

# Democratic Nowtopias from the Educational Commonsverse in Greece



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**Abstract** The chapter examines the role educational commons can play in addressing inequities, advancing democracy, and fostering inclusion by allowing teaching and learning to be shaped by students and teachers through values of equality, freedom, and creativity. The case studies discussed have been conducted in formal and non-formal settings in Greece comprising a self-organized autonomous libertarian educational community, three public preschool classrooms, of which one cooperated with university students, and a primary and secondary school. They sought to establish the preconditions for co-creating a community that offers opportunities for self-formation and equal participation. The paper argues that, under certain circumstances, the logic of the commons can flourish in pedagogical settings through enhancing active participation and inclusionary practices. However, the co-production and co-management of the teaching and learning process enacted by all members of the educational community in its everyday life and on a footing of equality, solidarity, autonomy, sharing and caring, still have a long way to go. Despite this fact, the diverse case studies presented here as examples of the Greek ‘commonsverse’ can operate as ‘crack’ in the education status quo inspiring new conceptualizations, methods, and actions pertaining to the educational commons.

**Keywords** Commons · Educational commons · Education · Children as commoners · Commoning practices · Community · Nowtopias · Commonsverse

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# 1 Introduction

The concept of ‘commons’ refers, mainly, to the dynamic processes of self-organized systems and communities that emerge around the need to reclaim natural resources or to socially produce goods including information and knowledge. These systems are structured or co-constructed as shared resources through active citizen participation and ongoing collaboration [24, 35]. Commoners are considered the subjects who embrace the commons’ philosophy aiming to create social networks based on solidarity, communication, sharing, care, and interdependence within communities. For this, education holds significant importance acting as catalyst for both societal development and personal transformation. Research on ‘educational commons’, emphasizing participatory and transformative teaching and learning, aligns with inclusive pedagogies that combat social injustices and inequalities [7, 30, 26, 27, 31, 32, 42, 43, 37, 44, 39]; and addresses the loss of shared knowledge (epistemicide) in favor of a caring approach to land and science [15, 16].

The present chapter emphasizes the need to discuss empirical data from diverse case studies in Greece conducted under the EU-funded project SMOOTH ([47], <https://smooth-ecs.eu/>). The project introduces ‘educational commons’ in formal and non-formal educational settings, exploring whether this conceptual framework can promote inclusion by treating children and teachers as commoners. These studies encompass diverse pedagogical sites in Greece, including a self-organized libertarian educational community, public preschools in Thessaloniki, a collaborative workshop between a public preschool in Athens and two departments (Education, Architecture) at the University of Thessaly, and a primary and secondary school in Thessaloniki where Mamagea, an environmental organization, implemented Workshops for Nurturing and Developing Environmental Resilience (i.e., WONDER). And they can all be seen as situated in the Greek commonsverse—‘a loosely connected world of different types of commons’ [5].

The primary objective of all these studies was to investigate the feasibility of enacting the commons’ logic in educational settings to combat inequality and knowledge gaps. In addition, they aim to highlight the unique experiences of participants as commoners, examining how alternative subjectivities, rituals, practices, and mentalities developed in these alternative educational spaces. Further, this chapter approaches educational commons as ‘nowtopias’ [5], realized in the present as ‘here and now’ aiming to promote social inclusion for all children and youth while subverting injustices, inequalities, and knowledge loss. Whilst all these concepts were not equally adopted by the case studies design, the shared goal was to address inequalities and provide open access to knowledge practices through the co-creation of a classroom or school community. This community offers young children, students, teachers, educators, parents, and the locals the opportunity for self-formation and equal participation through commoning practices such as peer governance, co-creation of knowledge, and collaborative learning. The chapter is organized into five sections including this introductory Sect. 1, the enactment of educational commons in diverse pedagogical sites Sect. 2, the discussion of methodologies and fieldwork

Sect. 3, the presentation of findings around the axis of children as commoners, commoning practices, and community Sect. 4, and concluding remarks Sect. 5.

## 2 Enacting ‘Educational Commons’ in Diverse Pedagogical Sites

Before delving into the methodological details of each case study, we provide brief overviews of the diverse pedagogical settings and the case studies where the principles of educational commons were enacted by young children, students, teachers, and researchers: *First*, the ‘Little Tree’ is a libertarian educational organization located at the outskirts of Thessaloniki in northern Greece, comprising a community of fifteen children aged 2–4 and five educators along with parents, guardians, and a researcher (Silia Randitsa) who all actively participate. The study led by Yannis Pechtelidis and took place over two years, in the springs of 2022 and 2023. Activities were conducted in the school’s semi-forested area and during field trips. Little Tree operated based on values of self-organization, self-formation, teamwork, solidarity, sharing, caring, and hands-on education. *Second*, action research was implemented in two ‘public preschools’ located at the urban scape of Thessaloniki in northern Greece and led by Yannis Pechtelidis. These two case studies occurred in the springs of 2022 and 2023, with sessions happening bi-weekly in the school environment. The first round included 40 children aged 5–6, two educators, and two educators-researchers (Angeliki Botonaki and Chrysa Gatzelaki) whilst the second round comprised 16 children and two preschool teachers from a different preschool, along with two researchers (Angeliki Botonaki and Elena Viseri).

*Third*, a Collaborative Design Commons for artefact making was co-created amongst children and teachers at a public preschool in Athens and students from two departments at the University of Thessaly (Education and Architecture) in the context of LeTME (i.e. Learning Technologies and Mathematics Education) laboratory and led by Anna Chronaki with Iris Lykourioti and Ioanna Symeonidou. Based on long term experience with pedagogic experimentations and/or interventions enacting principles of educational commons for subverting local injustices and troubling essentialism through in/formal mathematics education practices (see [11–15, 16]) the study involved around 20 children in the ages of 4–6, 10 university students in the ages of 19–21, a teacher-researcher (Eirini Lazaridou) and a researcher (Danai Binkel). Our collaborative experimentation was focused on reclaiming place (i.e., virtual and actual notions of land and territory) and mathematics (i.e., processes, objects, techniques, artifacts that allow potentialities to happen) as commons through the creation of affective spaces for both preschool children and adults who care in diverse pedagogic modalities. For this, the idea of ‘the island’ became the common denominator across all participants for not only to ponder with complex issues around ‘what is an island today for us and for the Mediterranean archipelago?’ but also to espouse the idea of ‘making an island for us’. As such, this co-creative process resulted into

reclaiming the imaginative place of an 'island' by tapping into its virtual transformative capacity to cover diverse needs and desires such as making: a place-based-tool for role-playing and storytelling, a hands-on game to play with dice and role-playing characters and, finally, manipulative artifacts for building a multiplicity of space constructions.

And *fourth*, the *WONDER Schools Project*: The first round was focused on environmental education, took place in a primary school in Thessaloniki's city center in spring 2022 and comprised 13 pupils and their parents/guardians participated. Weekly workshops were held by educators and environmentalists from the organization 'Mamagea' in collaboration with a researcher (Stelios Pantazidis). The second round of the case study took place during spring 2023, lasting approximately 2–3 h on a weekly basis, involving 18 students, teachers, an educator from Mamagea (Dominiki Vagati) and a researcher (Naya Tselepi). In both case studies, led by Yannis Pechtelidis, participants combined components of educational commons and cutting-edge practices about environmental education. Peer governance and combating adultism were the two main tenets of this design, which was built upon the collaborative planning of the schoolyard.

### 3 Methodologies and Fieldwork

The case studies organisation followed four main steps: (a) planning pedagogical projects; (b) enacting projects in educational settings; (c) evaluating project impact on children and communities; and (d) reflecting on project outcomes. Collaborative discussions occurred among teachers, educators, and researchers during each project's development. The teams in each study worked together for enacting the case studies and they had additional opportunities to engage in reflective training sessions during the design phase, reflective discussions on data collection and interpretation with a reference group, and regular meetings throughout the studies with the UTh reference group. These sessions included academics, activists, teachers, researchers, and artists, addressing fieldwork challenges. Below, the specific methodologies employed in each case study will be denoted.

At the Little Tree, the pedagogic practice of project-based learning created the basis for extra methods employed to promote conflict resolution amongst children and to introduce educational commons values. Active listening and pedagogical documentation were key tools for making such efforts visible. Data collection involved teachers, children, and the researcher. Interpretation occurred in collaboration with the UTh reference group as mentioned earlier. The case studies enacted in the two public preschools in Themi, Thessaloniki included pedagogical methods such as peer-to-peer governance, games, and drama whilst the methodology for data collection was based on action research. Activities ranged from imaginative improvisation to cooperative games and balance exercises. Qualitative data was gathered on children's collaboration and roles.

The Collaborative Design Commons study focused on a central urban neighborhood preschool in Athens, involving 21 children, including four with special needs, teachers, and researchers. A collaborative pedagogic experiment based on the ‘island’ project ran from November 2022 to February 2023, employing ethnographic fieldwork methods. The impact on children’s engagement with the commons was examined through various means, including participant observation and multimedia artifacts. And, finally, the Mamagea project employed two rounds of qualitative data collection and analyses. The first round encouraged verbal and nonverbal expression through peer-to-peer governance, active listening, and project work. The second round employed additional methodologies like Sociocratic Circle Method, participatory planning, SWOT analysis, and SMART goals. Below, the preliminary analysis of data collected in these diverse case studies will be presented with a focus on children as commoners, the commoning practices enacted and their effects for the community.

## **4 Children as Commoners, Commoning Practices and Community**

This section reports the findings from the aforementioned case studies in these diverse pedagogical sites by focusing on how they enact the educational commons in three distinct but interrelated axis: children as commoners, commoning practices and community.

### ***4.1 Children as Commoners***

The notion of the ‘child as a commoner’ has emerged recently [41, 43–45] and has affected relationships between adults and children. This notion was developed based on the image of the child as a protagonist and an engaged member of society ([8, 368–369], as well as on the argument that children have the right to participate in the public sphere. This argument aligns with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child [40]. In a commons-oriented education, understanding children as social actors is vital not only for how they become visible, but also for their contribution to knowledge production and their participation in the decision-making processes. In this context, pupils and students do not depend on teachers or adults in general explaining reality to them. In particular, the main objective is self-formation, sharing and caring, community identity and experimentation and, consequently, the emancipation of children from adults (teachers and parents) at ‘here’ and ‘now’ or the ‘nowtopia’ as mentioned earlier. Specifically, in the libertarian learning community of the Little Tree, for example, educators work towards how young children (aged 2–4) will be able to take initiatives within the ‘school’ without their help. It is characteristic

that before the beginning of the assembly, children allocate roles by themselves, they coordinate, keep the minutes with the help of an adult companion. Children are treated by the adults as capable of making decisions and of shaping their everyday lives. Therefore, through their everyday practices, they experience and perform the role of the active citizen within the boundaries of a micro-community. The emphasis in Little Tree is placed firmly on the present of children's life, which is not sacrificed in the name of a successful adult future [41, 43–45].

Further, in a commons-based education, children actively engage in the social life of their community. Their involvement constantly evolves through new ways of participating and experimenting. This alter or hetero-pedagogical approach of commons questions the traditional discourses on children, which construe them as passive, weak, defective, and ignorant beings that are lacking not only in specific knowledges, capabilities, and skills, but also in learning capability [41] that also becomes evident in traditionally fixed epistemic areas such as mathematics [13–15, 16]. Companions and/or educators through educational commons can challenge in effect the predominant relations of dependence between children and adults. As such, children's active engagement throughout our pedagogic experimentation based on the 'island' project of the public preschool in Athens also noted children's potential as commoners. More specifically, we were able to experience their involvement as creative commoners with huge interest in participating and contributing to the emerging activities. This realization could be noted at three levels: taking part in classroom assemblies, sharing learning including mathematics, struggling with relations amongst them all. Concerning the first level, children were noted as being active participants in classroom assemblies taking place as everyday routines (i.e., the regular morning or noon assembly, other assemblies along the process for setting or clarifying what the project was about and what could be the aims for activity, negotiating ways of working, sharing the making of varied products such as drawings, artifacts and arriving at specific conclusionary remarks or key points). In addition, children co-created ideas (e.g., what is an island, how to name it, what stories could they narrate, how to understand the island as a place of being, how to create and construct our own island, how to measure its perimeter). In this, they were involved in making the map of an island and they further problematized the idea of measuring its perimeter and area so that to know what objects could fit on the island. Their convivial creations were transformed into a floor-game that stayed with them and was also shared as a playful activity with children from other classrooms.

However, children's awareness of themselves and others as active participants and contributors in the classroom setting differed according to age, gender, and ability. In particular, children between the ages 4–6 needed closer guidance to follow the procedures of exploring an idea (i.e., what is the island), expressing their views orally, making or contributing towards making a product (i.e., creating drawings, constructing a map together with others etc.). In addition, a couple of boys and girls expressed dominant behaviors through oral or body language in the ways they shared experiences and construction of artifacts. And moreover, although the four children diagnosed with ASD were present in all classroom activity by being accompanied with two special needs teachers, but it was harder to follow the full series of daily

routes that required oral expressions (i.e., classroom assemblies or voicing their views) or attention to precision (i.e., constructions, counting, measuring). Attendance to such differences meant a serious reorganization (also in negotiation with the two special needs teachers) and highlighted the importance of the teacher as caring, continuously, for mediating values of sympathy and self-other dialogue that supports and facilitates a differential access to the series of activities as a teaching and learning process that matters for all but in diverse ways to each one of the participants throughout the case-study.

Although it is mainly adults initiating the commoning processes, children play an active role in these practices, which they conceptualize and enrich with their own experience and views. Adults try to avoid too much interference and they carve out a space for children to express themselves freely and to shape the process in their own terms. Children have the ability to influence educational and social life as a whole and to partly steer the process of subjectification [41]. In this context, adults are able to recognize, value, and respond to this image of the child as a commoner. During the WONDER project of Mamagea in the public High School of Thessaloniki, the educator of Mamagea and the researcher avoided too much interference in children initiatives and acted as ‘companions’, which was aligned to the practices of educational commons and proved to have helped a lot of youngsters in their process of empowerment, self and collective autonomy. The additional value of this case study was that elements of the Sociocratic Circle Method (SCM) [6, 19, 46] were introduced by the educator of Mamagea and the researcher, expert in Sociocracy, as a methodology to cultivate the culture of communication, peer governance, decision making and roles distribution within the class and their assemblies. Here, it is important to remind that the ambience of a typical classroom within a public High School in Greece evokes disciplinary approaches and hierarchical power relationships; the students’ desks are aligned and the teachers usually teach in a one-way direction, whereas, there is little space for active participation, co-creation of knowledge and co-shaping of school life. Thus, when participants were asked, from the very beginning, to create a ‘circle’ (of chairs without desks), this fact in itself was a ‘crack’ in the everyday school life of these students. The ‘circle’ under facilitation, as the basic structure of the Sociocracy Method’s operation [10] was necessary because everyone could look each other in the eyes as well as they could pose their bodies towards the speaking person. Nobody was left out of the circle, all participants were visible and could be heard because their voices matter. The facilitator provided a safe space and time for each participant to express herself and respected the right of not wanting to speak. In this class, the challenge for the students was to break their previous pattern of communication; to not actually listen to others, to speak over them and to be highly judgmental of the other’s sayings. Through the Sociocratic circle with facilitation, they experimented to wait patiently for their turn, to actively listen to each other and to say something meaningful on their turn. As for the judging pattern, that was worked out through another process of Sociocracy for the evaluation of the tasks, within which they learned to give positive feedback to the work done by a classmate or a group, as well as fruitful proposals of how this could be done better. The role of facilitator was mainly performed by the educator or

the researcher but soon the students felt intrigued to experiment. In this framework of communication and respect, class students slowly understood that the educator of Mamagea and the researcher really cared about them and their ideas, that we wanted to help in bringing them to life and that we meant our words. This was the key point for their ‘transformation’, somewhere in the middle of the project’s implementation, when most of the class students ceased to behave in apathy and started to actively engage in the process. This was the basis for the passing from their individuality to collective formations and activities of the class.

In educational commons, children are considered capable of making decisions and shaping their daily lives. This challenges the prevailing idea that children can only learn certain things at certain ages. Children in the learning communities of the study through everyday practices, such as children’s assembly, sociocracy circle etc., experienced themselves the role of citizenship within the boundaries of their community. ‘Citizenship’ in education is linked to an eminently political question: ‘what is your image of the child and childhood?’. The image of the child as a commoner challenges the dominant stereotypical discourses for children, which marginalize them, as they are considered by nature immature and incapable of participating in the social and political scene [41]. It also challenges the image of a selfish child who does not care about others: For example, the adage ‘Let’s check to see who is crying, guys’ appears frequently in Little Tree. Instantaneous crying is a common response to minor conflicts between young children or when they are hit while playing in a group of children. Crying is a social expression that solicits assistance, communicates a need, validates, and strengthens bonds between people. When a youngster screams, the others put an end to what they are doing and focus on the individual who is pleading for assistance. Children pick up and use phrases like ‘Are you okay?’, ‘Do you need anything?’, ‘How can I help you?’, and ‘Do you need a hug?’ extremely quickly. In the community, small acts of kindness—like lending a hand to someone who has fallen, offering a drink of water, or offering a tissue—occur touchingly frequently, and educators support them in any way they can. Children easily absorb acts of mutual aid and empathy and gladly repeat them at every chance in an environment of respect, freedom, and diverse ages and skills.

Furthermore, in one of the preschools in Thessaloniki, a child from the next class came over and started sobbing nonstop, causing two children to react in an unplanned way by showing him unselfish love, devotion, and concern. The same thing happened to a young child who was having trouble adjusting to being away from his mother and a girl who was guarding him during what she perceived as vulnerable times. Additionally, one child informed the researchers that he wasn’t feeling well and was a little sleepy before we even began the intervention. To support the boy’s propensity for self-care, the researchers asked him what he believed would be helpful. He responded—surprised at the promptness of the response—that he needed to relax and lie down for 30 min, precisely outside the classroom, where the children’s coats were situated. He did leave and lay down on his own for a half hour and then returned, demonstrating our trust in his judgment and commitment to the arrangement we had formed. Furthermore, two girls offered to save others by inviting them to share their raft during a game of self-activity and problem solving that took



place at the beginning of the interventions, but it turned out that most of the children were only interested in their own rescue.

## 4.2 *Commoning Practices*

The commoning practices in the educational field is a form of minor politics, which develop around specific themes that are critical stakes in society, such as childhood and adulthood, education, and community. Minor politics in educational settings undermine the power of dominant discourses which define what is true and rational and hence govern our acting and doing; and move discussion, for example, from the application of a practice which is deemed as developmentally appropriate to the politics of developmentality, or from speaking about interventions and regulations on 'the child in need' to the politics of the image of the child ([20], 145).

Minor politics of the commons might create a convivial environment for facilitating and supporting the practice of 'care of the self', making a space for critical thinking and democratic discussion about subjectivity, opening possibilities for new relations to self and the world (ibid, 146). For example, during the assemblies in the public preschool in Thessaloniki (2nd round), children formed several group rituals related to convivial tools. Using a totem to organize discussions, greeting 'our little dove'—an imaginary friend who needs our love, care, and tranquility—sitting in a circle on the floor, thumbs up/down to make decisions, and saying goodbye after each meeting by forming a tight circle, piling their hands on top of one another, and saying aloud 'Shiny Little Stars,' the name of the group the children chose during the meeting. Through open-ended games and drama games, researchers and teachers provided young children the time and space to find and develop their own priorities while assuring that they were engaging equally and without any conflicts. Moreover, during the second round, the children asked to have about ten minutes to express their thoughts and share their experiences. The researchers and preschool teachers decided to give room (the first 10 min of the interventions), where they could talk about anything they wanted, such as home issues, their dreams, hobbies, or just plain thoughts. This made the children feel better and helped the class become more cohesive.

Some routines were also generated, through the Sociocratic methodology, in the WONDER project of Mameagea (2nd round) in the public High School of Thessaloniki, some of which were: sitting and communicating in a circle, looking (with eyes and body) the speaking person, active listening; showing their consent with corporal expressions of 'like', 'dislike' or 'so and so' (using either a thumb or both of hands) etc.. 'Rituals' were also important; as for example, within the processes of 'check in' and 'check out' to pose the questions 'how do I come in the circle?' and 'how do I leave the circle?'. In this way, time and space were given for the participants' feelings and particularities. Class students were initially making fun of it because they were not used to expressing their feelings within the school environment, however, they seemed to like it and commonly use it as the project evolved.

Another important highlight from the same case study is that new understandings of the common resources—here, the school yard—introduces new practices and uses of it. The first step, within this respect, was to give to the students the opportunity to map the school yard; they were asked to trace spaces and places as well as its common uses. The next step was to bring to the map's surface the invisible spaces; the ones where vulnerable groups of school children tend to go and hide; spaces of isolation and spaces of gender discrimination. Within the map making processes, the classmates worked collectively, and they showed a great interest and joy. The maps created attempted to be a new view of the uses of the school yard and a stimulus for reflection for the youngsters. Followingly, we accompanied students in a visioning methodology, within which we asked them: to put into words and emotions 'how the school yard appears in their dreams'; to place themselves and others in there and; to imagine new imaginary ways of using the space. Our aim was to transform the current school yard's uses into imaginary ones, to expand the boundaries of 'what the realistic is'. Then, we mapped the youngsters' ideas and images per category and created the first mind map. This map, together with the previous ones, offered new understandings and imaginaries of the school yard that provided triggers for new uses; in this way, the yard started to be a place of our meetings and working during the project.

The final step of the collective decision-making process was to organize the students' ideas by using the S.W.O.T. and S.M.A.R.T. analysis in order to find out what interventions in the school yard are more realistic—under the new understandings of realistic—and according to our project's framework. In addition, students decided by consent that they wanted a football pitch within the yard and graffiti related to this topic. Here it is important to remind that the four (4) girls of the class also acknowledged the need for a football pitch and consented to the proposal although they wouldn't become actual users of it. Even more, students were encouraged to prepare an official document and a layout of their proposal as a request towards the Municipality's Department for Technical Services. Finally, they participated in the open celebration of the school year's ending with a full presentation of their project, proposal and graffiti. Through *peer governance* people make decisions, set limits, follow rules, accept responsibility, and resolve disagreements on an equal footing. It is a trustworthy way for children/students, teachers and educators, and parents/guardians to forge sincere bonds with one another and a cohesive kind of commons.

Students of the public secondary school of Thessaloniki from the WONDER project of Mamegia (2nd round) also experienced *peer governance* through various processes based on the Sociocratic Circle Method (SCM) [34, 36, 49] Following the circle structure of discussion, *the decision making* was made with consent after a process of 'shaping the consent' under the SCM facilitated by the certified facilitator. The consent has contributed that all voices were heard and included in the final decisions, that participants were happy with them as well as committed to the tasks. In addition, by this process students discovered and fostered their own priorities and improved active inclusion. '*Open election*' for roles distribution contributed a lot in the change of the students' representation of the 'other' and following to the

creation of ‘trust’, as a basis of collective bonds. The process supported the students to acknowledge and speak out the positive characteristics of the ‘other’ and, therefore, of themselves. This very fact empowered them—even the most introverted ones—to take on roles, to be responsible for the realization of their tasks, to have trust in others and to actively involved in *collective activities*. The following quotes related to this transformation come from the researcher’s diary notes: “It was not something that they took over with joy and pleasure; instead, we had to work a lot in the roles distribution. A decisive point was when we followed the open election process of the Sociocratic Circle Method, within which we asked them to elect the presenter’s role and to give positive arguments for him/her. It was encouraging to hear that they could see in depth the others’ capacities and talents and say something good for them, contrary to their previous pattern of ‘judging’. After this process, it was easier to find presenters for the day.”

In the public preschools of the study in Thessaloniki, through open-ended drama games, children gained abilities for peer governance. Researchers used Augusto Boal’s ‘Stop and Go’ methodology to ‘freeze’ the children and hear their thoughts at crucial moments. They also called for brief assemblies to give children the chance to express their opinions fairly on how they built their game. The classroom rules were developed by all the children. Children were given the authority to behave as social agents actively participating in ‘public life’ when they impulsively urged the other children to be quiet in an effort to take action and so contribute to the regulation of the latter. Children were encouraged to remind other children to follow the rules they have set for themselves rather than having researchers do it for them. As a result, some of the responsibility is shifted to the children and the researchers avoid exercising complete vertical power, which leads to more horizontal peer-to-peer governance. When we need to make a group decision, like where to hide the treasure, we listen to everyone’s ideas and make a choice based on what the majority of children desire. Also, children were given a box with an upper side opening similar to a ballot box so they could communicate with the researchers while they were not present. This demonstrated to young children that their voice mattered and that everything they had to say would be heard, empowering them to behave as social agents and actively participate in society. All of these instances involved democratic open discussion and the engagement of most of the children of the class.

Similar instances were also denoted in the Collaborative Design Commons study as children participated actively in different phases of the project sharing skills for the use of tools and artifacts and supporting each other to express ideas publicly either orally, in writing and through drawings and constructions. It was noted that opportunities for children to alternate roles in these processes created for them trajectories for transformative growth not only for the children who were assumed as not having yet these types of knowledge or modalities to communicate but also for those who assumed for being able and thus in need for leaving that privileged position behind. In a commons-based education, the teacher and the students work together to *co-create learning* experiences rather than aiming for a preset result that was planned specifically for them [39]. *Peer learning* is a popular practice in educational commons where children collaborate, support one another, and use their knowledge

and abilities to teach younger children while also learning themselves. Peer learning can be viewed as a method of co-learning without the involvement of a teacher, as well as a manner of facilitating the process of co-constructing knowledge.

One of the themes that emerged from the WONDER project (1st round) was “Designing together with children and promoting community building”. The participants co-shaped their ideas for the school yard during the participatory design process. This tendency has been seen in many other experiments when participants shared an aim [29]. Children’s roles are frequently constrained and directed by adults, even in the context of participatory planning [48]. In light of this, the educators in our situation made an effort to avoid imposing their opinions on the group’s other participants, instead serving as a facilitator and offering their own knowledge and experience. Strong connections among educators, researchers, parents/guardians, and children were built through the workshops. During the participatory design process, every time the responsibility was given to the children, there was, in general, excitement. Old and new participants collaborated smoothly during the participatory design session. The new members first struggled to operate independently and were reluctant to take the initiative. But the older members—the children—took the initiative to assist the younger members. In the participatory planning (bottom-up approaches) process of the study, the users actively engaged in it, in contrast to the traditional design methods (top-down approaches) where the participating components are typically the designer (active role) and the client (passive role). Because it encourages respect and understanding for the protection and maintenance of the place, this participatory planning led to a more immediate and in-depth appropriation of a space by users [9]. Users participated in all phases of the educational project, from planning to the final formulation of the developmental process of the plan, using the three primary levels of participatory planning (information, co-planning, and co-decision). In addition to transforming the expert-user collaboration into ongoing, mutual learning, participation also turns the process into an organic one with the goal of enhancing place—and community-based identity [18].

### 4.3 *Community*

In a world where inequalities increase more and more, democracy is challenged, competition, individualism and an intensified exploitation of the environment is experienced and where the coexistence of people’s contrasting interests, values and cultures trigger racism and xenophobia, there is an urgent need to rethink and reshape the concept of community. According to the sociological theories of late modernity and the post-traditional risk society, individualism becomes the key feature of contemporary societies [2, 3, 23]. Although they contribute significantly to the understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social in the late modern era, they appear largely abstract and detached from people’s everyday lives and experiences. They focus exclusively on individualism and ignore the elements of solidarity, cooperation, collective meaning making, and struggle for common

values. Therefore, they fail to offer a comprehensive description of contemporary social reality. Moreover, these theories fail to acknowledge that traditional class and gender divisions of people still affect the life chances of individuals, although their effect is increasingly indistinguishable from the subjects ([42], 147–149).

Additionally, several important philosophers, such as Nancy [33], Esposito [22] and Agamben [1] have responded to the need to reshape the concepts of community, commons, and politics. The philosophical approaches of these theorists are very interesting, however, as Kioupkiolis [25] points out, they remain trapped at an abstract level of an ontology of being-together. They construct the ‘common’ as an ontology of co-existence cut off from any real political practice. They do not engage with central issues of democratic politics such as dominant forms of power and specific forms of collective action struggling to defend and shield democracy. Consequently, they fail to focus their analysis on key concepts around which societies and communities develop, such as antagonism, segregation, power, and hegemony. These concepts have been adequately developed in the work of Laclau and Mouffe [28] and, recently, utilized to theorize why adolescents refuse formal knowledge such as mathematics [13]. To the critical remarks by Kioupkiolis [25], we could add the absence in the work of the above theorists of an actual educational policy of commons that would aim for an ontology of coexistence and sharing ([42], 147–154).

The concept and value of community is central to any form of commons. Therefore, in order to understand the concept of community in its complexity and materiality and not only in abstract terms, we have carried out research in the framework of SMOOTH in formal and non-formal education settings, where emphasis was placed on the process of commoning governance, self-formation, as well as on the practices of conflict resolution within educational commons, which create a strong sense of belonging to the community. Specifically, the two preschools in Thessaloniki have enacted peer learning, collective decision-making, and open, reflective conversations all contributed to a stronger sense of community among the children. Additionally, during some activities, participants created small artifacts together, such as two drawings done in collaboration, a story with illustrations they called ‘Athropocrocodile Tale’ based on a drama game they had played earlier in the day, and a spaghetti and marshmallow tower. Most crucially, children co-produced calm and respectful conditions of sharing, cooperating, and coexisting during drama games.

In relation to the community, the Collaborative Design Commons study made efforts to create a sense of community not only amongst children as classmates but also between the school and the parents including their worldviews as well as amongst children in the school community and students at the two departments of education and architecture at the University of Thessaly. For this, *first* the school project based on the idea of ‘the island’ supported for creating bonds across children, adults, and the idea of ‘the island’ as a place to be imagined, inquired, understood, constructed, and transformed into something that could become children’s own space to work with. Children brought into the classroom stories and materials from their homes such as pictures, pebbles or, even, sand from the islands that they or their relatives had visited. In addition, maps were also brought into the classroom for the children to explore and find out what an island looks like when represented on two-dimensional

maps and even when it had to be scaled down so that it fits on a piece of paper and, thus, opening up mathematical questions of size and scale. Issues of counting and measuring were thus introduced as tools for inquiring and identifying in approximation questions related to size and scale. *Second*, a dialogue was created amongst the school children's work on 'the island' and students at the university through organizing workshops where children's constructions and ideas were listened to and encountered for a co-design experience of artifacts related with 'the island' idea. This dialogue was supported with discussions amongst children and students, the workshops, and a padlet was created that documented visually the whole process of pedagogic experimentation ([https://padlet.com/dan\\_iii/reclaiming-place-and-maths-as-commons-through-affective-spac-sloq5f7vz93rb5uy](https://padlet.com/dan_iii/reclaiming-place-and-maths-as-commons-through-affective-spac-sloq5f7vz93rb5uy)). *Finally*, the tribute issue of the school newspaper opened the project not only to the school community but also the communities of nearby schools and the neighborhood as well as the final year school ending celebrations where children shared their work and the university student artifacts with everybody.

In the High School of Thessaloniki from the WONDER project of Mamagea (2nd round), we cannot argue either that a 'community' was shaped, instead a 'sparkle' of a school community emerged that provoked 'cracks' in the school everyday life. This school community, consisting of school students, teachers and experts of the SMOOTH project co-shaped and put the basis for the co-governance of the common source; the school yard. This 'community building' was implemented through a series of steps, highly based on the Sociocratic Circle Method, starting from the individual towards the school environment. Four aspects in this process are interesting to note. *First*, students' empowerment; participation in issues of their concern. The participatory planning and intervention in the school yard through the Sociocratic Circle Method helped students—even the most introverted ones—to take on roles and to be responsible for the realization of their tasks. When the classmates were discussing the creation of graffiti on the yard's wall, a girl spontaneously started to draw some design drafts. She was receiving poor support from her classmates, so she asked for help from schoolmates experienced in graffiti. We shall highlight that these girls were not experienced graffiti makers, however they stood up in a boys-graffiti-world; they believed in themselves and took the initiative to make graffiti related to football, a traditionally man's field, from scratch. Their motto from the beginning was "what counts is the effort". *Second*, the transformation of teachers and active involvement. A transformation was noticed in the attitude of the High School's Principal during the realization of the project; at the beginning she was suspicious and negative towards the class students' initiatives and proposals. However, when she learned that they took an active stance and they had already found a way to finance the graffiti she proposed, alternatively, that the school council could cover the cost and she motivated them to continue with the other activities. Hence, her attitude, which was highly influencing the other teachers', was generally positive and more active towards the class's activities. *Third*, sharing with other classes. At the same time, the class children aimed to share the progress of their project with the other school students. Thus, on the last day of their school year, an open celebration was organized in the school yard where they presented the project and the Sociocratic

Circle Method; their request towards the Municipality's Department for Technical Services for a new football field and the layout; the initial mental maps of the school yard as well as the graffiti. The other school students appeared to be highly interested and raised questions in this respect. Even more, some school students, experienced in graffiti making, helped the girls' team within the relative task. And *fourth*, joy and happiness. Joy and happiness were important factors in the implementation of the case study, since both of them seemed to have been missing from the students' school life. By providing some snapshots of collective activity and joy within the implementation of the WONDER project, students seemed to have enjoyed it a lot, and this fact can be a meaningful contribution to their school's day life.

In all case studies, the dominant relations of dependency between children and adults are being challenged whilst the values of 'autonomy' and 'self-formation' are promoted for the emancipation of children within the communities formed. The concept of dependency, in general, implies vulnerability and precariousness. This is particularly evident in relation to children, who according to prevailing discourses on childhood are considered vulnerable by nature and therefore need to be dependent on invulnerable and powerful adults. In these cases, 'dependency' refers to forms of power that threaten and violently undermine children's status. In this context, misconceptions about 'humanity' are created on a bipolar axis, i.e., there are vulnerable children on the one hand and invulnerable or strong adults on the other. In this sense, 'dependency' occupies a central position in the hegemonic violent dispositif/apparatus of the educational institution. However, 'dependency' can take other forms and contents. The concept of 'dependency' is ambiguous and ambivalent. In the case studies of the SMOOTH project, dependence on one another is inevitable and necessary because everyone is seen as vulnerable, not just children. One cannot survive and thrive without interdependence and a supportive environment ([42], 152–154). In this sense, the value of community is of utmost importance for members of the diverse pedagogical sites presented here.

Interdependence, solidarity, collectivity, participation, recognition and acceptance of diversity and autonomy, self-formation, movement, and experimentation are the materials with which the community of educational commons is built. The community that emerges from educational activity and peer governance is not perceived as a closed and fixed and consolidated entity, but as an assemblage of evolving encounters between people and groups that coexist and symbiote. The community is evolving as each participant influences and is open to be influenced by the other [21]. An education of the commons aims at the collective and equal formation of a community consisting of people with different perceptions, values, beliefs, and interests that are very likely to cause antagonism and conflicts between them. It is therefore necessary to resolve conflicts or disagreements that arise, for the benefit of both the individual and the community to which they belong, thereby promoting its sustainability and resilience. The way children dealt with disagreements and conflicts that had been arising among themselves during the investigation was a significant issue that came to light in Little Tree. The educators aimed to explore the ideals of cooperation, solidarity, and nonviolent communication with the young children in the Little Tree's environment. In this situation, the adults provided the children with communication



tools by recommending the various ways they can ask for what they want, express their emotions, or set boundaries. During the pedagogical documentation, it has been found that children not only use these tools in a useful and efficient manner, but also create new ones on their own. Additionally, some children take on the role of a mediator or facilitator to assist other children in settling conflicts.

Finally, in order to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors—since some behaviors may be (un)acceptable for some people but not for others—active listening and conflict resolution practices [4] were used in the public preschools in Thessaloniki. Simple descriptive behaviors were distinguished from those that included elements of personal judgment, active listening exercises, emotion recognition, empathy-building, practice in responding to unacceptable behaviors, and experiential pantomimes (i.e., bullying management through I-Messages like, “When you shout at me, I feel afraid,” for instance). This point refers to one of the basic design principles of a common proposed by Ostrom [35], namely the need for commoners to co-create conflict resolution mechanisms for the maintenance and well-being of a community of the commons.

## 5 Conclusions

The SMOOTH project as enacted through the Greek commonsverse has yielded evidence for combating inequalities from participatory observation in different case studies, discussion with preschoolers and students in focus group interviews, evaluation games, and feedback from teachers and educators. Specific conclusionary remarks for each one of the case studies summarize as following:

*First*, at the *Little Tree*, young children (2–5 years old) are treated as capable decision-makers within a micro-community, fostering active citizenship. Children readily embrace mutual aid and empathy in an environment of respect, freedom, and diverse ages and skills. *Second*, at the two *preschools in Thessaloniki*, active listening and conflict resolution practices are essential for peer learning and governance. Rituals within learning and decision-making processes contribute to self and other understanding. *Third* at the Collaborative Design Commons study, age, gender, and ability affect children’s awareness, active participation in all classroom activities and in processes of artefact making, dramatisation and transforming. Teachers play a vital role for mediating values like sympathy, dialogue and self-other awareness but also techniques for making artefacts that involve important mathematical ideas. Cooperation between children and teachers at preschool and students at the university departments creates bridges for transdisciplinary knowledge construction across mathematics, arts and crafts. *And fourth*, at the *WONDER Project of Mamagea*, older students (approximately 16 years old) need to experience respect, validation, and opportunities to shape their own environment by themselves. Involving students in decision-making processes is crucial for a vibrant school life. The Sociocratic Circle Method empowers students in peer governance.



Based on the findings discussed above three main points must be noted here. *First*, it is feasible for education to enact the commons. Educational commons are frequently established outside the formal education system in small-scale libertarian communities of non-formal systems, although the logic of the commons can be developed and gain ground in public formal education as well. *Second*, educational commons can be realized in the ‘here and now’ even within the formal educational institution. And *third*, promoting social inclusion for children and youth can be experienced as ‘nowtopias’.

Moreover, specific reflections and recommendations for further work in the Greek commonsverse could include the following points:

- The collaborative management of educational commons by the school community must be considered as work in progress.
- Public preschools are more open to new approaches as compared to primary and secondary schools.
- Public schools face challenges due to rigid Ministry programs and the pressure exerted by the capitalist market on education and curricula.
- Teachers need support for pedagogical processes, including participatory peer practices.
- The local community plays a crucial role in shaping the school environment.
- Strengthen cooperation among preschools, primary and secondary schools, academic institutions, and other members of the communities.

As a final point, one could denote that studies like this can challenge the status quo of contemporary schooling and work towards inspiring educators for enacting new concepts, methods, and actions for educational commons. We believe that this could foster democratic ‘nowtopias’ in the Greek commonsverse.

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