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**ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGIES, HETEROTOPIAS OR REAL UTOPIAS
IN EDUCATION: ADVANCING FREEDOM AND EQUALITY:
'A REALISTIC UTOPIA FOR A LIBERTARIAN SCHOOL OF
COMMONS'**

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Dimitriadou***

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study, which is part of the European program: 'SMOOTH Educational Common Spaces program. Passing through enclosures and reversing inequalities' Horizon 2020, is the exploration of the ways in which children -even from infancy- who participate in a libertarian learning community of commons, perform and possibly incorporate values such as solidarity, mutual aid, equality, sharing, autonomy and at the same time, collectively, produce knowledge through experimentation. In this research we apply the 'pedagogical documentation', a research methodology, which

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fully covers both the research and socio-political goals that have been set and which has been used in Reggio Emilia schools.

The present research attempts to deepen the ability of children to function as commoners by incorporating the principles of a libertarian framework in which the values of the commons are applied and enforced to a significant degree and on a consistent basis. We explore the ways in which children as subjects of commoning create tools for resolving conflicts, produce meanings and create independent learning groups. Since the ages of the children vary, it will be possible to explore the intergenerational socialization to and from themselves and also the way they adapt and their 'first steps' towards the communing of knowledge.

Keywords: learning community of commons, solidarity, equality, sharing, autonomy, collectively, children as commoners

The pedagogical practice at Little Tree already operates according to the commons' values of self-organization, cooperation, caring, sharing, and experiential learning. The Little Tree consists of a group of three educators and a group of fifteen children from 2-4 years old. Co-education of these ages means that children who have not developed speech and children who have very developed speech and can express quite complex concepts and expressions coexist in the same community. We see how over the course of the year the older ones help the younger ones to communicate and develop oral language while at the same time identifying, empathizing and commenting on their developmental steps. The teachers/companions, the children and their parents or guardians actively participated in this study. The members of this community come from different social backgrounds. The children's assembly lies at the heart of this learning community and the curriculum is emerging, an open work on progress co-constructed by the members or the commoners of this libertarian educational commons. A libertarian educational environment can, under certain conditions, be understood as a shared space, where study can be seen as a process of sharing in which knowledge and understanding are sought and shared (Korsgaard, 2019). A prerequisite for the engagement of an adult in such an environment is the acceptance of Cousinet's words 'by entering school, children already have a social life and thus a moral culture'. They therefore have the capacity to participate equally both in the school routine and the shaping of the pedagogical process and in the sharing of knowledge and the production of new collective meanings (Suissa, 2019).

In this research we applied the 'pedagogical documentation', a research methodology, which perfectly meets both the research and socio-political objectives set, and which has been developed and used in Reggio Emilia schools (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Postmodern Perspectives*, 1999). The tools used are the collection and analysis of a variety of materials, for example, handwritten notes by the researcher, the educators and the children about what is said and done, recordings and videos of morning daily life, photographs and children's artwork. By using these various media, the researcher was given the opportunity to record what the children do and say and what the educators do and say in relation to the children and their work. This methodology involves using this material as a means of reflection, for all participants on the pedagogical process, through a rigorous, methodical and democratic manner. This process is mainly about trying to see and understand what exactly happens in the pedagogical process and what the

child can do beyond predetermined frameworks of expectations and norms (Pechtelidis, Commons and educational reconfiguration, 2020).

In an environment that offers freedom of movement, action and participation as well as a variety of stimuli the scope for learning is broadened

The companions are not passive and neutral as they do not believe that there is neutral and objective education/knowledge but politically charged by those who construct it. Thus, the creation of autonomous learning groups happens in a prepared context that wants to reproduce another culture based on solidarity, equality and mutual help. Children's autonomy is translated through their freedom to move, to choose, to sort, to synthesize, and to create.

What seemed to be of most interest to the children during data collection was both group and individual activities related to their interests. Many times, children individually took the initiative to bring an interest of their own to the children's assembly. This resulted in the interest being collectivized as well as finding ways to work on the issue.

These activities may have been placed in the environment after observation by the pedagogical team and aimed at challenging children to develop and deepen their interests, or they may have been created by the children themselves with loose parts or structured materials with a specific target. In addition, the children showed throughout the whole period a great interest in their relationships with each other and in resolving their conflicts, as well as sharing their concerns with the rest of the community looking for possible solutions and answers. Most of the children who had mastered the tool of speech expressed their interest verbally or through their crafts and artistic creations. Children who did not speak or were in the process of learning to speak expressed their interests in non-verbal ways such as through their motor skills and by engaging in specific activities.

In the above examples we observe the children expressing themselves without instructions, but also the companions rephrasing what they have said, as well as emphasizing or supplementing on the children's interests. Moreover, what was observed is the children's unconditional acceptance of the multiple and different views of the others.

Example 1.

The assembly just started and everyone share their news or interests

C1. I, while you were doing the meeting with A. and C7, I took a potato (the one you brought to show us? You peeled it already?) not all of it. C2. If you

want, we can share it.

C1. Yes, but only after we cook it. C3. Otherwise we won't be able to eat it, it'll be stinky.

C1. I was thinking about what to do with the potato. I don't want to talk. C4. To bakes it in the oven. C3. Paint it with a rainbow and put it on the radiator.

C4. It'll burn. A2. Make a seal. C5. Paint it. C6. I say we put it in the oven and eat it later. C4. We should put hair on it C2. I'd rather make a house and eat her. A. says we should make the potato team

They're bringing potatoes and the assembly is over.

Example 2.

The theme of the children's assembly is a school trip to the feminist march.

C1: my mum let me go to the march and I took my drum and baguettes with me to beat the drum. There they were shouting what they wanted. A: Do you remember what they were shouting? C1: we want the thing to make jobs.

C2: they threw the ones that I covered my nose and my mom gave me a scarf around my neck. A: why did you cover your nose? C2: because they threw tear gas which is a powder that makes you close your nose and sting your eyes. it's some kind of chemical that these policemen are dropping. C1: I just saw yesterday when I was going to school I saw policemen.

C3: I came to the march but I wanted to be the leader of the march to say what we should do.

Gender issues in childhood are of concern to the pedagogical team, which researches and discusses these issues with parents, tries to create an environment that does not reproduce gender stereotypes and is vigilant in order to manage, together with the children, the cases where these issues arise instead of silencing them. Of course, because children do not live in a socio-political vacuum, they already manage gender issues, are confronted with social stereotypes and within a safe context they actively process them.

We observed several times during the recording that groups of children of the same gender spontaneously formed and engaged in stereotypical activities. Girls formed groups engaged in baby care and boys formed groups of digging and using tools. With the help of the prepared environment and the vigilance of the companions so that non-stereotypical behaviors were

not incriminated, we saw that in these groups that were formed, people of the opposite sex managed to participate without being commented on by the other children. We also observed how when a new interest arose, mixed-gender groups were formed as in the following example where a boy and a girl created an autonomous learning group that was subsequently joined by others and concerned the painting of the wooden house.

From the beginning of the community building, the pedagogical team has tried to convey the value of mutual-aid by offering help to the children themselves and at a second level by encouraging them to help each other. It is extremely interesting to observe children who have not yet acquired the verbal communication skill helping children with more advanced language skills. Thus, we see infants as young as two years old taking care of children of the same age or even older children, helping them to put on shoes, climb a tree, blow their nose, fill the water bucket, etc.

‘Guys, let’s go see who’s crying.’

This is a phrase that is often heard in Little Tree. In a community of young children, instant crying can be common as it is the primary way of reacting to minor tensions between children or when being hit during play. Crying is a social expression that calls for help, expresses a need, affirms and tightens relationships. When one of the children cries the others stop the activity and turn their attention to the person asking for help. ‘Are you okay?’, ‘Do you need anything?’, ‘How can I help you?’, ‘Do you need a hug?’ are phrases that children learn and use very easily. Small acts of helping each other such as a hand to pick up the one who has fallen, a glass of water or a tissue happen with touching frequency in the community and educators encourage them in every way possible. In an environment of respect, freedom and mixed ages and abilities, children very spontaneously adopt acts of mutual aid and empathy and enthusiastically repeat them at every opportunity.

Example 3.

C1: I say we do a performance. There will be someone playing Anna and someone playing Elsa. C2: I’ll be the first Elsa.

C1: No. C3 will be the first Elsa. First C3 then me then you okay? C2: No. Since you said 2 you solved your story. C1: you will be Anna! C2: No, I don’t like Anna.

C2: We’ll do two shows, yours and mine.

C1: Okay, then you’ll be in a different show. You’ll be in a different show from Eliana Elsa. C4: I’m going to do the knight. C1: Are you going to be in

our show or in the C2's show? C4: I'm going to do a show with both boys and girls and knights. C5: I agree with C4 performance.

C2: Let me tell you something! I want my show to have a lot of queens. And a few cats. And there will be flowers. C1: princesses? C2: Princesses! C1: Queens? C2: Queens! C1: Kings? C2: Kings! I will marry the king. C1: I will be the princess Elsa who will marry king Krystof.

We observed that the children act as researchers and the assembly is the place where they share and reflect on the results of the research they conducted during their activities, constructions, discussions, and play. In particular, we explored what children did, their desires at stake, how they moved, the rituals they created and how they functioned, materials that attracted their interest and why, words and expressions (patterns) that the children used individually and collectively in an event and how they worked. In this case children experience a prefigurative community in progress in the present, where imagination is not a dreaming but a realistic utopia, as Buber says in the *Paths of Utopia* "create the space now possible". In the Little Tree the co-building of a community from early childhood is part of an ethico-political proposal for self-organization and situated collective freedom.

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