, but sharing and, therefore, disseminating it (Pantazidis 2023a,b). The aim was to create an environment where knowledge is not simply transmitted, but it is also collectively constructed, empowering children to become active participants during their own learning journey. At the same time, the pedagogy of educational commons aims to prepare them to navigate the complexities of the knowledge society.

Knowledge, then, from this perspective, is an intangible good that is non-exchangeable and non-consumable. Corsani and Lazzarato (2004) argue that the dissemination of knowledge does not impoverish the one who has it. On the contrary, instead of 'depriving its creator', it contributes to increasing its value (see next subsection). If a student can successfully transfer knowledge to a classmate, it means that she herself has mastered it. But what is it that prevents us from sharing knowledge?

S2: If I give my knowledge to someone, they will get credit for it.

T: M2, that's not the point. I know who is trying and who is not. If we had a class where I asked you who knows, 5 would talk and 10 would remain silent. Think about it, if you give away half your lunch would you eat less or more? Isn't the same true with knowledge?

The logic of the commons in learning, was quite different from what the children had experienced at school, in the past. Acquiring knowledge was seen by children as an individualistic process, since it was effortfully acquired by them without being shared. After all, how can children easily share knowledge when they have taken the effort to master it? The purpose of knowledge is not connected to meaningful learning, but with the proof to the teacher (see Bennet 2013). One of my students, while we were working with peer learning practice, asked me at one point:

M5: Why should I share something I learned with my classmate, when she hasn't made an effort in her home?

It was a reasonable question to ask because in school we learn that we need to demonstrate our mastery of knowledge to the teacher. After all, there were no previous experiences of sharing, helping each other and meaningful collaboration in the classroom, only performance orientation. It is not new that the school context creates consciousnesses oriented towards competition, individualism and subordination (Pechteldis 2020).

Another question of my student:

M3: But why don't you teach us, but rather, you tell us to help others?

T: You can learn better when you do it with a classmate.

Collaboration was an issue that constantly surfaced. In the early days, most of the children found it quite difficult to cooperate. They were not used to co-existing in a cooperative setting. Collaboration and active learning took some time to be cultivated and to be developed further. Sometimes - especially in the early days- the difficulty in coordination was evident. There was difficulty in the issue of peer learning due to some children correcting others in a rude way.

M10: One says, the other writes, what should I do.

M7: We should write together, no one should erase it.

M5: Don't touch what I write. Can you stick with it?

It is well known from recent literature (see Chhibber & Law 2019) that learning for the sake of teaching others is more beneficial than learning for oneself. Children who learn for the sake of helping, are more likely to gain a deeper understanding of what they have learned, in case they have done so for the sake of teaching other children (Protégé effect) (see e.g., Iwase, Gushima & Nakajima 2021).

What was attempted, therefore, was for the least advantaged children to benefit from the rest, through a peer and solidarity-based form of learning that was supported by myself. The way the processes of the educational commons were carried through, was by instilling to the students the idea that we all ought to look after everyone, so that no child was left behind.

Another idea is to see learning as a product of educational self-organization (Mitra, Kulkarni & Stanfield 2016). Sugatta Mitra and his research group provided empirical evidence supporting the concept of learning as a product of self-organization, by employing a set of techniques; namely the 'Hole in the Wall' technique, and the 'Granny Cloud' technique. In the first case, he placed computers inside a wall in poor areas of India, and left them there. In the second case, through a live web link, he gave older women from the United Kingdom the role of encouraging Indian children in their learning. Mitra and his team (2016) observed that by giving room for self-organization in the educational process and by encouraging children, learning can emerge. According to Mitra's team, the teacher should not be there to impart what he/she knows, but to set the process in motion, after which he/she must step back and watch the learning process unfold.

My students and I experimented with self-organization. In a self-organizing condition, children are put in a role of responsibility and have to coordinate

the others. Children receive various benefits from participating in peer learning processes (e.g., see Kaya, Blake & Chan 2015). They learn to train and coordinate peers and practice a horizontal form of information sharing (Pantazis 2021). The following extracts report on coordination and responsibility sharing, among children.

Throughout the school year, efforts were made to change children's image of knowledge. The forms I experimented with involved ways in which all children participated in the educational process. It was important for them to learn to take care of each other.

M1: Why should we help if some people don't want to learn?

T: Everyone benefits from this lesson. Those who read and those who don't.

M10: Mr., I'm not helping her to learn it. I don't want her to learn anything.

My mission was not to educate heteronomous and expendable citizens through the consumption of knowledge, but to help children learn how to act autonomously, in solidarity and responsibly. The coordination of the learning process was implemented via a bottom-up scheme. In my opinion this is the key to the pedagogical proposal of the 'commons' because it enables the change of roles and the change in relationships between children and teacher.

M8 and M9 help M15 with arithmetic during the break time. They continued to help him even later during the 'inquiry-based learning' time. They were showing him with examples and testing him to see if he understood.

To sum up, the use of a logic incompatible with what they were used to, could not be easily accepted. However, I could claim that my findings demonstrate that despite the difficulties in coordinating a primary school class without the active involvement of a teacher, is positive, time and again. It was a process of constant testing of their relationships and also a process of constant learning of how work with each other. Over time, the children seemed to respond better without the necessary suggestions from my side on how to coordinate and help each other.

Conclusions

Parts of the results of my research highlightsome cracks in the school institution which became visible. These cracks created the conditions for a change in habits, perceptions and the way of relating between children and the teacher.

It took a lot of effort and dedication to the goal, in order for the students to learn to coordinate and help each other without depending on the teacher. The children made an effort to cooperate, but for the most part, this was done when I was present and supervising the situation. Later, cooperation with each other was done without my constant supervision, because it had gradually become a new habit of theirs. Their reason for cooperating is primarily related to external motives, rather than internal. The students, most likely, cooperated because they wanted to show compliance to me, or because they wished to earn my favor (see Forster-Heinzer, Nagel & Biedermann 2019). Children's responsiveness was not necessarily linked to understanding and meaningful learning, but probably to social expectations and roles.

This cannot necessarily be seen as something negative. Engaging in a process that makes the participant feel important can create engagement, turning an external motivation -action aimed at pleasing the teacher- into an internal motivation - action aimed at internal satisfaction (Rigby 2014). Therefore, external motivation cannot be perceived as meaningless.

Children know and understand that presenting themselves according to expectations and standards, is associated with greater chances of success in school (Reichenbach 2007). My students knew that they were expected to follow what the teacher asked of them. More specifically, the children perceived that proving knowledge was not rewarded as they it was used to. That is, they tried to 'align' themselves with my wishes, in terms of how they wanted to learn. In short, the evidence of knowledge acquisition was not eliminated, but it was transformed into evidence of participation, cooperation and mutual aid.

The children had come to understand that the aim was to participate, cooperate and help each other, rather than to demonstrate knowledge. In this way, a habitus of solidarity began to take shape in which they had to do all the above automatically, without my having to remind or motivate them.

To conclude, the famous slogan '*There is no alternative*' in politics can be transferred in the decision about education and schooling as 'There is no alternative to teaching and learning'. My students had a pre-established schoolized image about what education is, what knowledge is, and what is school and the roles of students and educators. Despite the difficulties of the specific context, we had the opportunity to co-learn and co-create with the children. Possibilities to change practices were revealed. Through the pedagogical practices of the 'commons', the conditions are given for the teacher to create a sphere of care and sharing, where he/she allows an egalitarian atmosphere in the school classroom. What I have noticed as a researcher/educator is that learning can occur without it happening solely

through the transfer of information and/or explanation by the teacher (see Rancière 1991) and that it is possible for children to have a voice in their education. I have also noticed that they can participate and co-manage issues of their concern.

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