

Sustainable Tilting at Windmills: The Management of Failure in Project-Based Czech Environmental Education

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Sustainable Tilting at Windmills: The Management of Failure in Project-Based Czech Environmental Education. Failure is a recurring theme in discussions about environmental education (EE). As EE becomes more project-based, the concept of failure takes on an organisational form. Using a pragmatic approach, this study examines the organisational practices involved in project success or failure, and how these are perceived by EE stakeholders. Specifically, we analyse the procedures and strategies employed by various EE stakeholders to achieve project success without compromising their organisations' missions. Based on 23 in-depth interviews with EE lecturers, managers, officials and association representatives, we demonstrate that the project-oriented nature of the EE field contributes to its formal success, despite apparent failures in efforts to raise environmental awareness. This is due to the interdependence of sponsors (i.e. public authorities) and contractors (i.e. non-profits), who collaborate to ensure the legitimacy and long-term survival of the entire sector. The paper contributes to understanding the consequences of the projectification of the public sector and the challenges of evaluating the effectiveness of environmental education.

Sociológia 2026, Vol. 58 (No. 4: 313-338)

<https://doi.org/10.31577/sociologia.2026.58.4.11>



Key words: *Environmental education; project failure; organisational practices; project evaluation; stakeholder collaboration*

Introduction

In recent decades, organised work has undergone intensive projectification (Jensen et al. 2016; Lundin et al. 2015). Project-based work is not only widespread in the economy, where both small start-ups and huge endeavours are project-driven, but also in the cultural, scientific, and non-profit sectors, which are now largely managed through the awarding and evaluation of projects (Munck af Rosenschöld – Wolf 2017; Hodgson et al. 2019; Jacobsen 2022). Project organisation also brings about a new definition of success and failure. While traditional, permanent organisations define success as growth, and failure as stagnation or termination, this does not apply to projects which have a clearly defined scope and end date. Therefore, the success of an organisation

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Funding statement: This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation (Grant Number 22-12099S)

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in a projectified field is not manifested in a change in its characteristics, but rather in its ability to acquire new projects (Lundin – Söderholm 1995; Boltanski – Chiapello 2007 [1999]). This can lead to the paradoxical situation where organisations or individuals participating in projects that are evaluated as unsuccessful may still be considered successful if they manage to acquire new projects. Such scenarios are aptly characterised by startup mantras ‘fail fast, fail often’ or ‘fail forward’ (Koskinen 2023).

The blurred line between success and failure in projects is thus not related to their duration, but to the achievement of project goals. Malpas and Wickham (1995) argued that all projects fail to some extent, because complete success is theoretically unattainable. There are always imperfections and unforeseen circumstances that the original project did not anticipate, preventing the full achievement of all intended objectives. This highlights the obvious difference between the failure of permanent organisations and project-based activities. Consequently, examining the circumstances in which success or failure is achieved in a project, or the distribution of success and failure in a project-based world, requires an entirely different approach to that offered by conventional organisational theory.

In this article, we will attempt to shed light on how success and failure are recognised in environmental education (EE). In the Czech Republic, EE is a predominantly project-based activity. It is primarily delivered outside of the state education system by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These NGOs provide educational programmes to schools, and collaboration between non-governmental environmental education providers and schools has been established (see Svobodová 2020). However, the functioning of EE NGOs is hampered by constant material insecurity. They lack a stable source of funding and therefore depend on time-limited resources, such as government or regional grant competitions, or earmarked financial donations from private companies. To a lesser extent, EE NGOs’ income also comes from payments by the schools in which they deliver programmes, sales of books, games and other educational materials, and donations from individuals. Their material dependence on sponsors means they must comply with the latter’s values and priorities, forcing them to compete with other NGOs for resources (Dolšák – Prakash 2022: 665–667; Zaidi 1999: 263–264). Due to their financial vulnerability, they are forced to focus their activities largely on available projects that are limited in both time and scope. Nevertheless, even relatively successful EE NGOs find themselves in a constant state of insecurity about their future existence.

This reported state of ongoing vulnerability and imminent collapse contrasts with the formal success of EE NGOs. In the long term, beyond momentary fluctuations caused by changes in the political elite, programmes and projects

are being implemented, with the vast majority considered successful. Funds provided to EE NGOs are successfully allocated, and funded projects are successfully completed, not only in the Czech Republic (Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic 2024; Central Bohemian Region 2024), but also in the EU (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2024) and in the US (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2024), for comparison. Although obtaining project resources and implementing projects does not negate the existence of material threats or the potential failure of EE NGOs, it demonstrates the ability of environmental educators to successfully obtain and implement projects over the long term, thereby keeping their organisations operational and attractive to sponsors.

It may come as a surprise that the overall success rate of EE organisations does not correspond with the general perception of the effectiveness of EE. From the perspective of the public, it seems that efforts to protect the environment, including EE, are unsuccessful in the long term, given the continuing deterioration of the environment. This perception of failure is replacing hope with pessimism, even among environmental activists (Cassegård 2024; de Moor – Marquardt 2023; Kleres – Wettergren 2017; Malmqvist 2024; Stuart 2020). The same applies to environmental education (EE): scientists have been pointing out its limited effectiveness for decades (Ferreira 2007; Jickling 2006; Saylan – Blumstein 2011; Scott – Gough 2003; Walsh 1984). However, as with the economic vulnerability of EE organisations, scepticism about the effectiveness of EE probably does not stem from EE significantly underperforming as an organisational field.

There are two possible conventional explanations for this contradiction. The first is that the reported perception of threat to EE NGOs is incorrect, and that these organisations are successfully fulfilling their missions, but strategically conceal this fact to gain greater support. However, this explanation is contradicted by self-critical voices within the EE community. The second, more complicated explanation assumes that the risk of organisational failure is real, and that EE NGOs push their staff to the limit in order to succeed, because they are constantly on the brink of failure. Despite – or perhaps because of – the threat of failure, these organisations' project applications are consistently supported, thus preventing total failure. According to this explanation, we are dealing with a certain type of organisation that is permanently failing (Meyer – Zucker 1989). These organisations are financially supported by sponsors who are interested in their long-term functioning, as well as in ignoring failure (Seibel 1996). Deciding which of these explanations is valid raises the problem of evaluating performance in the non-profit/non-governmental sector. While evaluation in the economic sphere usually focuses on relatively tangible outputs (production, profit), in not-for-profit organisations, success can also be

evaluated according to the attitudes of the target population. The success of environmental education projects may result from their focus on everyday activities, which aim to counteract overall environmental degradation and the potential individual deprivation that could result from it (Jacobs – Malpas 2023; Osborne 2019).

We do not consider either of these explanations to be satisfactory from a sociological perspective, because they assume that it is possible to evaluate project success impartially, or even objectively. However, such an evaluation does not exist. As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Hájek 2025), evaluation is an integral part of project social organisation, rather than an external process. Project providers (sponsors) set selection criteria and evaluation methods according to their interests. In this article, we therefore develop a sociological perspective that provides a plausible explanation of the paradox of success and failure in EE, without the need to rival existing project evaluations (Boltanski 2011 [2009]). We will study how failure and success in EE are achieved organisationally and experienced subjectively. Taking a pragmatic approach to the study of organisations (Simpson – den Hond 2022; Barondeau – Hobbs 2019; Barthe et al. 2013), we will examine how various stakeholders within the EE organisational landscape transactionally manage the coexistence of success and failure without jeopardising the field's overall functionality.

The ensuing text is structured as follows: Firstly, we explain our conceptual framework, which enables us to recognise project success and failure as intentional outcomes of organisational behaviour. Thereafter, we describe the context and methodology of our study. Subsequently, in several sections, we present the main findings that explain the ambivalence of success and failure in the EE organisational field. Finally, in the discussion, we outline the contributions of the research presented and suggest potential avenues for further study.

Pragmatic Approach to Studying a Project-Based Organisational Field

The projectification of work is discussed in connection with the transformation of work organisation at the end of the 20th century, when the emphasis on hierarchical and bureaucratic structures was replaced in managerial discourse by network structures, work flexibility and adaptability (Boltanski – Chiapello 2007 [1999]). In this newly emerging networked world, projects are considered the primary structuring element, capable of generating value through the creation of 'temporary pockets of accumulation' (ibid.: 105). In other words, rather than permanently differentiating their own structure to create value, such as profit or environmental awareness, organisations – whether private companies or public institutions – create an internal project or launch a contest for projects to be carried out by external entities. The projectification of work is

not motivated by the need to accumulate more value than before, but by a shared belief that time- and problem-bound projects are a more effective form of value creation for organisations than the establishment of new permanent organisations. For individuals and organisations implementing projects, the value created by the project itself may be less important than the fact that participating will enhance their reputation and increase their chances of securing future contracts. While, in traditional organisations, reputation is fundamentally linked to senior management, in project-based areas of work, the reputation of all participants is crucial to success or failure (ibid.: 108–121). In the non-profit sector, organisations with a reputation based on the successful implementation of many projects are much more likely to obtain further projects than newly established or less experienced organisations.

According to organisational literature, a project is defined as a temporary form of organisation that can be described using the concepts of time, task, team and transition (Lundin – Söderholm 1995). From a pragmatic perspective centred on action, a project appears as coordinated action by several actors. Initially, one actor – the sponsor – provides resources and means to other actors – the contractors – who commit to using these to achieve the sponsor's goals within the specified timeframe. If a sponsor has a choice of potential contractors, they will select those who they believe are most likely to achieve the set goals, i.e. to create the required value. Similarly, potential contractors can choose among available sponsors, based on the set goals, the resources offered and the sponsor's reputation. It is important to note that, as a social object, a project does not exist in isolation, but emerges procedurally from transactions between sponsors and contractors. It is therefore always relational and exhibits varying degrees of uncertainty over time (Simpson – den Hond 2022: 129). An integral part of the project is its evaluation, for which the sponsor is primarily responsible. However, this can be delegated to a third party, or even be carried out by the contractor themselves, in a process known as self-evaluation.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2007 [1999]) argue that critical moments in project-based work are the *tests* that contractors undergo when creating and concluding projects. Firstly, the contractor and their proposed project are evaluated to determine how well they align with the sponsor's goals and requirements. For example, a non-profit organisation might enter a contest organised by the Ministry of Education to develop an environmental education programme. Typically, several applicants will submit proposals, and the sponsor will assess which is most likely to achieve the set goals. The second type of test takes place at the end of the project and aims to determine whether the set goals have been achieved. As it is impossible to achieve all the objectives entirely (Malpas – Wickham 1995), the sponsor must define the

project's success criteria. The nature of these criteria determines the ratio of successful to unsuccessful projects (Pinto – Mantel 1990).

In general, failure is more common in a project's creation than in its completion. This is because sponsors only select projects that are highly likely to pass the final tests and to be evaluated as successful. It is uneconomical to provide funds to a contractor who is unlikely to meet the project criteria, so sponsors try to avoid this. Furthermore, in project-based work, sponsors can only 'punish' contractors who fail to complete a task by excluding them from future projects. Therefore, sponsors' desire to avoid failure can result in contractors being selected very strictly. Nevertheless, the final evaluation is rather formal, as failed projects are not in the sponsor's interest. This means that the number of failing projects cannot be attributed to their quality, but rather to the sponsor's deliberations. In this context, Fisher (1972) identified two sponsor ideologies: *failure* and *non-failure*. The failure ideology views success as possible only in the context of failure. This is analogous to a zero-sum game, where the value of success is determined by the probability of failure. Conversely, the non-failure ideology considers contractor failure to be a form of sponsor failure and vice versa; the more successful the projects, the more successful the sponsor (in a positive-sum game). In the case of environmental education projects, we are interested in sponsors' ideologies and how these are reflected in the apparent paradox of successful projects, despite the critical overall assessment of the effectiveness of the activities.

Failure Overview in the EE Organisational Field

In the field of environmental protection, failure in various forms is a ubiquitous concept. This is evident from the widespread use of terms such as 'climate grief', 'eco-anxiety', 'eco-depression', 'climatic depression', 'solastalgia', and from the increasingly desperate acts of protest by climate activists. The role of environmental education in the spread of these phenomena accompanying environmental degradation is unclear. At first glance, the observed environmental disruption appears to demonstrate the failure of environmental educators to influence the attitudes and behaviours necessary to avert it (e.g. Saylan – Blumstein 2011: 1–3). The pessimism spreading among the environmentally educated population can also be seen as a consequence of the success of EE. Those who are informed are more aware of existing problems and how they are spreading, which can cause feelings of anxiety and guilt. Rather than motivating active change, creating anxious, environmentally responsible citizens, users, and consumers may be an unintended consequence of EE. Environmental educators themselves can also be impacted in the same way (Pihkala 2020: 6). A similar situation exists in the areas of active citizenship and green

consumption. While some educators strive to develop competencies for active ‘green’ *citizenship*, the resulting educational impact is merely a set of tools for environmentally responsible *consumption*. However, the opposite sequence of events may also occur.

The existing body of literature primarily addresses the notion of environmental education (EE) failure within the context of formal education, rather than in broader, project-based applications. Stevenson (2007: 144–151) argues that the inherent conflict between the goals of traditional schooling (social system stability) and EE (environmental sustainability) – characterised by differing approaches to knowledge transmission and authority – leads to a perception of EE as failing. Saylan and Blumstein (2011) concur that EE is failing to prevent environmental devastation. They attribute this to ineffective collaboration and a disconnect between education and real behaviour (ibid.: 18–20, 54), for which they propose curricular and societal changes (ibid.: 46–47, 174, 180). Conversely, Ferreira (2007: 1–3, 9–13, 226–231) suggests that the sense of failure among EE practitioners stems from unrealistic expectations of achieving complete moral transformation. He proposes reframing the goals of EE to focus on attainable behavioural changes and civic engagement. However, these approaches only compound the shortcomings of EE that have been reported previously, such as failure to achieve goals, the susceptibility of educators to being misled by those with competing agendas, ineffective strategy development, and even fundamental confusion about the definition of environmental education (van Matre 1990). In addition, several texts address specific shortcomings of EE, or the absence of necessary research on its effects (in the context of Czech EE, for example: Činčera 2013; Matějček – Bartoš 2012). Specific examples of failure include failing to consider women’s issues in EE (Gough – Whitehouse 2024: 121–133), omitting the development of critical awareness of the political and social context of environmental issues and liberation ethics (Chiappo 1978: 458), and focusing educational approaches on sustainable economic growth, which actually exacerbates inequalities and depletes natural resources (Kopnina 2020: 1).

In summary, the statistics indicate that the field of environmental education (EE) is thriving. There is a sufficient number of sponsors willing and able to fund EE projects, and a sufficient number of contractors, particularly non-profit organisations, ready to carry out the work. Furthermore, the vast majority of projects are evaluated as having been successfully completed. Nevertheless, the field is also associated with various forms of failure and feelings of failure, some of which are probably self-created. Environmental anxiety, organisational uncertainty and the balancing of contractor organisations on the edge of economic and personnel sustainability are also described, as is the complicated process of reaching consensus on EE goals (Cuker – Hájek 2024). Through our

research, we attempt to answer the question of how this connection between success and failure relates to the organisational structure of environmental education projects, whether projectification produces these contradictions, and how they are reflected in the subjective experience of project-based and institutionally embedded workers.

Research Context and Methods

Environmental education is not a standard part of the compulsory school curriculum in the Czech Republic.¹ This means that it is not a specific, dedicated school subject, as is the case, for example, of geography, geology, natural history and civic education. Instead, it is established as a cross-curricular objective within framework educational programmes (FEPs), and teachers must incorporate it into their lesson plans (Svobodová 2020). However, the obligation to include the FEPs' content in teaching is only loosely defined. It is not clearly linked to the regular curriculum, and its scope and method are not firmly established. This leads to an unequal level of EE across different schools, depending on the preferences of the various teachers and principals (Činčera 2009). This position gives EE a somewhat subordinate role in relation to other subjects in the curriculum within the education system. However, it also renders environmental educators outside the formal education system indispensable, due to the lack of environmental expertise within it. This has led to various non-governmental and non-profit organisations, such as 'eco-centres' employing environmentally oriented instructors, to become involved in school education.²

In order to deliver educational programmes, NGOs must meet several prerequisites. Firstly, they must secure sufficient financial resources to cover employee salaries and other organisational expenses. Financed mainly by public subsidies (predominantly from the Ministry of the Environment, partially from local and regional authorities), EE providers face fluctuating resources (e.g. CZK 70M / EUR 2.9M for climate education in 2024, down from CZK 105M / EUR 4.3M in 2023; Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic 2024). Foreign financing is very rare. Nevertheless, our conversations with ministerial officials confirm that supported projects are successfully implemented, with rare exceptions. This reliance on public authorities for funding necessitates compliance with these bodies' requirements, thereby demanding administrative professionalisation. Administrative competence and performance are further prerequisites for EE NGOs if their aim is to succeed in their projects. Alongside NGOs involved in environmental education in schools, professional associations are another important organisational actor. These associations provide training courses to individual NGOs

and grant them accreditation if they consistently meet specific requirements. As public grant providers commonly require this professional accreditation, there is an established interdependence between the government sector and the most important actors in environmental education.

In our research, we examined how stakeholders in EE in the Czech Republic understand, define, evaluate and approach project failure. To this end, we conducted 23 in-depth interviews focusing on the organisation and experience of failure in EE. Our aim was to gain the perspectives of lecturers, managers of EE NGOs, representatives of professional associations, and grant-awarding officials. The majority of our respondents were lecturers and NGO managers, accounting for 19 of the 23 interviews. The remaining 4 interviews were conducted with professionals from various EE associations (2), a government official and a municipal official. Respondents were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods, ensuring relative spatial and organisational diversity across the country. Since most of these organisations are Prague-based, 16 interviews were conducted with actors from the capital. The remaining interviews included 2 from another regional centre and 5 from peripheral or semi-peripheral areas. The first author, who had previously been employed by one of the NGOs involved in EE, was able to facilitate the selection of suitable organisations thanks to prior knowledge of the organisational landscape. Due to the limited accessibility of the respondents, who were based in different parts of the country, and also partly because of the current protective measures against the spread of infection, we conducted the interviews primarily online. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to the interview. All interviews were conducted between April and December 2022. In addition, 3 NGOs provided us with materials that they use for internal evaluation. These included checklists, evaluation scales for educational programmes, satisfaction questionnaires, educational worksheets, and other related materials.

The structure of the interview reflected our research areas, which included organisational and personal goals and missions, the importance of projects for achieving these goals, the nature of work in projects, experiences of success and failure, collaboration and conflicts between actors within EE, and consensus building. We employed an iterative questioning approach (Robinson – Schulz 2016), in which questions alternate between front-stage and back-stage discourse. As NGO workers in the field of EE speak not only for themselves, but also as representatives of their organisations and, by extension, the entire field, ambivalence in their statements is to be expected. This is because it is difficult to maintain authenticity as an individual practitioner who inevitably makes compromises, while also representing a thoroughly virtuous collective cause (Boltanski 2011 [2009]: 84–87). To gain a more thorough understanding

of how actors perceive the structure and nature of the organisational field of EE, we employed a card game elicitation tool. This approach has previously proven effective for researching normatively charged topics (Hájek et al. 2020; Kovtiak 2024). During the interview, the interviewer noted down important stakeholders that the respondent mentioned spontaneously. Later in the interview, the interviewer presented this list to the respondent and asked if they wished to add any other stakeholders. The respondent was then presented with Imagle cards featuring images of animals and various objects, which are used as teaching, discussion and game aids (<https://imagle.com/>). Respondents were asked to assign one or more cards to each stakeholder and to justify their decision. These justifications were then used in the analysis.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. To safeguard participant confidentiality, all data were anonymised.³ We then analysed the transcripts using Requal, an open-source qualitative data analysis software (<https://github.com/RE-QDA/requal/>). Evaluation materials were used solely to enhance our understanding of the operations of NGOs and the evaluation methods mentioned by respondents. Our analytical approach began with thorough immersion in all the data, followed by coding. During this stage, we applied both deductive codes derived from our theoretical framework covering project actors, their activities and results (sponsors, contractors, evaluation, failure), as well as new codes created inductively (blame attribution, failure avoidance, denial of failure, inevitability of failure, networking, specialisation, subjective experience). In the next stage, we examined the coded segments for recurring patterns of organisational failure, paying particular attention to personal experiences (micro-level), organisational project practices (meso-level) and the macro-level, where success and failure are linked to the broad goals and overarching missions of the entire organisational field.

Absent Perception of Organisational Failure

Firstly, we enquired into how participants understand failure in environmental education, and whether they encounter it in their work. Surprisingly, despite the environmental crisis and funding uncertainty, members of the field found it difficult to identify failures. The following excerpt is from an interview with a ministerial official responsible for environmental education.

Interviewer: What would be the worst thing that could happen in EE?

Interviewee: (long pause) I can't really imagine how it could fail. (laughter).
(Interview 19)

The lack of a notion of failure reflects the fact that it is not considered a possible future scenario; for EE practitioners, failure is, in a sense, unthinkable.

able. Although this seems strange, it is quite logical when we consider EE's overall value frame. As one professional EE coordinator explained:

Interviewer: How would you define failure in the EE field?

Interviewee: Well, that's a tough question (smiles). (...) I have the feeling that all these [EE] activities are long-term tilting at windmills and that there is probably no final solution that would solve everything. (Interview 20)

The metaphor of tilting at windmills suggests that achieving a final victory is not important, because the meaning of EE activities lies in the activities themselves. Just as Sancho Panza considered Don Quixote's battle with the windmills to be foolish because windmills cannot be defeated, EE workers often feel that the public unjustifiably view their activities as a form of impractical idealism that prioritises Nature as the most important value.

The fact that the value framing of EE activities makes it impossible to define the scope of their potential failure does not rule out the possibility of identifying certain failure scenarios in the next step. This is no longer a fundamental failure of the activity or field itself, but rather a failure due to the exhaustion of organisational or human resources. This is how failure was represented in the interviews, typically being manifested as an inability to secure the material resources necessary for long-term operation. Beyond tangible issues, failure was also described as a lack of innovation in educational content. This recognises the changing nature of EE and points to the rapid obsolescence of some areas – acid rain and the ozone hole being typical examples.

Respondents also had no problem describing personal exhaustion as a form of failure. Within their organisations, they frequently discussed feelings of burnout, frustration and disappointment with the limited impact of their programmes, as well as negative feelings about a lack of resources and interpersonal conflicts, especially with school staff (teachers). At the same time, they recognised their own failure to address these feelings and the broader issue of mental health among educators. Nevertheless, respondents do not view this failure at an individual level as a consequence of the field being poorly organised or of normative ideals being unattainable. Instead, they view it as personal failure, in that the worker 'let it go that far'. For them, failure is more easily understood in personal terms, rather than in relation to EE's broader educational mission. An NGO worker commented:

There are folks in this sector who shoulder the burden of the world, and you simply have to tackle it in a certain way to avoid crumbling. Yes, it requires a lot of effort for relatively little recognition or money. It can be frustrating. On the other hand, you can choose to leave this path behind and go elsewhere.

Sometimes I feel tired and slightly frustrated by my surroundings, but I still enjoy it, I still see some deeper meaning in it, and I am pursuing that ideal. Without that ideal, I don't think the work could be done. (Interview 4)

This characteristic of EE activities – the tendency to take the weight of the whole world on their shoulders – can probably be generalised to the entire non-profit sector. In this view, the search for a ‘deeper meaning’ and the pursuit of an ‘ideal’ cannot fail at a macro-level; failure can only occur at the level of individuals. Consequently, despite the widespread and shared feelings of personal failure among EE NGO workers, general enthusiasm prevails.

In addition to exhaustion of resources, another type of EE failure emerged in the interviews. This type of failure did not directly concern members of the organisational field, but rather their partners, i.e. teachers in the schools with whom EE NGOs must cooperate. Alongside practical issues in coordinating project-based EE and bureaucratically organised education, our respondents also described a deeper contradiction between the logic of education and environmental education, hindering the effective implementation of educational programmes. This contradiction was identified using Imaglee cards, where respondents were asked to match actors in the field with corresponding animal pictures:

That's the wise elephant! Those teachers are very focused on knowledge and information. They require a lot of knowledge and information transfer from us. At the same time, sometimes, precisely because of this, they are rigid, and they often cannot appreciate something that cannot be evaluated with a grade. They may not be able to evaluate the child's experience that much. They test what the child remembers from the programme. In school, they simply write an essay and a test, but they probably don't focus as much on the experience it creates. In fact, it seems uninteresting to them. (EE lecturer, interview 16)

The conflict between the school system and EE stems from their different approaches to evaluation. While EE focuses on acquiring knowledge through experience, school teachers prioritise knowledge that can be tested and graded. This contradiction limits the effective implementation of EE, as desired by NGO lecturers, and can potentially lead to a sense of failure. Respondents offered us various ideas for overcoming this contradiction. These included long-term collaboration with teachers, focusing on long-term educational programmes rather than on stand-alone lessons, and teaching outside the classroom.

Network of Collaboration Leading to Organic Solidarity in the EE Field

Direct questioning of employees about failures in the EE organisational field revealed that failure is understood either as the exhaustion of resources, or the problematic collaboration with partners in an activity that has normative substance and therefore cannot fail in itself. While this is a plausible interpretation, it is based on the perspective of a member, rather than on an analytical basis. Thus, we now focus on the organisational characteristics of the EE field that cause its stakeholders either to avoid organisational failure or to render it invisible.

During discussions about the functioning of the EE organisational field, its strong networking was evident. Representatives of various NGOs and their professional network association (aptly named Pavučina, meaning ‘web’) as well as representatives of public donors regularly meet at conferences, workshops, fairs, seminars and educational events. There, they share institutional and personal experiences, such as ideas for educational programmes, recommendations on the focus of educational activities, ways to secure material resources for organisational functioning, and methods for overcoming legal and bureaucratic difficulties. The connection between people and organisations is also evident in their use of similar methodological approaches to educational and activity organisation, which are presented and discussed at joint meetings. One NGO manager emphasised the importance of this intensive connection as follows:

This is another activity organised by Pavučina, which holds a trade fair primarily for its members, but not exclusively. There is always a theme. Spanning three to five days, it comprises a series of workshops, seminars and excursions, with contributions from organisations that have something to say on the topic. I think this is important, because it connects people and demonstrates that the network is effective. (Interview 4)

In addition to sharing experiences, mutual meetings and communication also play a role in coordinating the use of resources. Like other sectors, the EE sector has limited resources, which individual organisations compete for. To minimise failure, Czech EE actors specialise thematically. This permits their grant applications to have different focuses and to target different groups, thereby reducing mutual competition. However, effective specialisation requires frequent communication, i.e. on the organisation of and participation in events, which is demanding in itself, but which prevents failure.

Another mechanism enabled by this complex EE organisational network is collaboration in intra-network evaluation. Joint meetings are highly inclusive, providing individual organisations with the opportunity to present their

successful programmes, examples of good practice or innovative approaches to securing material resources. This helps them to maintain or enhance their reputation within the network. At the same time, professional associations set requirements for their members to meet in order to join the network and reap its benefits, such as obtaining the certification required by most grant providers. Member organisations must fulfil these requirements, such as reporting on educational programmes and participant numbers, and attending training courses and seminars. The umbrella organisation acts as a provider of know-how and a quality assessor for EE NGOs involved in the network.

Based on our findings, we suggest that EE organisational fields prevent organisational failure by encouraging intensive networking, thereby creating conditions for organic solidarity to emerge within the field. This solidarity develops through frequent, inclusive meetings between field actors, enabling the sharing of best practices and specialisation, which reduces mutual competition. The resulting interdependence is also vertical, with professional associations and sponsors consulting potential project contractors (non-profit organisations) on their requirements and evaluation criteria.

Sponsors and NGOs Collaborate to Produce Non-Failure

Failure in project-organised activities does not occur spontaneously; it is never an unintended consequence or accident, but always the intended result of coordinated action (Hájek 2025). An essential part of organising failure is evaluation: an expert and authoritative assessment of whether the project has achieved its objectives or not. It is therefore unsurprising that representatives of EE NGOs often emphasise the importance of evaluating their educational activities. They argued that some sponsors make awarding a grant to an NGO conditional on an initial self-evaluation, so educational organisations include self-evaluations in their grant applications to increase their chances of success. The strong presence of evaluation requirements is also linked to project implementation and, in particular, project completion. In this case, sponsors – mainly ministries and local and regional governments – use evaluations to decide which grant applications to support and whether the supported projects have been successfully implemented. The interviews revealed that this decision-making process is complex, and that all stakeholders are indirectly involved.

As institutions that distribute public money, sponsors must justify the effectiveness in allocation of financial resources, just like NGOs. Evaluation is the tool used to achieve this. Overly strict evaluation of project applications would lead to unallocated funds, which is undesirable for the sponsor (see below). Similarly, if supported projects were often deemed unsuccessful upon completion, the quality of the application evaluation process would be called

into question (Saylan – Blumstein 2011: 68–69). Sponsors are therefore under pressure to judge projects as successful. In addition to the external pressures, sponsors also have internal motivations to prefer positive evaluation, based on their stated goals, values, and the current state of the organisational field. The representatives of funding bodies for EE projects that we spoke to are closely involved in this field themselves. They are former educators who regularly attend EE conferences and other events, and communicate frequently with EE NGO representatives. In interviews, they therefore spoke of their efforts to support EE NGOs as much as possible:

Our goal at the moment is to maintain the system of eco-centres and actually help it to stabilise, so that it can grow a little (...) So that there is some kind of funding that is basically guaranteed to help stabilise it, so that this sector simply has its own place. (Ministerial official, interview 19)

The excerpt highlights the importance of linking the stabilisation of the organisational field with flat-rate (demand-based) funding for NGOs. While sponsors may generally prefer intense competition, which leads to higher-quality projects, a stable environment is arguably more important for project quality in the medium term. Stability helps to create an interconnected network of organisations, enabling specialisation, communication and the promotion of good practices. In a ‘wild’ competitive environment, sponsors may set strict quality standards for project support, but only a few organisations, mainly large, professionally managed ones, will be able to meet them. However, this would threaten the existence of many small NGOs that are barely financially sustainable, which would lead to a proliferation of failures and thus undesirable destabilisation of the organisational field.

To prevent evaluation from being transformed into a tool for mass production of failure, as is the case in the start-up or R&D fields, where the greatness of a project’s success is measured by the number of failed projects (Hájek 2025), it is important to believe in common interests and the resulting need to collaborate in the formation of evaluation criteria within the organisational field. A regional sponsor representative described this collaboration as follows:

When we were preparing the grant programme and the evaluation criteria, we also gave them to non-governmental organisations for review or, let’s say, for some kind of feedback. (Interview 21)

While this collaboration in the design of evaluations does not make failure impossible, it does demonstrate an effort to minimise it. If the criteria are acceptable to NGOs, there is a greater chance that they will submit acceptable applications and successfully implement projects. Cooperation across the field,

framed by common goals, thus makes organisational failure rare or at least invisible, i.e. not institutionally ratified. As the respondent in the above interview adds, 'If there were no cooperation [between the ministry, regional authorities, municipalities, organisations and schools], I think it would be bad.'

Sponsors' preference for and support of success does not eliminate the pressure on EE organisations not to fail; on the contrary, it increases this pressure. For NGOs, achieving success in project implementation is essential, as any failure could result in difficulties in returning already spent funds and also would deprive them of the opportunity to obtain future funding. However, this success is primarily tied to fulfilling project criteria and aligning with the sponsor's current agenda. For some organisations, this means that projects related to their organisational mission are sidelined, as they must apply for projects that address topics preferred by sponsors and secure funding for their activities. Currently, climate change is the dominant theme among sponsors, and NGOs must reflect this. The following excerpt is taken from an interview with the manager of a regional EE organisation, who explains how they plan the focus of their projects with regard to their sponsors' priorities:

Climate change is a major issue. Everyone wants to do something about it, either because they want to or because they feel they have to. However, we are concerned that climate change will overshadow the other issues we are dealing with here, because our focus is still regional. (...) Funds will be diverted to climate change, and it will be deliberately separated from current issues. (Interview 6)

The excerpt illustrates how organisations adapt their goals to align with those of their sponsors in order to secure sufficient funding. However, the need for adaptation is also driven by the other parties involved in environmental education: schools. NGOs must implement projects that schools are interested in. Even though both sponsors and schools are largely inclusive and do not impose demanding criteria on contractors, finding projects that suit all three parties is not easy, as one of the lecturers explains in an interview:

There are two factors at play here. One is the financial issue; we sometimes enter areas of education that are linked to funding. The other is the feedback we receive from schools. For example, we might say, 'This topic would be great to deliver to schools,' but then we think long and hard about whether to do so because we don't know if schools would choose it as part of their educational offering. (Interview 7)

Even though sponsors formulate grant calls according to their preferences, EE organisations thrive, because they still leave enough thematic space for organisations that are not primarily focused on the given topic to apply and be

successful. NGOs can therefore select topics that align with their objectives and conduct their proposed activities within that framework. Inclusive sponsorship thus puts significant pressure on organisations to adapt to their sponsors' priorities, rather than failing because they either cannot meet strict sponsor criteria or continue their mission.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study, we investigated how success and failure are recognised and experienced in a project-based environment. We examined environmental education as a case because, in the Czech Republic, this is undoubtedly a project-based field associated with perceived massive failure in terms of educational impact, yet with organisational prosperity in terms of successfully implemented projects. Moreover, the Czech situation may represent the broader functioning of EE in the Central European region, as its projectification has also taken place in neighbouring countries, such as Slovakia (Piscová et al. 2023) and Hungary (Gan et al. 2019); for a review, see Hadjichambis et al. (2019), Khademi-Vidra (2017), and Kovách et al. (2021). In our analysis, we used a pragmatic approach to organisation that emphasises individuals' reflexive behaviour and the interactive co-production of reality.

Our focus on failures within the organisational domain of environmental education draws together two areas of literature: the projectification of the public sector and the evaluation of EE's contribution to environmental improvement. The former primarily addresses the consequences of projectification concerning how NGOs organise their work (Jacobsen 2022; Johansson 2003; Löfström 2025; Lundin et al. 2015), while the latter examines the effectiveness of environmental education (Ardoin et al. 2018; Saylan – Blumstein 2011; Van De Wetering et al. 2022). Our research shows that, to explain a specific situation – the projectification of EE in the Czech Republic – it is necessary to link these two areas of literature. This is because the way work is organised determines how its results are evaluated, and subsequently how successes and failures are perceived within the field (Boltanski – Chiapello 2007 [1999]; Fisher 1972).

In the organisation of Czech environmental education, we identified three types of collective actors: government and regional institutions in the role of project sponsors; EE NGOs (called 'eco-centres') acting as project contractors; and EE field's professional organisations connecting and authorising contractors to implement EE projects. Key to understanding the relationships established among these actors is the role and performance of evaluation – that is, the various tests used to verify project quality. While the need for impartial and qualified decisions on project success or failure justifies the formal presence of

evaluations (Pinto et al. 2022), their actual role is much more complex and opaque. As the interviews revealed, alongside the contractors (the NGOs), the sponsors are also invested in the success of the projects. For sponsors, every project that is evaluated and judged to be a failure represents a waste of the funds entrusted to them and indicates an inability to attract or support good projects. Coordinated, yet publicly undeclared efforts to ensure positive project evaluations enable organisations and the entire project sector to operate in the long term, as this lends legitimacy to the field.

Our first finding was that EE actors do not recognise any failures at the organisational level, despite being critical of various aspects of it (Novosák et al. 2020). One respondent described this as ‘tilting at windmills’, representing an idealistic framing of activities in which the achievement of goals is not expected. While Malpas and Wickham (1995) argue that no project can be completely successful, because it is practically impossible to fully implement the original plan, the same argument can be reversed: no completed project is wholly unsuccessful because some work has been done and progress has been made compared to the original situation. ‘Tilting at windmills’ therefore means that failure is primarily associated with resigning from fighting for a good cause, rather than with the number of windmills that have not been dismantled (cf. Osborne 2019). Consequently, workers situate failure outside the organisational field of EE, in their personal lives, fatigue, insufficient appreciation and potential burnout.

In line with Löfström’s (2025) findings on Swedish NGOs in the social sector, the requirements of project-based evaluation pose an obstacle to educators who wish to develop activities according to their own ideas. Educators in our sample also face high pressure on individual performance, despite low financial remuneration. They cope with this obstacle in various ways. EE organisations can choose a different sponsor if there is a conflict of values with the sponsor’s requirements, or when unfavourable political circumstances arise (e.g. austerity policies). They can select from several ministries and municipalities at different levels, although there are some regional and temporal constraints. However, more commonly, they choose a topic where their goals align with those of the sponsor (Johansson 2003; Löfström 2025). The sponsors’ willingness to allow this tailoring of preferences to grant requirements is paramount and consistent with their non-failure ideology (Fisher 1972). If sponsors were to set their evaluation criteria too narrowly in line with their own values, potential contractors might be unable to meet them, resulting in little interest in the scheme. Failure to implement a grant call would reflect poorly on the sponsor, motivating them to develop more inclusive evaluation criteria.

The involvement of sponsors is essential for the distribution of organisational success in the EE field. Their decisions determine both the specific educational content and which organisations will be accepted into projects, thus affecting their access to the necessary financial resources. Given the high degree of interconnectedness within the Czech EE organisational field, where contractors and sponsors meet in person at public events (Cuker – Hájek 2024), an unwritten consensus has emerged: sponsors are expected to provide sufficient material resources for as much of the organisational field as possible, while NGOs are required to implement the educational projects assigned to them competently. This changes the function of project evaluation. Rather than critically examining the quality of NGOs and the outcomes of their work, as would be the case in the projective world (Boltanski – Chiapello 2007 [1999]), evaluation now takes on a more or less ritualised form of confirming the project architecture of the EE organisational field.

In the Czech EE, sponsors and evaluators are often the same people, or representatives of the same public institutions, such as ministries or regional councils. If the sponsor lacks the capacity or is under political pressure, project evaluation may be carried out by an external actor to ensure greater accountability for the use of public funds, specifically the requirement for impartial ('objective') and professional evaluation. External evaluators, akin to standard effectiveness studies of educational programmes, tend to focus on measuring the impact of educational programmes through pre-/post-tests or surveys (Ardoin et al. 2018; Svobodová 2020; Thomson et al. 2003), rather than evaluating the projects as a whole. Despite such evaluations being carried out by external actors, the selection of evaluators remains in the hands of sponsors or contractors, potentially leading to the selection of evaluators who will assess projects positively (Saylan – Blumstein 2011: 69–70).

In the Czech Republic, several academics focus on evaluating EE programmes as part of their scientific research agenda. Given their integration into the organisational field of EE, for example, they often speak at and regularly participate in EE conferences. Their approaches and methods resonate with EE stakeholders in the organisational field (see Činčera – Kroufek 2021). This also demonstrates the strong, long-term collaboration among sponsors, contractors and evaluators. The strength of these relationships is evident in their comprehensive efforts to ensure the successful implementation of projects. As these relationships span the long term, they typically have local roots (although they also have a national reach). They are characterised by strategic coordination, stable core project members, and flexible partners. Thus, we can speak of a kind of project network organisation (Manning 2023: 129). This is characterised by a shared non-failure ideology, resulting in sponsors, contractors and

evaluators carrying out their activities in a way that accommodates other actors, thereby maximising the probability of successful project implementation. However, this mutual effort to avoid project failure can lead to project fetishism and hinder the achievement of the goals of individual organisations and environmental education efforts as a whole. To avoid this outcome, we recommend that educators, officials, teachers, academics and other actors involved in the EE field create and maintain evaluation criteria that operate separately from the project scheme.

The project-based nature of this educational field often sidelines those who are the subject of projects, but who do not participate in their planning or organisation. This includes target populations such as pupils, students and the public, who have no direct influence on project settings. It also includes teachers, who have significant potential to ensure the successful implementation of environmental education (Ferreira et al. 2007). Future research should focus on ways to involve these groups. Greater exposure of the role of sponsors would also help to achieve educational goals. Sponsors should not be limited to 'just doing their day job', i.e. issuing grant calls, but should actively provide support and address specific project issues (Breese et al. 2020). Although sponsors already carry out these activities, our findings showed that they are rather ad hoc and not organisationally integrated. Expanding their official role to include an obligation to support the entire field would make their failures more apparent.

Notes

1. In addition to fulfilling the condition of projectification of environmental education, we also chose Czechia, because of the first author's extensive personal experience with the local organisational field.
2. Based on informal information from stakeholders, we estimate that there are about 50 NGOs providing EE to schools in the country. For a regional comparison of EE projectification in Europe, see Hadjichambis et al. (2019), Khademi-Vidra (2017) or Kovách et al. (2021).
3. The study adhered to the International Sociological Association's Code of Ethics, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection principles. Ethics committee approval was not required under our 2022 institutional policies. Participants gave informed consent, including approval for archiving de-identified data for future research. All data is securely stored by the research team following standard data protection guidelines. After project completion, identifiable data that cannot be anonymised will be destroyed, while anonymisable data will be archived in an established data repository.

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