



Building resilience in times of turbulence: agentive responses to changing conditions for Greek heritage language education in Sweden

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Abstract

Drawing on theories of agency in LPP (e.g., Bouchard and Glasgow, in: Bouchard, Glasgow (eds) *Agency in language policy and planning. Critical inquiries*, Routledge, 2019) and educational governance (e.g., Ramiel and Lefstein in *Camb J Educ* 52(2):217–233, 2022), this study investigates the conditions under which heritage language schools operate outside national support structures. It is based on a linguistic ethnographic case study of a Greek community-run complementary school in Sweden that abruptly lost access to its premises in the spring of 2023. We examine the key stakeholders' understandings of this period of turbulence, and the individual and collective agentive responses they enacted to secure the school's survival and to overcome adversity. Data were collected over two years and include policy documents, interviews with key stakeholders, fieldnotes and recordings of classroom interactions, as well as fieldnotes from board, parent and teacher meetings. The findings exemplify how bottom-up governance practices, individual and collective agency and emotional investments contribute to the Greek school's organisational sustainability, and enable it to persist in the face of acute challenges and the changing political conditions in Sweden. Ultimately, we discuss how these findings can inform language policy more broadly to strengthen support for heritage language education and multilingualism in society.

Keywords Language policy · Heritage language education · Individual and collective agency · Organisational sustainability · Resilience

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Introduction

Since the late 1960s, Sweden has been known for its progressive multicultural policies, which facilitated the establishment of publicly funded heritage language education (henceforth HLE) during the 1970s. With the *Home Language Reform* in 1977, Sweden became one of the first countries in the world to offer publicly funded HLE as part of the national curriculum (e.g., Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012; Salö et al., 2018; Aktürk-Drake, 2024). This was consistent with the dominant Swedish logic at the time of “advocating standardized institutional arrangements and rules that applied equally to all recipients” (Borevi, 2024:36). However, in parallel to publicly funded HLE, various community-run complementary schools (henceforth CS) were also established. These were grassroots initiatives organised outside of the national school system. One such example is a Greek CS that was founded in Stockholm by a group of immigrant parents in the 1960s. In this article, we use this Greek CS as an illustrative example of the vulnerable position that community-run CS are in, despite their long history in Sweden. Drawing on ethnographic data, we examine how key stakeholders—such as board members, parents, teachers, and students—reflect on and respond to challenges that have emerged following a period of acute instability, and in response to changing political and institutional conditions for HLE in Sweden. Through this case, we investigate how bottom-up governance practices, individual and collective agency, and emotional investments contribute to the CS’s organisational sustainability, despite operating outside of adequate institutional support structures.

Although CS have always co-existed with publicly funded HLE in Sweden, there is limited research and knowledge about them (but see, György-Ullholm, 2004; Bouakaz, 2012; Lubińska, 2024). In Sweden, there is no information about how many community-run CS exist, where they are located, what languages they teach, how they are organised and funded, or how many students, parents and teachers they engage. In fact, few people even know of their existence outside of their respective diasporic communities. From a global perspective, however, community-run CS are the most common way of organising language and cultural education for children in minority languages (e.g., Nordstrom et al., 2024).

The Swedish Language Act (SFS 2009:600) was enacted in 2009. In addition to assigning Swedish the status of principal language, it gave official recognition to five national minority languages, and stated that the public sector is also responsible for ensuring that individuals are given the opportunity to develop and use their other languages. Publicly funded HLE can be seen as one of the ways in which the public sector ensures this opportunity. In recent years, however, publicly funded HLE has become increasingly disputed (e.g., Salö et al., 2018; Hedman & Rosén, 2020), as part of a growing scepticism towards the multicultural ambitions of earlier decades (Borevi, 2024). While the enactment of publicly funded HLE became an important symbol of Sweden’s change from an assimilationist to a pluralistic state ideology in the 1960–1970s (e.g., Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012), it has now turned into a symbol of what was supposedly wrong with these multicultural intentions (Borevi, 2024).

Like many other European countries, populist and nationalist movements and right-wing politics have gained increased popularity in Sweden over the last 15 years.

The Sweden Democrats (SD), a political party on the far right, entered the Swedish parliament in 2010, and is currently the second-largest political party. While SD strongly supports Swedish language and cultural heritage, it consistently promotes the abolition of publicly funded HLE (e.g., Hedman & Rosén, 2020), as well as the enforcement of stricter migration regulations in general. Following SD's rise, other political parties have also begun to shift in their attitudes towards migration and multicultural policies (e.g., Borevi, 2024). Tangible results of these ideological changes include governmental initiatives aimed at reducing asylum-related immigration, incentives to increase voluntary return migration, the abolishment of state subsidies for ethnic organisations, and recurring claims that the state should stop funding HLE. In the political debates, SD regularly argues that funds allocated to HLE could be better spent elsewhere (Hedman & Rosén, 2020). The party often claims that HLE should be organised outside of the national school system, and financed by those who primarily benefit from it (*ibid.*). Interestingly, the existence of community-run CS operating independently of mainstream education is not acknowledged in these debates. Politicians never discuss the advantages or disadvantages of publicly funded HLE in comparison with community-run CS, nor do they discuss the conditions for CS, or the political measures needed if CS were to be the only available option.

Against this backdrop, we ask the following research questions:

RQ1: How do stakeholders in a Greek CS in Sweden perceive organisational disruption, and what kinds of individual and collective agentive responses do they mobilise?

RQ2: In what ways do these practices impact the school's organisational sustainability, in the absence of adequate institutional support structures?

Based on these findings, we will discuss implications for HLE in a context of increasing political hostility and institutional withdrawal, with a particular focus on how community-driven educational initiatives can inform broader debates on language policy, and the role of grassroots agency in sustaining minority language education. The case study contributes to emerging research on the governance and sustainability of CS under conditions of precarity. By focusing on the experiences of different key stakeholders at a Greek CS, and how they navigated the school's sudden loss of access to premises, it highlights how bottom-up governance and individual and collective agency is enacted to build resilience in the face of significant systemic challenges.

Previous research

In a recent scoping review, Nordstrom et al. (2024) concluded that research interest in CS has increased exponentially over the last two decades, and expanded in scope. Available research includes, for example, a focus on CS as spaces for supporting language, culture and identities, and key stakeholders' ideas and perceptions about the role of CS. The marginalisation of CS in relation to mainstream education, and their lack of institutional support, is another commonly explored theme (*ibid.*).

Recently, organisational aspects of CS have also received increased attention (e.g., Nordstrom et al., 2024). These studies highlight the persistent vulnerability of CS to economic precarity and institutional marginalisation, while they also recognise the resourcefulness and adaptability of the communities that sustain them. Studies on leadership and governance (Arthur & Souza, 2023; Thorpe et al., 2020) emphasise that these schools often rely on parent-led, voluntary structures, where financial fragility, lack of stable premises, and a high turnover of staff are continuous challenges. In such contexts, school survival often depends on flexible and hybrid leadership models. The leadership is seldom professional; instead, it is highly relational, and dependent on commitment and trust within the community (Arthur & Souza, 2023).

This literature also reveals how bottom-up governance and distributed leadership practices can foster *resilience*. As a concept, resilience is related to vulnerability and to the exposure to risks. It highlights the protective factors at play in the processes of withstanding and adopting to systemic challenges and new circumstances (e.g., Alghefeli & Hunt, 2022). Arthur and Souza (2023) and Thorpe et al. (2018) describe how collaborative leadership and communities of practice emerge organically, enabling stakeholders to sustain the schools even in the absence of institutional support. Such practices are not merely managerial but also deeply affective, shaped by emotional commitment, a sense of duty, and care for the next generation. Thorpe and Karamanidou (2024), focusing on Greek Cypriot schools in England, argue that governance decisions are embedded in broader diasporic networks and often negotiated between various actors, including parents, religious institutions, and state-linked educational missions. Leadership succession and capacity-building, they show, are central to organisational sustainability and to mitigating the impact of crises such as loss of premises or key personnel.

A few recent studies have explored how CS were affected by the abrupt shift to digital teaching during the COVID pandemic (e.g., Lytra, 2024; Young & White, 2024). These studies draw on teachers' and school leaders' reflexive accounts of the measures they adopted to support online teaching, and to mitigate its challenges. According to Lytra (2024:575), such accounts provide insights into processes of "continuation and change in pedagogic practice [...] during a period of disruption". In her study, Lytra describes teachers' actions as examples of "emergency grassroots policy making" (p. 572), a term that is also useful for characterising some of the measures taken by the different actors in this current study.

Theoretical framework

Agency in language policy and planning

This study is placed within the larger field of language policy and planning (LPP) (e.g., Spolsky, 2009). Specifically, it adds to the growing body of ethnographic studies examining the role of agents and agency in LPP processes (e.g., Johnson & Ricento, 2013; Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021; Lytra, 2024), and the role of acquisition planning to sustain minority languages (e.g., Hatoss, 2006). As already mentioned, the Greek CS in this study operates outside the jurisdiction of the national education

system. From a policy perspective, this means that it works outside a national macro-level top-down structure, allowing for bottom-up educational governance (Ramiel & Lefstein, 2022, see below), providing large agentic space for community-level actors.

Spolsky argues that language policy is “all about choices” (2009:1). This implies that social actors’ meaning-making, decision-making and agency are all central parts of LPP research (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021). In line with Bouchard and Glasgow (2019), and the central tenets of *social realism* (e.g., Archer, 2007), we view policy as “the outcome of the complex interaction between structural, cultural and agentic forces” (p. 30). According to this view, structure and culture always mediate agents’ ability to act. Equally important to agency is reflexivity—that is, agents’ reflexive engagement with the structural and cultural enablements and constraints surrounding them, and the ways these inform their decisions and their capacity for action (Archer, 2007). Bouchard and Glasgow (2019) argue that “agency is what happens whenever humans are reflexively engaged with the forces of culture and structure, and reflexivity encompasses a broad range of processes, from silence and inaction to voiced opinions and critically engaged actions aimed at rectifying unequal power distributions in the real world” (p. 72).

In the present study, board-members, parents, teachers, students, and members of other local Greek associations are all “people with interest” (Zhao & Baldauf, 2012:5) in the language planning decisions of the Greek CS. Importantly though, some of these actors—particularly the CS’s board members—bear greater responsibility and exercise more decision-making power than other community actors. The board constitutes a form of top-down structure in relation to the teachers at the school, while the teachers are also central language policy actors in that they interpret, adapt, and enact the decisions taken by others within their own classroom practices (e.g., Priestley et al., 2015). The agency of these actors is, however, also influenced and constrained by prevailing educational policies and practices, and by the surrounding political and institutional conditions under which the school operates.

In LPP decision-making processes, both individual and collective forms of agency may come into play. Individual agency refers to an individual’s capacity to reflect on and act on their own behalf in relation to existing circumstances, whereas collective agency can be defined as “the collaboration of individual agents to achieve collective goals” (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019:36). In the present study, the primary collective goal was to secure the Greek CS’s survival and long-term sustainability during a period of disruption. The stakeholders had to jointly devise creative solutions and mobilise shared resources to enable resilience in response to the challenges posed by losing access to premises, and the ensuing financial difficulties (see Findings section below). Such collective actions require solidarity, but may also give rise to tension, as individual actors can hold divergent understandings of problems and solutions and express different agentic responses to structural and cultural forces (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019).

Educational governance

Educational governance refers broadly to the mechanisms, practices, and rationalities through which education systems are steered, coordinated, and held accountable. As Wilkins and Mifsud (2024) emphasise, governance is a multifaceted and evolving concept, shaped by shifting political agendas, decentralisation trends, and changing expectations of accountability and performance in public services. Rather than referring solely to formal government control, governance in education often entails a complex web of actors—including state agencies, school leaders, local communities, and private organisations—whose interactions shape how decisions are made, and policies are enacted (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024:349). The same authors explain that the governance turn refers to a shift from top-down state control to more distributed and networked forms of steering, where responsibilities are shared among diverse actors and exercised through both formal authority and softer mechanisms such as standards and accountability measures. In this view, governance involves the coordination of diverse actors across multiple levels (Altrichter, 2010), which is also central to understanding how responsibilities are negotiated in CS under decentralised and uncertain conditions.

Within such a multi-level and multi-actor landscape, two contrasting but often overlapping logics of decision-making are frequently discussed: top-down and bottom-up approaches. Top-down governance is typically associated with centralised authority, where policy goals and implementation strategies are defined by higher-level actors, such as governments or ministries, and passed down through administrative hierarchies (Sabatier, 1986). In contrast, bottom-up governance emphasises the agency of local actors, such as schools, teachers, and communities. It frames these actors not as passive recipients of policy but as knowledgeable agents whose autonomy and reflexivity are harnessed as key resources in policy enactment (Ramiel & Lefstein, 2022).

In contexts where educational institutions operate with limited resources, governance is also closely tied to the question of organisational sustainability. Thorpe et al. (2018) explore how CS, often reliant on volunteer labour and fragile funding streams, navigate governance and leadership in ways that ensure survival and growth. Here, sustainability goes beyond maintaining CS' operation; it involves building leadership capacity, preserving institutional memory, and cultivating community commitment over time. Organisational sustainability thus becomes both a goal and challenge of governance, especially for small, culturally specific schools such as the Greek CS in this study.

Methods and data

The study employs a linguistic ethnographic approach, enabling a nuanced and contextualised exploration of the investigated Greek CS's linguistic and educational practices and discourses, and how these are tied to broader societal discourses (e.g., Copland & Creese, 2015, Rampton, 2007; Tusting, 2019). In this vein, linguistic ethnography is more than a set of methods, as it is grounded in the view that studies of

language are also studies of society. The approach offers a critical lens through which to examine how access to linguistic resources and minority language education is tied to economic and cultural resources, as well as to issues of social inequality and power (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Linguistic ethnography also entails an openness and flexibility in order to engage with and adapt to the dynamics, complexities, and contradictions emerging during ethnography.

Data were collected intermittently over the course of two years (2023–2024), and encompass policy documents, interviews with current and former board members (6), teachers (14), students (11), parents (16), an international coordinator for the teaching of Greek abroad (1), and a board member of the Greek cultural association (1). The interviews were conducted in Swedish, Greek, and English. Furthermore, the data encompass detailed observational records of classroom interactions (ca. 50 h), documented through fieldnotes, photographs, and audio recordings. These observations covered settings with students aged eight to 19 years, producing an extensive corpus of data. Through fieldnotes and participant observation, we also documented teacher and board meetings, and meetings with parents.

All three researchers participated actively in the data collection. Moreover, Nikolaidou was given the opportunity to observe the teacher and board meetings due to her prior connection within the Greek CS. The choice of this particular school was strategically informed by her longstanding relationships within this specific context—as a parent of attending students and as an active member of the school's parental board (cf. Lytra, 2024). Given Nikolaidou's multiple, overlapping roles as parent, board member, and researcher, our study inevitably encompasses an autoethnographic dimension. Winkler (2018) characterises autoethnography as a methodological approach that meaningfully combines autobiographical and ethnographic methods to examine the interplay between personal experiences and broader cultural practices. Nikolaidou's insider position facilitated access to the research field, significantly enhancing the comprehensiveness of data collection, and the identification of pertinent issues. In relation to her multiple roles, we adhered to the ethical guidelines advocated by multiple research ethics boards (e.g., the Swedish Research Council, 2024), explicitly communicated Nikolaidou's various roles to participants, and ensured their informed consent—oral and written—in languages accessible to them.¹ Due to the researcher's board responsibilities in employment decisions and pedagogical oversight, the interviews with the teachers employed by the board, and with the board members, were conducted by the other two researchers, to ensure greater participant openness.

Importantly, role entanglements were not unique to the researcher. Several teachers involved in the study were also parents of children attending the school, balancing their teaching responsibilities with personal investments in the school community. This dual involvement often shaped their participation in the research, as professional and parental perspectives were closely intertwined. Likewise, all board members are parents of enrolled students. These overlapping roles raise important questions about

¹ An application for ethical review was also sent to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, but they waived the requirement for approval (Dnr: 2023-01466-01), since the project was deemed not to fall under the jurisdiction of the Swedish Ethics Review Act.

how professional authority, personal attachment, and community membership intersect in shaping what is shared, withheld, or emphasised in ethnographic accounts.

All interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts, along with the fieldnotes, were coded using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. The initial coding was inductive and descriptive, aiming to make sense of the data. For this article, we concentrated on a subset of codes that captured how members of the school community experienced and responded to the challenges caused by the premises issue (see Findings, Navigating instability). These codes included *school premises*, *economy*, *school fees*, *working conditions*, *volunteering*, *the board's role*, *the parents' role*, and *networking*. In the final stage of analysis, we revisited these coded segments through the lens of our theoretical framework, with particular attention to key actors, acts of agency, and reflexive responses to institutional challenges. We also treat affective dimensions as an integral part of reflexive responses, since emotions and feelings are closely interwoven with how actors make sense of and act upon institutional challenges. We also examined how responsibilities were negotiated and how coordination unfolded across individual and collective levels. This approach enabled us to trace how individual and collective responses to structural pressures unfolded over time, and how agentic engagements shaped the school's capacity for resilience during these times of turbulence.

Given the small number of Greek CS in Sweden, we have decided not to provide details about the individual participants in the study, in order to protect their anonymity. Instead, we refer to them in broad categories such as students, teachers, parents, and board members, who all have in common that they are involved in the Greek CS in some way.

Findings

Navigating instability: context and timeline

The Greek CS in this study is a grassroots initiative that was established by Greek parents in the 1960s. Currently, the school serves ca. 350 students between the ages of six and 19, who attend the school every Saturday morning to learn and develop their knowledge in and about Greek language and culture. The students are divided into 15 groups, ranging from preschool to upper secondary school. Sixteen teachers work at the school, two of which are seconded from Greece. Unlike publicly funded HLE, the Greek CS, along with other similar CS in Sweden, does not receive any legal, institutional, or economic support from the Swedish state,² and none of its policies are enforced by Swedish law.

The school is run by a parents' association, which nominates members to the school's board. In practice, it is the board that has the formal and practical responsi-

² The municipality of Stockholm provided the old premises at a local mainstream school free of charge, which was a form of economic support. In order to be entitled to this support, however, a majority of students needed to be registered citizens in the municipality of Stockholm, which is no longer the case, since many of the students at the Greek CS now live in neighbouring municipalities.

bility for organising and running the school. There are currently nine members on the Greek CS's board—all of them parents of students attending the school.

Historically, the Greek state provided substantial support for the school, including sending and paying for all of its teachers (e.g., Damanakis, 2012). Following the economic crisis in Greece in early 2010, this support was significantly reduced, which forced the Greek CS to take over the principal responsibility and financial burden of teacher recruitment. The school's main income comes from student fees, and it receives some financial support from different associations in the Greek diaspora. Importantly, the school's operation is largely dependent on voluntary work from community members, and from teachers who teach at the school in exchange for relatively symbolic incomes.

In the spring of 2023, the Greek CS experienced an abrupt and challenging disruption, when it was informed that its longstanding arrangement to use the premises of a local mainstream school was terminated. Faced with imminent displacement, the parental board rapidly mobilised and successfully secured alternative premises at a nearby school, provided by the local government. However, this arrangement proved fleeting. In the autumn of 2023, after only a few months in its new location, the school's contract once again ended abruptly. As an emergency measure, the board decided to move all classes temporarily online.

By early 2024, after considerable efforts, the board succeeded in securing new premises. However, this solution brought new challenges. Unlike previous arrangements with the local government, the new location was within an independent school, requiring the Greek CS to pay rent, thereby substantially increasing its operational costs. Moreover, the agreement is short-term and subject to regular contract renewals, each carrying the risk of higher rental fees. Amid these disruptions, the school has lost over 15% of its students, further deepening its financial difficulties.

The Greek CS's difficulties in securing stable premises illustrate a broader pattern observed globally, since CS often operate in "borrowed spaces" – settings "intended for other times, people and purposes" (Tsolidis & Kostogriz, 2008:324; see also Nordstrom, 2020:2; Nordstrom & Jung, 2022). These spatial challenges are not merely logistical but reflect the marginal status of such schools, where long-term support structures are typically absent, and sustainability relies largely on the persistent efforts of community members. In addition, the Greek CS in this study operates under competitive conditions since there is another independent Greek CS in the area, which families and teachers may choose if dissatisfied with the present school (cf. Uriu & Douglas, 2017).

Dealing with the loss of the premises

The news about the termination of the Greek CS's longstanding arrangement with the mainstream school was a great "shock" for everyone involved (see Excerpt 1). The interview extract also illustrates the board members' frustration over not receiving an explanation as to why this happened, nor were they given an opportunity to resolve the situation:

Excerpt 1. Interview with board member/parent (B5)

B5 Every February we would write to the Sports administration* and book all the rooms for the next school year # we would write a list with all the classrooms that we needed, and then they usually # we write in February and then we used to get an answer sometime in May or June, a confirmation letter, all these years. But now, uhm, and then suddenly this spring, well in June, we received an email saying that they will not renew our bookings, uhm, and that was a shock after 40 years [...] we tried to get in touch with the principal both before and after we received the formal decision, but the principal wouldn't talk to us. He was hiding, and I don't know, he never answered his phone.

*The administrative municipal unit who used to handle the school's premises.

This unexpected rupture in the school's spatial stability exemplifies the precarious nature of governance in CS education, where no formal mechanisms guarantee access to infrastructure or to institutional recognition and support. In governance terms, the absence of top-down support systems exposes the limits of centralised accountability and forces the CS to rely almost entirely on bottom-up governance practices (Altrichter, 2010; Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024).

The school's abrupt displacement made it clear to everyone that they could no longer take for granted having access to stable premises, which is not only a practical and material inconvenience but viewed as a symbolic loss of recognition:

Excerpt 2. Interview with board member/parent (B4)

B4: It's the most important [thing] right now really, to have access to premises. Because we have realised that it wasn't something that we could take for granted really, to have access to a school the way that we did for all these years. [...] I really think that access to premises is our best recognition of the fact that this is an association that carries out important work for the state's children and adolescents.

For the members of the school's parental board, the recent issues have resulted in a significantly increased workload, which is entirely voluntary: "It has been really turbulent as you probably know, really, really turbulent" (Interview with board member/parent, B6). Within less than a year, they have had to find new premises twice, and to rapidly transition to online teaching—a change that was effected in less than a week. Furthermore, the board has had to manage concerns and rumours as to why the displacement occurred, and why at this particular time. Some parents connect it to recent changes in Sweden's migration politics. The recent turmoil has also led to a higher turnover of teachers than in previous years, further increasing the board's workload: "Since it's up to me to find new teachers, I feel a bit stressed about the situation!" (Fieldnotes following a congregation with the teachers, June 2024). Over the past two years, the board members have had to make decisions swiftly, taking action in response to changing conditions, mobilising resources and support. For this work, they receive no compensation, a sign of their strong commitment. Their unpaid, and time-sensitive work embodies a form of collective agency (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019), where decisions are made not through policy directives, but through shared situated knowledge and community negotiation. In this sense, the Greek CS's sustainability is less about formal institutional resilience and more about the capacity of the grassroots actors to absorb shocks and disruptions, and to collectively reconfigure operations under pressure.

The loss of premises has clearly had major material and economic consequences for the Greek CS. For many of the interviewees, however, the loss has had equally significant emotional repercussions:

Excerpt 3. Interview with student (S10)

S10: It felt as if you lost some of this stability or like because you connect that building like XXX [=name of the school] that was the Greek school to me, so when it moved it was a bit like # wow what's happening, because you lose like this routine to go specifically there and that was like # and it felt a bit uh shaking, also because there were some who quit because it got so complicated and I don't know. It was a strange time sort of. It has changed everything a bit.

Excerpt 4. Interview with board member/parent/former student (B6)

I: What are your thoughts on this now # what has happened to the Greek school with the premises and everything # how involved have you been?

B6: It's been really difficult, uhm, I've been involved, I was a student myself there, uhm # from day one until the last day as a parent.

I: Mmm ...

B6: When the school moved there in the 1970s, I was a student.

I: Yeah.

B6: I think I was in first grade and # yeah so I've been around for the whole trip # for us the XXX [=name of the former school building] it feels really sad because those were # premises that suited us, it was a place that was associated with the Greek CS, the one on XXX [=name of area in Stockholm] # it was us. So they cut off one of our legs and our 46 to 47 years of history just like that, and without really giving any # reason.

As is made clear in these statements, many of the stakeholders associate the Greek CS with the old premises, which for them symbolised stability, and happy memories. The act of being dismissed from those premises therefore represents a sense of sadness and loss. What is lost is not just a building, but a sense of cultural and spatial rootedness—a shared infrastructure of belonging that supports community life and the intergenerational transmission of identities.

As exemplified in this section, the loss of the premises and the ensuing difficulties have had wide-ranging affective, material, economic, social, and symbolic consequences for the Greek CS. Operating outside the jurisdiction of the national education system, the school embodies a bottom-up model of governance, where survival depends not on formal structures or institutional guarantees, but on the agency and reflexivity of the key community actors. Their actions exemplify how bottom-up governance operates in precarious educational contexts, where collective agency (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019) becomes the primary means of sustaining institutions in the absence of systemic support.

Pedagogical implications

Online teaching as an emergency solution

Decision-making is a fundamental part of all LPP (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2021). The loss of premises the second time in 2023 (see Navigating instability above) forced the members of the board to engage in a form of “emergency grassroots policy

making” (Lytra, 2024:572), as they hastily decided to move all teaching online. One of the board members described this shift as decided upon from one day to another: “We were notified on a Tuesday that we weren’t welcome back on Saturday” (Interview with board member/parent, B5). The board members quickly needed to notify the teachers and provide them with general guidelines on matters such as the recommended length of online sessions, highlighting the “ad hoc and flexible nature of language policies” that emerge in response to rapidly changing conditions (Hatoss et al., 2024:481).

In the interviews, the teachers reported having varying degrees of skills and confidence in digital teaching. Similarly, the stakeholders’ reported experiences from this period vary greatly. Some parents described it as being an overall “failure” and “a waste of time”, leading students to drop out or to enrol in the other Greek CS in the area, while others described it as “challenging” but “better than nothing”. Parents and students acknowledged that online teaching had some advantages, mainly along the lines of: “You could get up a little later, you didn’t need to travel, and you had all of your things close by” (Interview with student, S11). The teachers also emphasised that online teaching was significantly easier with the older students than with the younger ones (see also Young & White, 2024).

The school’s ability to quickly adapt to the disruptive event by implementing a temporary online model illustrates the kind of situated, agentive responses that characterise bottom-up educational governance. These decisions were not handed down through formal policy channels but were instead made through localised negotiations between the community actors, reflecting a high level of reflexivity and institutional improvisation.

Although the key actors may have seen some advantages with online teaching, making this solution permanent would dismantle the important social functions of the Greek CS. Across the interviews, one of the most important purposes ascribed to the Greek CS were social aspects of being able to get together and speak to each other on a regular basis (see also authors; Lytra, 2024): “It’s not good that we have online teaching because the students come to the Greek CS mainly to see their friends” (Teacher interview, T4). Hence, even though the online format may have fulfilled the pedagogical goals for some groups of students, it failed to sustain the important social functions that are also central to the school’s mission.

Pedagogical continuity and change

A recurring theme in our data is a dual effort to preserve the school’s continuity while adapting to the new circumstances. After relocating, the Greek CS lacked sufficient classrooms for all students. As a temporary solution, the board arranged for the older students to use the facilities at the Greek Cultural Association in Stockholm, offered free of charge. However, according to the teachers, the facilities and their dated technological equipment were unsuitable for teaching, and the students reported missing the presence of younger peers. Hence, separating the school into different spaces was suboptimal, both pedagogically and socially.

Traditionally, the Greek CS has organised instruction in age-homogeneous groups. However, due to the significant decrease in student numbers and the limited space in

the new premises, some groups were merged. For instance, a grade 2 was combined with grade 3, and two upper secondary groups were unified. In the younger group, the teacher created two parallel working groups with separate teaching materials and tasks. Our observations showed that managing this dual structure was challenging. Hence, the loss of students and the subsequent restructuring of groups also had repercussions at the micro-level within the classroom.

Another consequence of the relocation was the loss of access to a large auditorium. Previously, school celebrations for Greek national and religious holidays included performances and large gatherings of students and families. Without an auditorium, these events had to be reimagined. While some teachers and students welcomed the opportunity for change, others missed the traditional festivities: "...we don't have an auditorium anymore, so it's not as fun" (Student interview, S11). These adaptations illustrate that resilience does not imply a return to past structures, but also flexibility and embracing change.

Building resilience in times of turbulence: adaptation, continuity, and innovation

In the face of the mounting economic and organisational pressures, the Greek CS has demonstrated resilience. While the loss of the school's premises marked a rupture with past stability, what followed was not only a period of disruption but also a process of active reconfiguration. At the heart of this is the community's capacity to sustain educational activities and cultural identity through bottom-up governance, voluntary engagement, and adaptive resource mobilisation. This capacity, we argue, is central to the school's organisational sustainability.

In the absence of institutional support, some of the key actors constructed a collective agency (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019), with the aim of securing the school's survival. The board of the Greek CS has been the primary driver of recovery and reorganisation. Its first and main task was to find new premises. To this end, board members contacted schools in the city, visited potential locations, and negotiated rental conditions. They also asked the parents of the association to make contact with their children's schools and enquire after new premises, and it was in this way that a new venue was eventually secured. Their efforts not only ensured short-term continuity, such as rapidly shifting to online teaching, but also instigated longer-term strategies for economic survival and social cohesion. These practices illuminate what Ramiel and Lefstein (2022) describe as the reflexive capacity of local actors in bottom-up governance: the board members were not passive victims, but active agents in navigating change. A telling example of this comes from a parent meeting:

Excerpt 5. Fieldnotes following a parent meeting (June 2024)

There were a lot of parents at the meeting today, many more than usual. [...] We spoke about the school's economy and the chairperson applauded several of the parents, who are sponsoring the school in different ways. For example, a transport company that delivers the textbooks from Greece to Sweden for free, and a cleaning company that cleans up after us in the new premises for a symbolic sum of money. Both companies are owned by parents at the Greek CS. Similarly, one of the fathers has bought a coffee machine on his own initiative, and he now makes and sells coffee during the breaks each Saturday. The board welcomes all such initiatives, the chairperson praised them, and everyone applauded, creating a very positive atmosphere at the meeting.

This extract illustrates how parental agency and community ties become vital assets in sustaining the school, and that collective agency is based on a shared sense of responsibilisation (Ramiel & Lefstein, 2022). These forms of engagement are not institutionalised or regulated by external authorities but emerge through informal, relational governance practices. Such initiatives, however, also reveal the school's dependency on community goodwill and volunteering, an indicator of organisational fragility. This tension is further illustrated in the fieldnotes following a meeting with the board, when financial precarity demanded innovation:

Excerpt 6. Fieldnotes following a board meeting (November 2024)

We agreed that we have to find new ways of bringing in money. Right now, the association is losing money, and we need to use the school's savings this year. The new members have taken on an initiative to sell chocolate with the school's logo on it to collect money. It's been going well. Others have started selling sandwiches and sweets in the lunch hall. All earnings are put into the school's account. All these initiatives are great, but they are not enough to cover the large expenses for rent and wages. During the meeting, I raised the issue of increasing the student fees, since that seems to be the only solution if the school is to survive.

The school's new financial model, built around informal parent-driven fundraising efforts and fee-based funding, is indicative of what Thorpe et al. (2018) call "community-anchored leadership" in CS—governance premised on mobilising local networks rather than relying on systemic support. Despite these efforts, the limits of bottom-up governance become apparent in moments when external recognition and support are explicitly sought but remain absent. Even though the Greek CS receives some financial and institutional support from the Greek state, some of the parents had higher expectations, believing it should take greater responsibility during such challenging times:

Excerpt 7. Interview with board member/parent (B05)

B5: We called for a digital parent meeting and informed them about the situation [...] And then there was also this other issue that where, where is Greece, the Greek state to help us with this issue, and later when we found the new premises some parents, two of which were on the board, they wanted to write a letter to the Greek state to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Education and to the embassy and explain the situation and, like, request them to support us in some way, trying to find new premises.

I: And did you do it or?

B5: We did because it was decided at the parents meeting that we should.

I: And how did they answer you?

B5: No.

I: No?

B5: We never received an answer.

This example underscores the asymmetry between community efforts and institutional engagement. Despite repeated appeals, no formal state or institutional actor stepped in. It is also interesting that the parents anticipated more active engagement from the Greek state than they did from the Swedish state. Either way, the school's continued existence is contingent not on governmental structures but on the self-organising capacities of its members. The organisational sustainability of the Greek

Table 1 Factors contributing to organisational vulnerability and sustainability

Factors contributing to vulnerability	Factors contributing to sustainability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of institutional backing and interest • Unstable access to premises • Financial insecurity • Strong reliance on community engagement and voluntary work • Unsustainable workload for the school's board • Increased drop-outs and turnover of teachers and students • Tensions among stakeholders, due to diverging understandings of the situation and the possible solutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school's long and rich history in Sweden • Community engagement, and emotional investments • Local and transnational support networks • Bottom-up educational governance practices, enabling large agentine space for key stakeholders • Financial and educational support from Greece, and from Greek cultural institutions in Sweden

CS is dependent on both local and transnational networks, and on the involvement of parents as well as other stakeholders (cf. Hancock & Hancock, 2024). This collective agency is key to the school's viability. Meanwhile, the fragile economic situation not only leads stakeholders to come together in collective efforts, but also creates tension. Raising the tuition fees, for example (see Excerpt 6), was a debated and sensitive topic, since it can lead to decreasing student numbers, which in turn would reduce the school's revenue.

New governance practices have also emerged during these challenging times. In light of rising costs, discussions have intensified around the school's internal organisation—ranging from the minimum number of students required per class, to the role of teachers, to how feedback and concerns from parents are managed. Teachers have also raised concerns about preparation time, access to educational materials, and their participation in decision-making (see also Uriu & Douglas, 2017). One outcome of these discussions was a joint decision taken by the board and the teachers to create a school handbook that will be distributed to parents and published on the school's website. This handbook will outline some basic rules regarding the school's operations and classroom conduct. It will include guidelines for communication between parents and teachers, and underscore the importance of safeguarding the teachers' pedagogical autonomy and professional responsibility in shaping the content and structure of their lessons. These developments thus mark a shift toward more formalised practices of internal governance—a sign of both organisational maturation and adaptation under pressure.

In sum, this section has shown how the Greek CS's response to economic difficulties involved more than short-term coping strategies. It is a case of sustained community-based resilience, engaging a dynamic interplay of adaptation, continuity, and innovation.

Factors contributing to organisational vulnerability and sustainability

In the study, we have identified a number of factors that contribute to the Greek CS's vulnerability, especially during times of turbulence, but also a number of protective factors supporting its organisational sustainability over time. We summarise these in Table 1.

For the Greek CS, structural and financial insecurity are significant concerns, and a matter of survival. The school's loss of access to premises in 2023 provides a case in point. The CS's strong reliance on community engagement represents a sign of both organisational fragility and sustainability. It is a vital asset, but it cannot be taken for granted. Due to community efforts and the Greek diaspora's relatively long history in Sweden, there are various active Greek cultural institutions that take an interest in the Greek CS's survival. Along with financial and educational support from the Greek state, these diasporic support networks are important for the CS's long-term sustainability. The collective efforts of stakeholders to come up with creative solutions and to mobilise resources are also crucial components to its organisational sustainability—and an excellent example of collective agency (Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019). Although times of turbulence bring uncertainty and instability, it can also be

an additional important source of engagement since it highlights the necessity for engagement in order for the school to survive.

Discussion and conclusion

This study provides insights into an HLE initiative that largely operates outside formal institutional support structures and policy debates—in other words, what Aravossitas (2016) calls “hidden schools”. While teacher agency has been given considerable attention in previous research (e.g., Priestley et al., 2015), educational governance, leadership, and collective community-level agency in heritage language education has received less attention, especially in response to acute systemic challenges (Hancock & Hancock, 2024). In this paper, we have investigated different key stakeholders’ understandings of a period of turbulence, its consequences, and the actions they have taken to secure the Greek CS’s survival and more long-term organisational sustainability.

The findings demonstrate how the community stakeholders responded to the acute organisational challenge of losing access to premises and the ensuing difficulties through both individual and collective agentive responses. This aligns with previous findings from Arthur and Souza (2023) and Thorpe et al. (2018), who describe leadership within CS as often hybrid, flexible, and strongly relational. In the Greek CS, the stakeholders mobilised collective agency, characterised by collaborative problem-solving, distributed leadership, and a shared sense of responsabilisation. Importantly, our data illustrate that collective agency involves proactive, strategic decision-making aimed at long-term organisational sustainability.

Although turbulence tends to be primarily negative, it can also create space for agency, grassroots policy-making, and innovation (Hancock & Hancock, 2024; Lytra, 2024). For instance, in our study, the move to new premises led to new ways of celebrating national and religious holidays. It also inspired collective efforts to sustain the school, and has set in motion a shift towards more formalised practices of internal governance. Hence, the Greek CS’s deployment of resilience, in this sense, does not imply a return to past structures, but rather adaptation and innovation in response to the new conditions.

The factors identified in the previous section can be used to inform policy making on a broader scale. Not being granted formal structural support has significant negative consequences for community-run CS, while community engagement and emotional investments, along with support from diasporic support networks, play a crucial role for their long-term sustainability (see also Hatoss, 2006; Uriu & Douglas, 2017). Remote learning and online teaching are sometimes contemplated as possible solutions to securing access to HLE more broadly (e.g., Department of Education, 2025; Hatoss et al., 2024). Our findings, however, suggest that while online teaching may be a viable short-term solution, it conflicts with the Greek CS’s important cultural and social missions. This highlights the tension between sustaining the school’s operation and maintaining its core institutional values, rooted in physical presence, community, and belonging.

These institutional tensions are not isolated. They must also be viewed in relation to the broader historical and transnational ties that shape how HLE is sustained across different diaspora communities. The Greek diaspora in Sweden has a long and dynamic history (Nikolaidou & Rydell, 2025). It is supported by several cultural institutions and networks, and receives support from the Greek state (Damanakis, 2012; Kostoulas-Makrakis, 1995). These support systems contribute to the Greek CS's organisational stability. It remains to be investigated, however, how communities that are less well-established, organised and privileged are able to rely on community-driven HLE in Sweden. The strong reliance of CS on local community engagement probably also limits their reach mainly to urban areas (cf. Reath Warren, 2017). This underscores the importance of maintaining publicly supported HLE, alongside community-driven initiatives. Moreover, insights from a recent comparative study (Ganuza et al., 2025) highlighted how publicly funded HLE and complementary schools were seen by stakeholders as complementing alternatives, each playing a role in ensuring the broader access and support for HLE and multilingualism in society.

Implications from this study suggest that recognising and supporting community-driven CS could enhance broader language policy frameworks, particularly in contexts where publicly funded HLE faces ideological contestation and funding withdrawal. Policymakers would benefit from acknowledging these parallel systems and the crucial roles that emotional labour and collective agency play in sustaining minority language education. Highlighting these bottom-up governance structures and relational leadership models calls for more inclusive policy discourses that incorporate the strengths and needs of complementary educational initiatives operating under conditions of precarity.

The political context in Sweden, marked by rising populist and nationalist sentiments (Hedman & Rosén, 2020; Borevi, 2024), frames the agentic actions observed in this study. The stakeholders' collective deliberations and community-wide participation to secure migrant minority language education can be seen as counter-narratives to the prevailing political discourse. Thus, our findings underscore the importance of collective agency, not just in managing practical challenges but also in navigating complex ideological environments.

In sum, this study highlights how collective agency, emotional investment, and bottom-up governance are central to the sustainability of HLE under pressure. By focusing on how resilience emerges not from institutional stability but from collective engagement and flexible governance, the study challenges dominant narratives that position sustainability as dependent on top-down structures (cf. Thorpe & Karamanidou, 2024). It brings attention to the invisible infrastructures of community-based schooling. Recognising these efforts is essential—not only for supporting multilingualism but for safeguarding educational equity in increasingly exclusionary political landscapes.

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