

Article

Social Entrepreneurial Learning in Self-Organized Early Childhood and Primary Education Settings in Greece

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how social entrepreneurial competencies develop among young children in self-organized early childhood and primary education settings in Greece that operate outside traditional state–market logics and embrace a commons-based ethos. While existing approaches to Entrepreneurship Education (EE) frequently privilege individual skills and economic productivity, this study reframes entrepreneurial learning through the lens of social entrepreneurship. Using a qualitative comparative case study, we analyze educational material from self-organized schools and include focus groups with educators. The findings show that social entrepreneurial competencies emerge as present-tense relational practices embedded in everyday collective life, rather than as future-oriented economic skills. By situating these findings within contemporary debates on Social Entrepreneurship Education (SEE) and Childhood Studies, the paper advances a model of entrepreneurship grounded in empathy and collective action in response to social antagonism. In these schools, social entrepreneurship in childhood is understood as a mode of being and becoming in common, enacted through pedagogical worlds in which children learn to live, decide, care, and act together in the present. Overall, the findings highlight the potential of commons-based pedagogies to reconfigure entrepreneurial learning as a relational and collective practice in preschool and primary school education.

Keywords: educational commons; commoning; childhood studies; social entrepreneurship education; care; self-governance; assemblies; more-than-human

1. Introduction

In a world shaped by ongoing economic instability, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, ecological degradation and geopolitical conflict, education is increasingly expected to cultivate not only knowledge acquisition but also key transversal competencies that enable learners to navigate uncertainty, engage democratically and contribute to more sustainable and resilient futures. This shifting landscape calls for educational approaches that move beyond traditional content delivery and bolster flexible, creative and socially responsive forms of learning. EE has emerged as one such framework, equipping children with vital capacities such as creativity, problem-solving, resilience, adaptability and initiative, which are now widely recognized as essential for navigating both the future of work and the challenges of contemporary society (Huber et al., 2014).

However, current approaches to EE remain limited in both scope and orientation. Much of the existing literature is sparse and predominantly shaped by neoliberal paradigms that emphasize economic productivity, competitiveness and individual success (Sarikaya



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& Coskun, 2015). EE frameworks also tend to conflate profit-oriented competences with those belonging to social and sustainable entrepreneurship, failing to acknowledge their conceptual and pedagogical distinctions (Hogenstijn & Cuypers, 2023). Such models often overlook the children's present-tense agency, relational development and emotional growth, core concerns within Childhood Studies, which foreground children's lived experiences and rights (Abebe et al., 2025; Baltador et al., 2024).

It is important to clarify that the use of the term "competencies" in this study does not refer to instrumental, measurable skills located within the individual child. Competencies are conceptualised as relational dispositions and emergent practices that arise within specific institutional arrangements. In this sense, the study adopts a relational and practice-based epistemology of learning, where entrepreneurship is not a transferable skill-set but a mode of being-in-common. SEE offers an alternative perspective, emphasizing children's capacity to recognize social challenges, act collaboratively, and generate value for the common good within their communities (Hogenstijn & Cuypers, 2023; Pischetola & Martins, 2024).

To explore more collective, socially embedded and relational approaches to SEE, this study turns to the concept of commoning, which foregrounds mutual care, shared responsibility, peer governance and the co-management of shared resources (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). At the same time, commoning strengthens experiential learning, as children participate in shared decisions and responsibilities that sustain the everyday practice of democracy in the classroom.

Although scholarship on Educational commons, SEE, and Childhood Studies has developed rich theoretical insights, these studies have largely evolved in parallel (Abebe, 2025). There remains limited empirical research examining how commons-based institutional arrangements concretely structure the emergence of social entrepreneurial competencies in schools. In particular, while SEE identifies empathy, collaboration, and social value creation as central dispositions, it remains underexplored how these orientations become pedagogically organized and sustained through everyday school life.

This study addresses that gap by empirically demonstrating how commoning operates as a pedagogical mechanism for cultivating social entrepreneurial learning within self-organized early childhood and primary education initiatives in Greece. Drawing on a qualitative comparative case study of commons-oriented schools, the paper analyzes how collective governance, relational autonomy, solidarity-based economic participation, and ecological stewardship function as institutional infrastructures that nurture social entrepreneurial dispositions in the present tense of childhood. The study investigates the following research question: How are social entrepreneurial competencies enacted and cultivated through commoning practices in self-organized early childhood and primary education settings? This perspective shifts the focus from teaching entrepreneurship as a curricular topic to examining how specific institutional arrangements shape children's participation, responsibility and social agency in everyday school life.

2. Challenging Neoliberal Narratives: Childhood Studies Meets SEE

Is it not paradoxical that contemporary educational discourse often imagines the child primarily as a not-yet, future worker, future innovator, or even a future entrepreneur? EE frequently orients itself toward what children will become, rather than recognising who they already are: social actors, citizens of the here and now, with agency, emotions, relationships and the capacity for meaningful participation. This temporal displacement, which positions children as "incomplete adults in preparation", reflects a deeply neoliberal logic that prioritises economic futures over children's present experiences, identities and rights (Bandelj & Spiegel, 2023; Pechtelidis et al., 2023).

Childhood Studies has long critiqued this narrow future-oriented framing, arguing that such visions obscure children's current capacities. When EE follows this logic, it risks becoming a mechanism for shaping compliant, competitive subjects aligned with market demands. This critique becomes even more urgent when considering the dominant EE models. Widely used frameworks rarely distinguish between competences for profit-driven entrepreneurship and those for social or sustainable entrepreneurship (Hogenstijn & Cuypers, 2023; Rigg & van der Wal-Maris, 2020).

SEE reframes entrepreneurship as a relational, value-driven, and socially responsive endeavour. Research shows that SEE cultivates compassion, perspective-taking and collaborative problem-solving, capacities that are already visible in early childhood settings (Sarikaya & Coskun, 2015; Elder & Stordal, 2025). Because early childhood education naturally emphasises cooperation, imagination, sharing and care, SEE aligns closely with its pedagogical foundations.

Filtering SEE through Childhood Studies does not merely reinforce its emphasis on empathy and social value creation; it redefines the temporal and ontological foundations of entrepreneurship itself. If children are recognized as present social actors instead of future entrepreneurs-in-training, then social entrepreneurship becomes a mode of current participation in collective life, not simply preparation for later intervention.

Childhood Studies thus shifts SEE from a competence-based framework toward a relational and present-tense enactment of social agency. This creates conceptual space for educational models—such as commons-based schools—where children participate as commoners. The following section introduces the concept of the commons and examines how commons-based educational settings organize these forms of participation.

3. School as a Commons, Children and Teachers as Commoners

The concept of the commons, originally developed in response to the privatization of natural resources such as forests, land and water, offers a powerful lens for reimagining educational practice. Grounded in Ostrom's (1990) empirical work on collective resource management, the commons paradigm demonstrates that sustainable governance need not depend on state or market control, but can emerge through community-based self-organization, mutual care, and stewardship.

The commons can be understood not simply as shared resources but as the ongoing activity through which communities collectively produce, sustain and expand shared value (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Recent scholarship emphasises that the commons emerge through commoning, a generative, relational and affective labour that binds people, practices, ideas and places into shared forms of life (Duff, 2025; Fernández González, 2025). This shift reframes the school as a commons in the making: a space constituted by the everyday attachments, habits and cooperative practices through which students and educators cultivate trust, solidarity and mutual responsibility.

Commoning thus moves beyond managerial or infrastructural understandings of community, highlighting instead the shared labour of "making sense in common" and sustaining attachments that hold a collective world together (Duff, 2025). When translated into schooling, these principles give shape to what has been described as the Educational commons, a pedagogical orientation that reconfigures the school as a shared resource and a participatory community.

Educational commons are characterized by shared resources (time, space, knowledge), participatory governance, and peer learning, where students and educators act as co-managers of their learning environments. This approach promotes student agency and collective responsibility. As such, commoning creates fertile ground for the emergence of social entrepreneurial competencies.

Drawing on this theoretical foundation, this framework reimagines schooling as a relational and co-produced process rather than a system of transmission and control (Pantazidis, 2024; Pantazidis & Moisiadou, 2025). Instead of treating the classroom as an administratively defined space governed by hierarchical authority, the school becomes a collective resource, an environment where knowledge, practices and relationships are co-created and co-managed by students, teachers and the broader community (Pantazidis & Bantiou, 2026).

However, translating this commons-based logic into formal schooling reveals deep tensions with institutional structures. As Bernstein (1996) argues, most school systems are organized through strong classification, rigid boundaries between knowledge domains and roles as well as strong framing, where pacing, sequencing and evaluation are tightly controlled by the institution. These mechanisms reproduce hierarchical relations and restrict opportunities for autonomy, co-decision-making and horizontal interaction. De Lissovoy (2022) interprets this configuration as a form of normative surveillance, where compliance is mistaken for learning, while Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power helps illuminate how such structures regulate bodies, behaviours and possibilities for action.

Building on this understanding, the idea of the school as a commons is not merely metaphorical but situated within concrete educational experiments that reconfigure learning as a collectively produced and collectively governed good. As Pechtelidis and Kioupioulis (2020) argue, Educational commons bring together a tripartite structure: shared resources, rules of co-governance, and a community of "commoners" who actively co-shape meaning, relationships and everyday practices. In such environments, governance is horizontal, participation is embedded in daily routines, and children are recognized as present actors who contribute to the democratic and relational fabric of the school.

This shift is not merely methodological but also deeply emotional and ontological. It requires educators to navigate the uncertainties, vulnerabilities and affective risks that accompany pedagogical transformation (Zembylas, 2021). Such shifts are sustainable only when supported by communities of educators who share values, dilemmas and responsibilities, recognizing that care is not only interpersonal but also political (De Lissovoy, 2022).

It is important to clarify that the commons framework is used in this study primarily as an analytical lens and does not constitute an ontological claim about the schools examined. The initiatives are presented as educational configurations in which practices associated with commoning are enacted to varying degrees, without implying that they fully embody or exhaust the concept of the commons. This distinction allows the study to analyze how commons-based principles function interpretively in understanding pedagogical practices, while avoiding normative or essentialist claims about the empirical status of the cases.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretive stance. Given the exploratory character of the research and its focus on meanings, practices and relational dynamics, qualitative methods were considered appropriate for examining how social entrepreneurial competencies are understood and enacted within self-organized educational initiatives. Focus groups were selected as the primary method of data collection.

4.2. Research Context and Participants

The research focuses on self-organized, community-based educational initiatives in Greece that operate outside the dominant state-market paradigm and are guided by principles of autonomy, cooperation, horizontal governance, and care. These initiatives are part of a broader ecosystem of libertarian and commons-oriented schools. Specifically, the

study examines Ataxia School and two initiatives affiliated with the Network of Libertarian Schools.

First, Ataxia School, the Democratic School of the Mountain located in Steiri, Boeotia, is a pedagogical initiative that operates under the legal form of a Social Cooperative Enterprise (in Greek Koin.S.Ep.). It offers students the opportunity to experience education in a holistic way, combining decentralization, engagement with the natural environment, community involvement, and the cultural life of the local area. The school cultivates values such as environmental awareness, equality, and collective management. It includes both kindergarten and primary school (up to Grade 5), which operate as co-located single-teacher schools. The role of educators is primarily supportive and facilitative, accompanying and encouraging children throughout the learning process. The main aim of the initiative is to promote a form of high-quality education that incorporates children's voices and interests into the educational process. Through the use of the school assembly as a central pedagogical tool, children collectively discuss their needs and co-create their own learning pathways, supported by educators within a framework of egalitarian relationships. Ataxia School is currently in its third year of operation.

Furthermore, the "Network for Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning" consists of the following self-organized educational initiatives: Mikro Dentro (Little Tree), Sporeio (Seedbed), Mikro Vouno (Little Mountain) and Mikros Ntounias (Little World). The Network was established in 2019, following a nationwide meeting on Libertarian Education, with the aim of dissemination, research, and collective action. The Network envisions a free school as part of a broader vision for a free society, grounded in values of sincere communication, solidarity, cooperation, and a balance between individual autonomy and collective coexistence. It functions as a space for dialogue, reflection, and collaboration around Libertarian Education and Experiential Learning, bringing together individuals and collectives who share these pedagogical and social principles.

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of the self-organized educational initiatives included in the study. It summarizes their years of operation, governance structures, and age ranges in order to situate the empirical material within their institutional contexts.

Table 1. Overview of Participating Self-Organized Educational Initiatives.

Initiative	Years of Operation	Governance Structure	Legal Status	Location	Age Range
Ataxia School	2023–today	Educators, students and parents	Social Cooperative Enterprise	Steiri (Boeotia)	4–11
Little Tree (Mikro Dentro)	2014–today	Educators, students and parents	Association	Thessaloniki	3–6 (until 2014) 2–5 (since 2020)
Seedbed (Sporeio)	2016–2025	Educators, students and parents	Social Cooperative Enterprise	Athens	2.5–5
Little Mountain (Mikro Vouno)	2015–2020 (morning cycle), 2021–today (afterschool)	Educators, students and parents	Without	Athens region	2.5–5
Little World (Mikros Ntounias)	2015–2022	Educators, students and parents	Association	Lesbos	2.5–7

Given the strong pedagogical and ideological commitments of participants, particular attention was paid to group dynamics during the focus groups. The facilitator actively

encouraged divergent perspectives and invited quieter participants to contribute, in order to avoid premature consensus or dominant narratives. Moments of hesitation or ambiguity were treated as analytically valuable instead of smoothed over. Field notes were taken during and immediately after the sessions to document interactional dynamics, including patterns of turn-taking, affirmation, and tension. These observations informed the subsequent analysis, particularly in identifying both convergences and internal frictions within the initiatives.

Prior to the focus group discussions, preliminary informal discussions and online video calls were conducted with members of the initiatives. Some participants were already known to the researchers through previous professional or educational encounters, which facilitated access and trust. The preliminary video calls served a dual purpose: first, to clarify the aims, theoretical orientation and scope of the research, and second, to allow participants to assess whether their educational initiatives aligned with the research context and focus.

4.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through two semi-structured focus group discussions. Focus groups were chosen because they enable the co-construction of meaning through interaction, dialogue, and collective reflection, processes that resonate with the commons-based pedagogical orientation of the studied initiatives. An interview guide was used to structure the discussions, covering themes such as educational values, commoning practices, social entrepreneurial learning, governance structures, and institutional challenges.

In total, five educators participated in the study. The first focus group involved two members of Ataxia School. The second focus group included educator representatives from the Network of Libertarian Schools, specifically two participants from Seedbed and one participant from Little Tree. Within the Network, the participating educators were collectively designated by the initiatives as representatives of their respective schools, while in the case of Ataxia School the participants were the core teachers responsible for the everyday pedagogical coordination of the school.

Each focus group lasted approximately 120 min and was conducted in Greek. With participants' informed consent, the discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations included voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymization of data, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Although the number of focus groups was limited, analytical saturation was reached through the depth of the discussions, the strong thematic convergence across participants' accounts, and the triangulation of focus group data with documentary material from the initiatives' public communications.

In addition to the focus groups, documentary material was analysed, including publicly available content from the initiatives' official websites and social media pages (Facebook). The material included mission statements, pedagogical descriptions, event announcements, posts, and visual documentation presenting everyday activities and educational practices. These materials were used to contextualize and triangulate the focus group findings, providing insight into how the initiatives publicly articulate their pedagogical orientations.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, following a reflexive and iterative process. This approach was selected in order to systematically examine patterns of meaning within participants' narratives and to interpret how social entrepreneurial learning was constructed through everyday pedagogical practices. Qualitative content analysis

allowed for both inductive sensitivity to the data and theoretically informed interpretation, aligning with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the study.

The analytic process began with data familiarisation, involving repeated readings of the focus group transcripts and documentary material in order to gain an overall sense of the dataset and identify preliminary patterns. This was followed by open inductive coding, during which meaning units were identified and coded in relation to pedagogical practices, relational dynamics, and organizational principles. Coding was conducted without a predefined coding frame, allowing categories to emerge directly from the data.

In total, a large number of initial codes were generated and subsequently compared, refined and grouped into broader analytical categories based on conceptual similarities. This process involved constant comparison and iterative reworking, as many segments of data were multilayered and related to more than one analytic dimension. The development of categories therefore required a careful balance between analytic specificity and conceptual integration, in order to preserve the richness of participants' accounts without producing an overly fragmented structure.

Analysis moved iteratively between data and theory, allowing emerging categories to be interpreted in relation to key concepts from SEE, Childhood Studies, and commons theory. Through this abductive process, higher-order thematic patterns were constructed, capturing recurrent processes such as commoning practices, forms of childhood agency, collective governance, economic participation, and ecological orientations.

Throughout the analytic process, attention was paid to convergences and divergences across initiatives, as well as to tensions, contradictions and ambiguities within participants' narratives. Such inconsistencies were approached as theoretically productive, illuminating the complexities and limits of commons-based pedagogical practices.

To illustrate the analytic audit trail, Table 2 presents concrete examples of how raw data excerpts were developed into higher-order themes. This stepwise representation enhances transparency and clarifies the interpretive movement from coding to thematic abstraction.

Table 2. Illustrative Example of Coding and Thematic Development.

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Codes	Analytical Category	Higher-Order Theme
<i>"If there is no assembly, there cannot be a school."</i>	Institutional necessity; governance awareness; children's participation	Everyday democratic governance	Commoning Governance—Learning Democracy Through Everyday Practices
<i>"Processes are optional. . . but there is shared responsibility."</i>	Optional participation; accountability; collective consequences	Situated autonomy within collective structures	Situated Autonomy and Collective Care
<i>"Many parents contributed a lot, even cooking, because one family would cook every day. There was a kind of circularity."</i>	Collective provision; reciprocity; community contribution	Reciprocal community economy	From Consumption to Contribution: Reframing Economic Participation
<i>"Society doesn't believe that a child can deal with economic issues. An 8-year-old calls for an offer for buses and they think it's a joke."</i>	Children's economic agency; age norms; institutional responsibility	Children as economic actors	From Consumption to Contribution: Reframing Economic Participation
<i>"We might do composting and discuss for five months how a peel turns into organic matter."</i>	Ecological cycles; experiential learning; regeneration	Ecological value creation	Ecological and More-than-Human Entrepreneurship

To enhance analytical rigour, the researchers maintained detailed analytic memos and engaged in ongoing reflexivity, critically examining their own positionality, theoretical

commitments, and prior engagement with the field of Educational commons. The analysis prioritised interpretive depth, conceptual coherence, and theoretical saturation, foregrounding an interpretive approach to meaning-making. This epistemological stance is consistent with qualitative content analysis as an interpretive research strategy, where meaning is understood as co-constructed through analytical engagement with the data.

Overall, the analytic process combined systematic coding procedures with reflexive and theory-driven interpretation, enabling the identification of robust thematic patterns while remaining attentive to the relational, contextual and political dimensions of the empirical material.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles for qualitative social research within the Greek and broader European regulatory context, including compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union, 2016). The research posed minimal risk, as it involved voluntary participation in focus group discussions with adult educators concerning professional experiences, pedagogical practices, and educational values. No sensitive personal data were collected, and no interventions were conducted. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the aims of the study, the research context, the methods used, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Explicit consent was obtained before audio recording.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured at the level of individual participants. All transcripts were anonymized, and no personal identifiers were included in the analysis or reporting. Participants requested that the names of their educational initiatives be mentioned in the publication; written consent for institutional identification was therefore obtained, while individual educators remained anonymized. They were not considered vulnerable in a way that would require special ethical approval. Participants were adult professionals and did not fall under categories requiring additional ethical safeguards. The study involved non-invasive qualitative research methods and posed no foreseeable risk to participants.

Formal ethical approval from an institutional review board or ethics committee was not sought, as such approval was not required for this type of low-risk qualitative social research within the relevant national and international ethical frameworks. At the time of the study, the researchers did not hold an active institutional affiliation that could provide formal ethical clearance; previous academic departments were consulted and confirmed that ethical approval could not be issued, as the research was not conducted within the context of a postgraduate programme. Ethical integrity was ensured through informed consent procedures, transparency regarding the aims of the study, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any point. Data were pseudonymized, securely stored on password-protected devices, and managed in accordance with GDPR data protection principles.

5. Results

The analysis revealed four interrelated thematic patterns that illuminate how social entrepreneurial learning is enacted within self-organized educational initiatives. Instead of conceptualizing entrepreneurship as an individual competence or future-oriented economic skill, the findings demonstrate that social entrepreneurial competencies emerge through everyday practices of collective governance, relational autonomy, communal economic participation, and ecological care. Together, these themes highlight a reconfiguration of entrepreneurship as a situated, relational, and ethically grounded form of learning, embedded in practices of commoning, democratic participation, and more-than-human coexistence.

Theme 1: Commoning Governance—Learning Democracy Through Everyday Practices

Across the self-organized educational initiatives, governance was enacted through the school assembly, which functioned as a central pedagogical structure for collective decision-making. Participants described the assembly as a real institutional mechanism embedded in everyday school life, through which children actively shaped rules, routines, and shared responsibilities.

“The tool for decision-making is the Assembly and we choose horizontality. In the end, we had a stable pedagogical assembly, a management assembly, some parent meetings and the Children’s Assembly.” (Seedbed)

In this sense, democratic participation was not simulated through role-play or isolated classroom exercises, but lived as a constitutive condition of educational practice. Children regularly coordinated assemblies, acted as facilitators or minute-takers, and participated in deliberations about excursions, conflicts, schedules, and collective projects. According to educators’ accounts and documentary records, these processes appeared to create opportunities for children to express opinions while engaging in practices such as framing shared concerns, negotiating differing perspectives, and collaboratively identifying issues requiring collective attention and action. This extends Dewey’s (1916) and Freire’s (1970) conception of democracy by situating it within contemporary commons-based educational practices.

“Usually in January or February, children realize that if there is no assembly, there cannot be a school.” (Little Tree)

This remark suggests reflexive awareness of the assembly as constitutive of the institution itself. Participants consistently emphasized the distinction between authority and hierarchy. Authority was described as relational, grounded in dialogue and collective trust, and decoupled from institutional power. They positioned themselves as facilitators and companions, not as decision-makers, highlighting a pedagogy based on influence rather than control.

“The adult always has power, but with children we have equivalence in decision-making. I listen, I propose, I accompany. Influence, not imposition.” (Little Tree)

Here, authority is redefined as dialogical coordination rather than command. This pedagogical stance resonates with Biesta’s (2011) notion of democratic subjectification, where learners become political subjects through engagement in collective responsibility rather than through the internalization of predefined norms. From a Childhood Studies perspective, these practices directly challenge dominant assumptions that frame children as politically immature or incapable of institutional agency. Instead, children are positioned as legitimate commoners, capable of shaping the norms, values, and organizational structures of their educational communities. Importantly, this recognition of children as institutional actors cultivates what may be described as institutional imagination, the understanding that institutions are collectively sustained and therefore open to transformation.

Democratic governance was further supported through the intentional design of the pedagogical environment. Mixed-age groups, open access to materials, and the absence of fixed curricular outcomes created conditions for autonomy, dialogue, and collective coordination.

“The environment is prepared according to children’s interests—language, mathematics, arts, plants, animals.” (Little Tree)

Educators described a continuous process of reflection and redesign of learning spaces, asking whether learning environments fostered collective engagement.

“We constantly ask: are materials accessible? do all voices fit? how do we create a space that does not demand a specific outcome?” (Seedbed)

Analytically, these findings illustrate democracy as practice in place of democracy as curriculum, aligning with the logic and ethics of the commons that locate political learning in lived experience. From a Social Entrepreneurship Education (SEE) perspective, these governance practices function as a pedagogical infrastructure for developing specific social entrepreneurial competencies. Participation in assemblies cultivates collective problem framing; rotating roles such as facilitator or coordinator foster participatory leadership and distributed accountability; and children’s recognition that “there cannot be a school” without assembly reflects the development of institutional imagination.

Theme 2: Situated Autonomy and Collective Care

In this study, autonomy was not understood as unrestricted individual freedom, but as a situated and relational capacity emerging within a collective ecology of care. Analytically, autonomy functioned at three interconnected levels: as a pedagogical condition structured by the school environment, as an ongoing participatory process, and as a developmental outcome observable in children’s relational agency. Educators consistently described autonomy as something cultivated within a community, not against it, emphasizing children’s visibility, initiative, and freedom of movement, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of collective responsibility and shared norms.

“Respect for childhood and visibility, encouragement of initiative and independence of children, a freedom of movement.” (Little Tree)

Here, freedom of movement is framed as supported and recognized within a shared pedagogical structure, not as unbounded individualism. This form of autonomy was embedded in pedagogical cultures that explicitly sought to build learning communities and collective trajectories of participation. Educators stressed that libertarian education involved cultivating a collective ethos grounded in cooperation, mutual recognition, and responsibility toward others.

Participation in activities was often described by educators as optional; however, this freedom was presented alongside shared responsibilities and collective consequences. Based on educators’ accounts and available documentation, autonomy appeared to operate as a relational process: children could exercise choice within collectively structured conditions and encounter the implications of their decisions within ongoing group activities. Children were reportedly encouraged to decide whether to engage in certain processes, while also being informed that withdrawal might affect collective decision-making. In this sense, opting out did not necessarily remove responsibility but could reshape how responsibility was distributed within the group. Accordingly, autonomy was framed by educators not as the absence of obligation, but as a form of ethical positioning within a shared social context.

“I need to know that if I leave a process, once the Assembly ends, I will not have presented my view.” (Seedbed)

This excerpt illustrates how choice is coupled with awareness of collective consequences. This relational understanding of autonomy aligns with ethics of care frameworks, which conceptualize moral agency as grounded in attentiveness, interdependence, and responsibility over independence (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Care was not treated as a private or emotional disposition, but as a political and pedagogical practice that sustained collective life. This was evident in everyday practices such as children caring for younger peers, supporting neurodiverse classmates, managing shared materials and resources, and choosing repair over replacement.

“Community excursions are structured by the children themselves, based on their interests, with our coordination.” (Little Tree)

Here, initiative is exercised within coordinated structures, illustrating autonomy-in-relation. Through such practices, children developed what Edwards (2005) terms relational agency: the capacity to act through mutual recognition and collective coordination, rather than through individual competence. At this level, autonomy appeared as a learning outcome, an enacted disposition characterized by negotiated decision-making, accountability to others, and responsibility toward shared material and social worlds.

“They understand that they participate in something different, that they negotiate with the adult world.” (Ataxia School)

The emphasis on negotiation underscores that agency is dialogical and situated, not unilateral. Importantly, educators located these pedagogical choices within broader political critiques of dominant educational and social models. Self-organized schools were described as existing simultaneously within and against the dominant system, consciously resisting binary logics of state versus market and promoting alternative imaginaries of education, cooperation, and social organization.

“Education is not politically neutral. We started our schools from a socio-political concern—what we live does not satisfy us and we do not want to be trapped in existing binaries.” (Little Tree)

Children’s agency was not expressed through competition or self-advancement, but through practices of “making, giving, and returning”, a cyclical logic of value production rooted in sharing, reciprocity, and mutual care.

“The children produce knowledge, share it, and receive other knowledge back.” (Ataxia School)

This cyclical description signals value as collectively generated and redistributed. These findings suggest that social entrepreneurial learning in these contexts was not oriented toward producing self-sufficient individuals, but toward nurturing relational subjects capable of acting responsibly within complex social ecologies. Autonomy, therefore, emerges not as an inherent quality, but as a relational capacity shaped through participatory pedagogical practices.

Theme 3: From Consumption to Contribution: Reframing Economic Participation

Children’s engagement with economic practices was not framed through abstract concepts of entrepreneurship or financial literacy, but emerged as a lived, collective and relational experience. Children in Ataxia school regularly participated in activities such as organizing small bazaars with stones, bread and handmade objects, managing stalls during community festivals, and collectively deciding how to distribute or exchange goods. These practices were not oriented toward individual profit, but toward shared contribution and mutual support, with children often expressing a desire to “support the school” or “help the community”.

The notion of “offering” framed exchange as contribution rather than market transaction. Economic participation was thus structured around cooperation, reciprocity and care rather than competition or accumulation. Participants described how children offered food and handmade items to elderly people, workers and visitors, and how economic activities were organized as collective events involving families and community members.

“Many parents contributed a lot, even cooking, because one family would cook every day. There was a kind of circularity.” (Seedbed)

Participants described this practice as a form of “circularity,” referring to reciprocal provision within the community. These practices resonate with theoretical accounts of

gift-based and solidarity economies, where economic action is inseparable from social bonds and ethical commitments (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Children's economic activities reflected alternative forms of value creation grounded in social responsibility, diverging from dominant market logics of consumption and individual gain. This aligns with SEE, which conceptualizes entrepreneurship as the identification of social needs and the co-creation of solutions for the common good within a social and ethical economy (Hogenstijn & Cuypers, 2023).

Beyond SEE, these findings also resonate with economic sociology, which emphasizes that economic action is socially embedded and not governed solely by market rationality. Similarly, scholarship in the political economy of childhood challenges the assumption that children are economically passive or merely preparing for future market roles. The practices observed here suggest that children act as present-tense economic subjects, contributing to the sustainability of shared institutions through collective organization and responsibility.

"The most significant thing the initiative does is the transition from the school of consumption to the school of participation, and from the economy of performance to the economy of care." (Ataxia School)

This quote names participation and care as economic logics. Children were not positioned as passive consumers or future economic actors, but as present participants in processes of self-organization. In several cases, children actively requested to engage in economic decision-making, such as managing shared resources or contributing to the financial sustainability of the school.

According to educators' accounts, children's requests to participate in "economic management" suggest an emerging awareness of the collective responsibility involved in sustaining shared resources. From a Childhood Studies perspective, these practices challenge dominant representations of children as economically incompetent or politically immature (Wall, 2022). Participants highlighted how children's involvement in economic matters was often met with disbelief by the broader society, precisely because it disrupted normative assumptions about childhood.

"Society doesn't believe that a child can deal with economic issues. An 8-year-old calls for an offer for buses and they think it's a joke." (Ataxia School)

This reaction illustrates how children's economic agency challenges dominant age norms. Through everyday practices of collective cooking, repairing broken infrastructure, sharing food, and organizing community events, children developed confidence in their capacity to act together and sustain shared worlds.

"If a window breaks, we will fix it ourselves. They learn here and now through self-organization, not delegation." (Seedbed)

Practices of repair and provisioning were described by educators as linking economic activity to the everyday maintenance of the educational setting. From this perspective, social entrepreneurial learning was interpreted less as the acquisition of skills for future market participation and more as the cultivation of economic orientations grounded in solidarity, reciprocity, and collective care. Based on educators' accounts and available documentation, children appeared to encounter elements of social entrepreneurial competence through participation in communal practices of contribution and cooperation embedded in everyday school life. In this framing, economic agency is interpreted not primarily as early preparation for competitive markets, but as engagement with relational and collectively sustained forms of value creation.

Theme 4: Ecological and More-than-Human Entrepreneurship

A particularly distinctive dimension of SEE across the self-organized initiatives was the extension of entrepreneurial imagination beyond human-centered productivity toward ecological and more-than-human relationality. In the sayings of participants, ecology was not approached as a body of environmental knowledge or a set of “green skills,” but as an everyday practice of ethical judgement, collective negotiation, and restraint (Hörisch et al., 2025). Children were encouraged to deliberate on whether, when, and how it was appropriate to intervene in natural spaces, disturb ecosystems, or interact with non-human beings, approaching ecological relations as moral and political questions embedded in everyday practice.

“There is a part of the field that is completely uncultivated, without any intervention, and even whether you are allowed to step there is a matter of discussion.” (Little Tree)

The emphasis on discussion indicates that ecological decisions were approached as matters of collective ethical deliberation. In this sense, ecological learning was not oriented toward mastery over nature but toward cultivating sensitivity to limits, interdependence, and coexistence. Practices such as lowering one’s voice in the forest, observing insects, or refraining from intervention reflected a pedagogical ethic of non-dominance, where care was expressed through attentiveness and restraint.

In this context, non-intervention functioned as a form of enacted ecological restraint. At the same time, practices such as composting and collective gardening functioned as experiential examples of circular and non-linear economic processes. Through extended engagement, children witnessed how “waste” was transformed into organic matter, re-signifying value as something that emerges through ecological cycles and relational processes.

“We might do composting and discuss for five months how a peel turns into organic matter.” (Little Tree)

Composting allowed children to witness ecological regeneration as a tangible and cyclical process. These practices reflect a model of entrepreneurship that decentralizes human-centered productivity. Within an expanded SEE framework, value creation here is not defined in monetary or market terms, but as the regeneration and sustenance of socio-ecological systems. Ecological care becomes a form of social value creation insofar as it protects shared resources, sustains collective life, and generates long-term communal benefit. This orientation resonates with social ecology (Hörisch et al., 2025), which emphasizes the interdependence of social organization and ecological responsibility, as well as with more-than-human pedagogies that challenge human exceptionalism and foreground relational ontologies between humans, non-humans, and environments. Entrepreneurship here is not framed as innovation for growth, but as collective stewardship of shared ecological worlds.

Ecology was also explicitly politicized through critiques linking environmental degradation to capitalist extraction and social inequalities. Participants framed ecological care as inseparable from broader struggles against commodification and hierarchical social relations.

“Capitalism exploits natural and intangible resources, just as it exploits education.” (Network school)

“Self-organization is ecology; the intrinsic value of living beings is social ecology.” (Seedbed)

These statements connect ecology to systemic critique. At Ataxia School, ecological entrepreneurship was further articulated through public engagement and civic action. Children participated in community festivals and initiatives opposing environmentally harmful infrastructures, such as wind farms and waste incineration projects, especially when these interventions affected landscapes they had personally experienced.

Ecological sensitivity was also cultivated through everyday coexistence with animals, insects, and natural spaces, with care and empathy developing through embodied encounters embedded in daily practice.

“My daughter cries when she sees an insect and says we should open the window so it can get out.” (Ataxia School)

“We go out into nature every day. The children follow its rhythm.” (Ataxia School)

Care appeared to emerge through repeated embodied encounters with animals, insects, and natural environments. Across contexts, participants articulated a post-anthropocentric understanding of nature, challenging narratives of human domination and emphasizing relational coexistence within ecological cycles.

“Animals were in the forest before we arrived; we are visitors in their home.” (Little Tree)

“We are not rulers over nature. We are part of the cycle.” (Ataxia School)

From a SEE perspective, these findings can be interpreted not simply as an environmental addition but as a potential conceptual extension of how entrepreneurship is understood within educational contexts. Based on educators’ accounts and available documentation, children’s engagement with ecological care appeared to create opportunities to approach ecological fragility as a shared concern, to participate in collective responses, and to recognize forms of value associated with regeneration, preservation, and interdependence. In this interpretation, entrepreneurial orientations were described less in terms of market expansion and more in relation to sustaining socio-ecological relations and reflecting on ways of living together within fragile more-than-human environments. In this sense, ecological commoning practices may be understood as opening space for reconsidering entrepreneurship as an ethical, relational, and collectively situated socio-ecological orientation.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to EE by showing that social entrepreneurial competencies can emerge as present-tense dispositions in childhood when learning is organized through commoning practices grounded in collective care, participation, and shared responsibility. Across the self-organized educational initiatives examined, entrepreneurship was not introduced as a curricular subject, an individual trait, or a preparation for future economic participation. Instead, it took shape through the everyday relational infrastructures of collective life (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024).

These findings challenge dominant approaches within EE, which tend to conceptualize entrepreneurship primarily as a set of individual competences oriented toward innovation, performance, and economic productivity (Sarikaya & Coskun, 2015). Even when social and sustainable dimensions are acknowledged, they are often subsumed under generalized competence frameworks that do not clearly distinguish between market-driven entrepreneurship and social value creation (Hogenstijn & Cuypers, 2023). In contrast, this study shows that social entrepreneurial learning does not necessarily require explicit entrepreneurial instruction. It can emerge organically through institutional arrangements that structure everyday participation, responsibility, and care.

In the initiatives studied, commoning operates as the pedagogical mechanism through which childhood agency is enacted and social entrepreneurial competencies become lived practices. This convergence shifts the analytical focus from “teaching entrepreneurship” to examining how educational forms themselves produce entrepreneurial subjectivities.

This convergence enables a conceptual shift from “children learning about entrepreneurship” to children practicing social entrepreneurship as commoners. Children

participate in real institutional arrangements where social value is collectively produced and sustained. They contribute to communal economies and cultivate ethical relations with more-than-human environments.

Importantly, this form of agency does not align with the individualistic subject implicit in many EE models. Across the cases, autonomy was consistently constructed as relational and situated, emerging within interdependence rather than independence. This resonates with ethics of care approaches, which conceptualize moral agency as grounded in responsibility, attentiveness, and relationality (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), as well as with accounts of relational agency that locate action in collective coordination and mutual recognition (Edwards, 2005).

The findings also reconfigure how economic participation is conceptualized in early childhood. The studied initiatives framed economic life as a domain of collective contribution, reciprocity, and care. Practices such as shared provisioning, community events, collective repair, and solidarity-oriented exchanges enacted alternative logics of value, consistent with theories of gift and solidarity economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This challenges dominant assumptions within both education and society that children are economically incompetent or should remain outside economic decision-making.

A further conceptual extension concerns the ecological dimension of social entrepreneurship. The study shows that entrepreneurial imagination can be oriented beyond human-centered productivity toward more-than-human relationality. Ecology was treated as an everyday ethical practice of attentiveness, restraint, and coexistence, and in some cases as a form of civic action. This resonates with social ecology perspectives (Hörisch et al., 2025) and more-than-human pedagogies, suggesting that social entrepreneurial learning can be grounded in socio-ecological responsibility and collective care. In this sense, entrepreneurship becomes a collective capacity to sustain shared worlds (human and non-human) through practices that redistribute responsibility, care, and power.

Taken together, these findings invite a broader rethinking of what counts as entrepreneurial learning in early years. The study suggests that social entrepreneurial competencies are better understood as emergent properties of pedagogical forms, meaning the ways in which educational life is organized, governed, and lived. For educational theory, this implies a shift from competency-based models toward relational and institutional perspectives on learning. For educational practice and policy, it suggests that fostering socially and ecologically responsible entrepreneurship may require less emphasis on adding entrepreneurial content to curricula, and more attention to building democratic, caring, and commons-oriented infrastructures within educational institutions.

The study also has implications for debates on neoliberal education. By foregrounding participation, care, and collective governance, the examined initiatives challenge the dominant human capital logic that frames education primarily as preparation for economic competitiveness. This aligns with critical perspectives that view education not as neutral or technical, but as inherently political and ethical (De Lissovoy, 2022). In this light, SEE appears not as a specialized pedagogical field, but as a potential alternative framework to market-oriented schooling.

Finally, several limitations and analytical considerations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on self-organized educational initiatives that are explicitly committed to commons-based and often libertarian pedagogical values. This political and ideological specificity shapes both the practices observed and the forms of social entrepreneurial learning that emerge. Rather than treating this solely as a limitation, it should be understood as an analytical condition of the study.

In sum, the study suggests that social entrepreneurship in childhood is not primarily a matter of teaching children how to innovate or compete in future markets. It is a matter

of creating pedagogical worlds in which children learn how to live, decide, care, and act together in the present. This repositions social entrepreneurship not as an educational outcome, but as a mode of being and becoming in common.

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Abbreviations

SEE Social Entrepreneurship Education
EE Entrepreneurship Education

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